

The Future of Strings: A Green Paper Prepared for Americans for the Arts

By the American String Teachers Association
Prepared by: Executive Committee

The Vision

The American String Teachers Association's (ASTA) vision for strings and orchestra in the 21st century centers upon five main principles:

- Providing access to strings and orchestra for all children, protecting these programs from economic uncertainty, and teaching members how to advocate for these programs;
- Influencing policy at the local, state, and national levels to promote the arts as a core component of a well-rounded education and of thriving communities;
- Strengthening the importance of orchestras within our communities through collaboration, education, participation, and support;
- Recognizing the foundational importance of classical music while embracing all styles of string and orchestra music; and
- Developing strong state chapters and leaders to provide benefits, services, and activities responsive to the needs of our membership.

Obstacles

In our discipline, we face some daunting challenges to realizing this vision. One of the greatest obstacles is access. Currently, only one out of four school systems offers curricular string instruction. When compared with other music disciplines such as band and choir, this number is relatively small. Because of such challenges as the current economic crisis, scheduling concerns, and the impact of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) too many existing programs are at risk of either elimination or reduction. These cuts are occurring in many locations, no matter how strong the school system and its arts programming.

In addition, testing mandates of NCLB have decreased the amount of time in the school day for arts instruction. Even though the arts are identified as core subjects in the act, some school systems are reducing the arts to spend more time preparing students for standardized tests. As Congress renews the debate about reauthorization, now is the time to address this issue as well as to ensure that funding for music and arts is a priority at the national, state, and local levels.

Attempting to influence policy, at any level, is often challenging for many educators. Most are so busy working with their orchestras, teaching private lessons after school, or performing that they might be the last to know that their program is in jeopardy. Even for the most savvy and experienced citizen, getting our leaders to focus

on the arts is ever more challenging as other topics such as health care reform, a rising deficit, and crippling unemployment take center stage on both the national and local agendas. By the time many educators rally to save the programs, the political die has already been cast.

The challenge of access also has a direct impact on the stability of many community and professional orchestras. Recent research, including the NEA's *Survey of Public Participation in the Arts* and the League's *Audience Demographic Research Review*, indicates that orchestras must review their practices to remain viable. If we do not have string and orchestra programs that encourage interest at the public school level, generating and maintaining interest at the community level will become more difficult. We will also experience a shortage of string teachers and performers. These issues are part of an arts ecosystem that requires further development.

Evolving musical styles present the profession with both great opportunities and challenges. No matter what genre a young string player embraces, the playing needs a strong pedagogical background. These fundamentals are taught in schools and private studios and give students the flexibility and skill level to succeed as performers in the concert hall and as future educators in the classroom. Classical music, rock, jazz, fiddle, and world styles all occupy a place in our musical history. The truly exciting element to instruments is that students can play all styles on the same instrument as long as they have a developed technique. While many of today's string teachers and orchestra directors are teaching and playing many styles of music, not all teachers embrace these changes. Teachers will need to teach correct technique so that students can then choose the direction they want to pursue. Good school or studio programs will teach a range of musical styles.

Overcoming Obstacles and Making the Vision a Reality

In addressing a vision for the 21st century, we must encourage all stakeholders in the arts to play an active role in shaping arts friendly policies. The reach must extend from around the table at school board meetings to the corridors of Congress. Advocacy must be a responsibility of everyone, including students, teachers, parents, administrators, and all those who support music education. ASTA partners with organizations such as Americans for the Arts, encouraging our supporters to be active in the Arts Education Fund. We provide training and resource materials that support music education. We also have a network of string educators and supporters poised to help programs. We plan not only to continue these programs but also to expand their depth. We will continue to offer advocacy training at our conferences. Our collaborative partnerships with other associations and nonprofit organizations strengthen our voice on the national landscape.

As advocacy is one of our core principles, ASTA needs to stay abreast of these issues, but it must continue to build its membership base by maintaining and constantly improving its services to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse population.

Increasing access to strings remains at the forefront of ASTA's mission. We have applied for and received several grants from NAMM that explore expanded delivery

systems, such as after-school programs and seed money for programs in economically challenged areas. We are conducting research in several areas related to increasing access, including examining the factors that lead to new programs, continuing to study the shortage of teachers, and focusing on underserved areas that do not have programs. All of this research has an underlying goal of making it possible for more young people to play string instruments. The data we collect will enable us to formulate more strategies to reach this goal.

In order to strengthen the relationships among schools and community and professional orchestras, we continue to encourage dialogue among public educators and private teachers. Many of our members already partner with their community orchestras as performers, through children’s concerts, or adjudicating local orchestra competitions that recognize promising students. ASTA will continue to work with the League of American Orchestras to showcase their Common Cause program that promotes the link between education and community orchestras. In the future, we hope to include more “how to” information both on our website and at our conferences, as well as in our professional journals.

While one of the goals of an orchestra teacher is teach students to play an instrument, another is to cultivate in students a lifelong appreciation for the arts that encourages ongoing community involvement. The children who play stringed instruments—and their parents are certain to be among the patrons of orchestras both now and in the future.

Together we must demonstrate that music is one of our core values. Together we must outgrow competition and instead model collaboration. Together we must ensure that music, including string instruction, is both adequately funded and accessible from the pre-school classroom to the symphony hall. While the majority of music students will not become full-time musicians, they will become wholly human and wholly educated. Where words fail, they will be able to speak through the music.

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