

String Projects Study Finds Need for 3,000 String Teachers



Students in the Illinois State University String Project.

Survey offers snapshot of educator shortfall in US orchestra and string programs

By Rory Williams

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DESPITE BUDGET ISSUES faced by public and private school districts, there will be a demand for nearly 3,000 string teachers in the coming years, according to a newly released study by the National String Project Consortium. What's more, some of these positions will be filled by teachers who don't primarily play stringed instruments.

The NSPC's claims are based on its study *The Status of String and Orchestra Programs in United States Schools: A White Paper Produced by the NSPC with Support from the American String Teachers Association*, which was released during February's 2010 ASTA National Conference in Santa Clara, California.

For the study, Baylor University's Michael Alexander, PhD, and Central Washington University's Bret Smith, PhD, conducted an online survey of 794 string and orchestra program teachers, or 5 percent of the total population of 16,102 string teachers in the nation. Of the respondents, 39 percent expected their districts to hire an average of 1.8 positions between 2010 and 2013. Smith and Alexander calculated this expectancy against the possibility of multiple respondents from one district, and then multiplied that outcome to match the total population of string and orchestra program teachers. They concluded 2,960 teachers will be in demand during this period.

Where does this demand come from? Despite cutbacks in public funding of school programs, the report notes that string programs have been encountering a tremendous growth trend. A study in 2000 found that 18 percent of the nation's school districts offer string programs, yet the new study shows the number now stands at 29 percent. "Industry [also] tells us there's a demand for more teachers," Smith says. "There are more kids playing now than ever."

Ken Dattmore, manager of the orchestral strings sales division of the Yamaha Corporation of America, says support for string programs is reflected in sales figures. "If a program fails or shuts down for whatever reason, you can almost bet that the private sector in the community is going to pick that up, and there's going to be some community orchestra or Suzuki program that springs up, and the number of instruments that gets sold is just the same," Dattmore says.

The new study indicates that the shortfall of string teachers is shrinking. A 2002 study published in the University of Arizona's *Journal of String Research* anticipated that 5,000 string teachers would be

in demand—2,000 more than anticipated in the NSPC report. However, the new report doesn't explain the decline, and leaves string educators to speculate whether they've been successful at addressing the reported shortage or whether the growth trend has slowed in recent years.

The study does show that about 63 percent of those surveyed said funding for their programs had decreased.

"It's very possible that there are more districts, but with fewer programs," says *Strings* magazine publisher David Lusterman, who chairs the NSPC board of

directors. "This demand for teachers might have migrated into districts that have programs, and the relative number of programs may have dropped.

"We just don't know."

NSPC executive director Robert Jesselson points to ASTA and other university professors' work in addressing the shortage and guiding and preparing more students for careers in teaching. But he also says retirement and a slowing in the attrition rate may play a role. "People in this economic climate are holding on to their jobs longer," Jesselson says.

The survey did not ask the age of respondents, though the average number of years that respondents reported teaching was nearly 15.

Age and retirement readiness may require further study, but Smith and Alexander were able to find that many of these teachers are ill-prepared to teach strings: about 30 percent did not primarily play a stringed instrument. Of the job openings in the 2007–08 school year alone, half were filled by those who do not primarily play a stringed instrument.

Dattmore has seen even more dramatic statistics at work at a Yamaha-sponsored teacher-training clinic for string and orchestra teachers in New York. "We estimate that 60 percent of the educators in New York are not string people," he says. "We had 40 people sign up [for the clinic] and 60 percent were not string players."

Of 70 percent of the study respondents who primarily play stringed instruments, about 36 percent are violinists, about 13 percent are cellists, about 12 percent are violists, and about 9 percent are bassists.

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The NSPC hopes to conduct similar studies during the next two years to track the need for additional trained string teachers.

"This study represents an opportunity to create this baseline understanding of what goes on in string education, and [we can] then try to track that over time and try to correlate," Lusterman says.

The NSPC was formed in 1998 under the auspices of ASTA. It is now an independent nonprofit organization working with ASTA and other music organizations to serve string education and string development across the United States. The NSPC supports 36 university-based String Projects dedicated to increasing the number of children playing stringed instruments and addressing the critical shortage of string teachers in the United States. ■

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