This study seeks to answer the question: What are the attitudes of South Georgia public school superintendents toward curricular string instruction? A 10-item questionnaire was developed and sent to 44 rural public school superintendents. Eighty-four percent of the superintendents (N = 37) responded to the questionnaire. The primary findings of this survey regarding the respondents’ school district music curriculum indicated that 89.2% of the districts did not offer curricular string instruction. The primary findings regarding the respondents’ thoughts about string instruction indicated that if money were not a factor, 78.4% of the respondents would like their school board to hire a string teacher.

One of the greatest challenges facing the string teaching profession is a no-win cycle: How does a school district administrator justify hiring a string teacher when there are no string students, and how do students learn to play a string instrument when there is no string teacher? The answers to these questions might lead to a new era of string teaching resulting in a new generation of string students.

During Dorothy Straub’s tenure as MENC vice president she presented a paper at the Loyola Music Symposium boldly stating:

“Every child should have the opportunity to learn to play a string instrument and perform in an orchestra. String programs should become the norm, not the exception, in the schools. A string and orchestra program is an integral part of, not an appendage to a quality music program. (Straub, 1995, p. 9)”

She further stated, “School music programs which have only a band and chorus are incomplete. School administrators as well as band, chorus, and general music teachers need to support the inclusion of a string and orchestra program” (p. 9).

This problem exists, in part, because the right people have not been asked the correct questions. For example, we do not know whether rural school superintendents would agree or disagree with Straub’s assertions that, “String programs should become the norm, not the
exception, in the schools” and that “School music programs which have only a band and chorus are incomplete.” Knowing the attitudes and perceptions of school superintendents toward developing string programs in rural communities may be the first step toward leaping the hurdles that have prevented access to string instruction in these areas. This study seeks to answer the question: What are the attitudes of South Georgia public school superintendents toward curricular string instruction?

This author reviewed three bodies of research related to rural public school superintendents’ views toward string instruction. These included studies which: (1) examined the question of access to string instruction, (2) analyzed administrator attitudes towards the curriculum and fine arts instruction, and (3) reviewed teacher preparation for the rural environment.

Five studies related to access to string instruction were the most pertinent to the present study. Leonard (1991) examined the effect of school size on access to string instruction within a national survey conducted by the National Arts Education Research Center at the University of Illinois. The Center randomly surveyed 1,326 schools out of the approximately 110,000 schools in the United States. Data from the survey differentiated string study from symphonic orchestra as well as small versus large school size for elementary, middle and secondary schools. In summary, the results revealed that less than 50% of schools across the country offered string instruction. Results also indicated that large schools were more likely to offer string and full orchestra instruction than were small schools.

Bergonzi (1995) first presented his ideas on access to string study for all children during the Loyola Music Symposium. He based his paper on data from the 1990 High School Transcript Study conducted in conjunction with the U.S. Department of Education’s National Assessment of Educational Progress, Basic Math Assessment (Legum et al., 1993). He found that 30.7% of American high schools offered string instruction and 1.5% of all high school students took strings. In high schools that offered string classes, about 4% of the students were enrolled in them. Additionally, “string programs were more frequent in high schools that were in or near urban areas, but virtually non-existent in those found in extremely rural areas” (p.36). Furthermore, large high schools, defined as those with at least 1500 students, offered strings 66.7% of the time while medium high schools (500 - 1499 students) offered strings 36.6% of the time and small high schools of fewer than 500 students offered strings only 6.5% of the
Bergonzi articulated his findings via a parable where he likened string instruction to one counter in a specialty arts store of a multi-level mall of school buildings. His analogy originated from a metaphor first penned by Powell, Farrar, and Cohen (1985) in their book The Shopping Mall High School. As a result of his study, Bergonzi recommended expanding nontraditional delivery systems by creating inter-district teaching positions, distance learning through video technology, utilizing the extracurricular school day to a greater extent and mobilizing the full weight of community resources to develop new string programs.

Smith (1997) gathered statistical data from reports, mail-outs and phone calls from all 14,183 U.S. school districts. Smith found that 84% of U.S. school districts did not offer string instruction. Of the districts that offered strings, 64% were located in urban areas (2,500 - 49,999 persons), 26% were located in metropolitan areas (50,000+ persons) and 10% were located in rural areas (fewer than 2,500 persons). Thus, children in metropolitan and rural school districts were least likely to receive string instruction. Only 4% of the school districts that offer strings were classified as lower socioeconomic status. Lower socioeconomic status was defined as more than 25% of the school-age children falling below the U.S. census poverty line. This study did not examine the differences or similarities in the accessibility of school band or chorus instruction to the findings for string instruction.

Gillespie and Hamann (1998) used a 44-item questionnaire to gather data describing the nationwide characteristics of public school orchestra programs. Upon reviewing 652 completed surveys (51% response rate) from 44 of 50 states (88%) they found, among other things, that the availability of orchestra instruction was linked to school size and location. Larger schools were more likely to offer orchestra instruction than smaller schools and suburban schools (56%) were more likely to offer orchestra than urban (30%) or rural (14%). They suggested that MENC and ASTA WITH NSOA could appoint task forces to develop strategies to help smaller schools find practical ways to develop string instruction. Their data also revealed that one out of every three individuals teaching orchestra in the public schools is not principally a string player, leading them to conclude that universities may need to evaluate their undergraduate string teacher training in light of the significant number of wind players and percussionists who teach strings or orchestra.

Smith (2000) examined string programs in low socioeconomic level
school districts where more than 25% of the children fell below the U.S. Census poverty level. The study also determined how such programs were funded. A 48-item questionnaire was mailed to 72 low socioeconomic school districts that offered strings. A total of 60 completed questionnaires were returned for a response rate of 83.3%. Of most interest to the present study was the finding that almost half the districts (45%) with fewer than 10,000 students used outside funding sources to pay string teachers’ salaries and approximately one-third of these small districts used alternative funding sources to provide string instruments. An additional relevant finding was that larger districts used more non-specialists to teach strings, particularly at the middle and high school levels. Stated Smith, “This situation makes it imperative that undergraduate nonstring education majors be adequately prepared to teach strings in the public schools” (p. 113).

Two studies concerning administrator attitudes were pertinent to the present study. Jensen (1982/1983) analyzed the attitudes of 1,547 decision and policy makers, including superintendents, towards the place of fine arts education in Nevada’s public schools. Two separate questionnaires were constructed. The responses to the first questionnaire provided the basis for the items selected to be included within the second instrument. The final questionnaire had two sections. First, 40 statements were assembled into a Likert rating scale. A second section asked the respondents to rate four different placements of electives in public school curricula in the order of individual preference to the person answering the questionnaire. The findings from this study revealed that the degree of support for arts education among these key persons was generally high and that arts education could and should be considered basic to the general public school curriculum.

Reddick and Peach (1984) constructed a 20-item questionnaire that determined and compared attitudes of 996 public school teachers and administrators in 83 rural Tennessee counties concerning curriculum development, course content, school environment, individualized instruction, philosophical parameters, student evaluation and extracurricular activities. Of interest to the present study, 69% of the administrators disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that art and music are as important as other academic subjects. Seventy-one percent of the teacher group, however, felt otherwise. On the other hand, 73% of the administrators felt that extracurricular activities were vital to the total curriculum, while only 44% of the teachers agreed or strongly agreed. Extra curricular activities were not defined in the study, but a separate question asked about athletic
Two studies regarding teacher preparation for the rural environment were pertinent to the present study. Surwill (1980) examined written responses from 62 classroom teachers, 8 principals and 9 superintendents from rural schools in 4 Montana counties who strongly supported the need for specialized preparation for rural teachers. Respondents made a number of recommendations including:

“Elementary teachers in rural schools are commonly expected to teach art, music, health and physical education, library skills, dramatics, etc. Therefore, methods courses and early practicum experiences should be designed by the institution to provide adequate preparation for students to demonstrate competency in these areas. . . . Secondary teachers preparing for careers in rural schools should realize that highly specialized training in only one academic discipline often times restricts their marketability for employment. In the great majority of rural schools it is almost imperative that a rural secondary teacher teach in at least two academic disciplines and often times carry additional assignments (p. 5, 6).”

The primary purpose of Jones’ (1985) study was to examine the availability of pre-service or certification programs for rural teaching. The population for this study was all directors of student teaching and administrators of field experience at 456 public and private institutions in 27 rural states. The 240 respondents from the population represented the sample for the study. Recommendations to implement pre-service training programs for rural teaching or to upgrade existing ones related to six areas: general curriculum concepts; preparation for rural cultural, isolated areas; availability of regional service centers; need for faculty specialization in rural education; and awareness of characteristics and needs of rural teachers and schools. One of the general curriculum components identified for teachers opting to teach in a rural environment was “training for teaching physical, music, art, or community recreation” (p. 13).

The previously cited collection of research on the subject of access to string instruction has focused on gathering data to determine the number and kinds of schools and school districts that offer strings. To date, Bergonzi’s (1995) shopping mall parable stands as the lone example of philosophical inquiry into why a disparity in string access exists. Given that rural schools are the least likely to offer string instruction, it makes sense to expand what we know about rural schools and rural decision-makers. The purpose of the current, preliminary, study is to begin learning about the attitudes of rural
public school superintendents toward curricular string instruction. Such information could then be used in designing a plan to remove the hurdles that have prevented access to string instruction in rural areas.

**Method**

**Subjects** This string instruction questionnaire was sent to 44 public school superintendents across South Georgia. Eighty-four percent of the superintendents (N = 37) responded to the questionnaire. Geographically, South Georgia is a region representing 30 percent of Georgia’s area but only 13 percent of Georgia’s total population. There are no major metropolitan areas in South Georgia, and economies are dependent on the agricultural industry. Most of the rural communities in South Georgia have little industry and no economic diversity. Twenty-one to forty-one percent of school age children in these counties live in poverty (Reed, 2001, p. 1).

**Questionnaire** A 10-item questionnaire was developed. The first section presented four questions related to the district’s music curriculum. These questions were:

(1) Does your school district offer band instruction within the curriculum?
(2) Does your school district offer chorus instruction within the curriculum?
(3) Does your school district offer orchestra (string) instruction within the curriculum (violin, viola, cello, double bass)?
(4) How would you rate the music curriculum in your district?

The next section contained two agree/disagree statements about the superintendent’s philosophy of music education. The first agree/disagree statement was excerpted from former MENC vice president Dorothy Straub’s opening remarks at the Loyola Music Symposium: “School music programs which have only a band and chorus are incomplete” (Straub, 1995, p. 9). The author wrote the second agree/disagree statement: “All children should have access to general music, band, chorus and string instruction within the school curriculum.” A third section asked the superintendents three questions specifically related to their willingness to hire a string teacher. These questions were: (1) If money were not a factor, would you like to see your school board hire a string teacher? (2) To reduce the financial burden on your district, would you be willing to share a string specialist with a neighboring school district? (3) Would you consider modifying or converting an existing music position to include
responsibilities for string instruction? A final question sought permission to contact the superintendent to further discuss string instruction.

Procedure A preliminary draft of the survey instrument was e-mailed to three faculty members at two different universities. Following minor revisions, the final version was distributed. An initial database of South Georgia superintendents was obtained from a local university. This list was then cross-referenced with the Georgia Department of Education web site and the printed Georgia Public Education Directory. The questionnaire was mailed, along with a cover letter and SASE, to 44 South Georgia public school superintendents. Twelve days later, a follow-up letter and second copy of the questionnaire was faxed to the superintendents. This time, superintendents were encouraged to return-fax the questionnaire. The return-fax information was boldface typed across the top of the questionnaire.

Results

A total of 37 superintendents returned completed questionnaires for a response rate of 84%. The findings for the superintendent’s music curriculum rating are presented in Table 1. The findings for the remaining survey responses are found in Table 2.

A Pearson r correlation coefficient was done to discover the relationship between the superintendents’ curriculum rating and their responses to the question that included strings as an important part of the music curriculum. No correlation (r = -0.079) was found. The mean was calculated for the response to the statement “All children should have access to general music, band, chorus and string instruction with the school curriculum” and is .82.

Table I. Superintendent’s Music Curriculum Rating

Rating Percent
Excellent 27.0
Very Good 37.8
Fair 24.3
Poor 2.7
Very Poor 5.4
Table 2. Survey Responses, Yes/No Questions (N = 37) (in percents)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Curriculum Yes No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Band Instruction Offered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chorus Instruction Offered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>String Instruction Offered</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Superintendent’s Philosophy

School music programs that have only band and chorus are incomplete 59.5 40.5 All children should have access to general music, band, chorus and string instruction within the school curriculum 75.7 21.6

String Instruction

If money were not a factor, would hire a string teacher 78.4 16.2 Willing to share a string specialist with a neighboring district 45.9 45.9 Consider modifying existing music position to include strings 32.4 62.2 Willing to be contacted to discuss string instruction 32.4 48.6

Summary

The primary findings of this survey regarding the respondents’ school district music curriculum are summarized as follows (percents rounded to nearest whole number):

- Ninety-two percent of South Georgia school districts offer band.
- Eighty-four percent of South Georgia school districts offer chorus.
- Eleven percent of South Georgia school districts offer strings.
- Eighty-nine percent of the respondents rate their district’s music curriculum at least Fair, and 65% rate their music curriculum Very Good or Excellent.

The primary findings of this survey regarding the respondents’ philosophy of music education are summarized as follows:

- The majority (60%) of the respondents agree with Dorothy Straub’s statement: “School music programs which have only a band and chorus are incomplete.”

The prevailing philosophy of music education among the respondents (76%) agrees with the following statement: “All children should have access to general music, band, chorus and string instruction within the school curriculum.” The primary findings of this survey regarding the respondents’ thoughts about string instruction are:
If money were not a factor, 78% of the respondents would like their school board to hire a string teacher. Nearly half of the respondents (46%) would be willing to share a string specialist with a neighboring school district to reduce the financial burden on their own district.

Almost one-third of the respondents (32%) would consider modifying an existing music position to include responsibilities for string instruction.

Almost one-third (32%) of the respondents gave the author permission to contact them to discuss string instruction.

**Discussion**

Results of the study have implications for string advocacy, public school staffing, undergraduate music education curricula and future research studies. The findings that string instruction is offered in only 10.8% of South Georgia school districts are consistent with other national studies which found that rural school districts and lower socioeconomic children are least likely to have access to public school string instruction. It is interesting to note the inverse relationship of the rural curricular music offerings: nine out of ten districts (91.9%) offered band, but nine out of ten districts (89.2%) did NOT offer strings. It is also of interest that band was more predominantly offered than chorus. This finding would seem to be contrary to the logic that money is a prohibitive factor to instrumental music study, since it takes money to provide band instruments but vocal music does not require any additional instrument purchases.

It is paradoxical that while 89.2% of the respondents do not offer string instruction in their school district, 64.8% rated their district’s music curriculum as Very Good or Excellent. This finding also seems to contradict the respondents’ strong philosophical agreement that all children should have access to string instruction within the school curriculum. No correlation was found between the superintendents’ music curriculum ratings and their responses to the question that included strings as an important part of the music curriculum. Additional research is needed to further delineate the superintendent’s separate views toward the importance of general music, band, chorus and string instruction. One weakness of the present study is that each of these programs was included within the same question. Still, it is reasonable to suggest that these superintendents think that their music curriculum is pretty good, even if it does not offer string instruction. Thus, it would seem that the first step of string education in South Georgia is advocacy to address the incongruous mindset of
the superintendents. Furthermore, the mean response to the statement “All children should have access to general music, band, chorus and string instruction within the school curriculum” is .82, so the majority of these superintendents believe that access to strings (among the other aspects of their programs) is important.

It is the author’s belief that these superintendents do not view having a string program as a prerequisite to a first-rate music curriculum, but instead view having a string program as a luxury, something which is desirable but not necessary. Eight superintendents wrote unsolicited comments in the margins or on the back of the survey form to clarify a response. To quote one of these written responses, “It would be nice if the system could afford it.” Another wrote, “If I taught in a larger school I would be 100% for adding a string program.” This luxury status for string instruction is consistent with Bergonzi’s (1995) shopping mall parable where he assigned string instruction the status of a fine arts specialty shop.

These views, in part, may reflect the MENC Standards and SACS (the primary Southern School accrediting agency) Handbook that do not specify string instruction as an integral component of a K-12 music program. These documents refer to the importance of music or instrumental music using only broad terminology. Perhaps ASTA WITH NSOA could develop a position paper and begin a dialogue with MENC and SACS toward strengthening the wording of the standards for K-12 music instruction to reflect Straub’s (1995) powerful statements.

Money was a prohibitive factor that stood in the way of these South Georgia school districts hiring a string teacher. There would appear to be at least three possible ways to address this problem:

1. **Inter-district or Shared String Teachers** Forty-six percent of the respondents were willing to consider pooling their district’s limited resources to share a string specialist with a neighboring district.

2. **National Grant/Foundation/Corporate Funding Leading to Rural String Teacher Residencies** There is already a long-standing national tradition of artists/composers/performers-in-residence programs for rural areas. The scope of these existing, primarily extracurricular, programs could be expanded to include curricular artist-string teacher residences similar to the Ford Foundation’s multi-million dollar sponsorship of the Young Composer’s Project in the late 1950’s.

3. **Pre-service String Teacher Programs Specifically Designed for the Rural Environment** Research shows that rural teachers must be able to
do many things so it stands to reason that rural string teachers will need to be able to do more than just teach strings. Wrote one rural superintendent, “I will fund a great beginning music teacher in [my town]. We have a small school system (just about 270 kids) - but we have high hopes. . . . General Music, Chorus, Beginning Band or Strings would be the expectation.”

**Further Research**

This study merely scratches the surface of one of the many issues related to string instruction in rural areas. More research is needed to determine why there are more band programs than choral programs in South Georgia and why band is the dominant form of instrumental music in the public schools. Additional, more detailed, studies with a larger sample need to be completed. Subsequent studies could inquire not only into rural decision-maker attitudes toward string instruction, but also rural music teacher and rural classroom teacher attitudes. It would be helpful to know what percentage of rural music teachers would be willing to participate in in-service or workshop training to become better equipped to start a string program in their school district. Additional studies could identify characteristics of neighboring school districts that could successfully share a string specialist. Commonalities of rural school districts and of smaller sized schools that offer string instruction need to be identified so that they can serve as a model for other districts and schools to emulate.

**References**


**Georgia Department of Education. (2001).** Georgia Public Education Directory. Atlanta, GA.


