

A Delicate Balance: Music Education in Canadian Schools

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Prepared for the Coalition for Music Education in Canada



by Hill Strategies Research



With support from Business for the Arts,
Musiccounts and the McLean Foundation



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INTRODUCTION

While there has been substantial international research on the benefits of music education for young people, there has been only limited research on the state of music education in Canada. Many American cities have attempted to gather key information about the situation of arts learning in order to help them understand and improve children's access to high-quality arts learning experiences.

This report attempts to fill a void in Canadian information by helping us better understand the situation of music education in schools across the country. In early 2010, a detailed survey of music education in Canadian schools was conducted by the Coalition for Music Education in Canada, with the research expertise of Hill Strategies Research.

The Coalition for Music Education in Canada envisions Canada as a country where the lives of all children are enriched by high-quality school music programs, and where their active participation in music is valued and supported in our communities. It is the goal of the Coalition to see that all children have the right and opportunity to receive, through their core curriculum, a well-rounded and balanced education that includes a comprehensive, sequential quality program in music. The Coalition works with parents, educators and government officials to achieve this goal. This new information will help guide the Coalition's efforts to improve the state of music education in our schools.

The Coalition commissioned Hill Strategies Research to prepare and conduct a survey of schools across the country, with support from Business for the Arts, Musiccounts, the McLean Foundation, and the net proceeds of the Coalition's Evening with Sir Ken Robinson and Friends in April 2009. The Coalition is grateful to all attendees at this event as well as the following sponsors: Business for the Arts, the Royal Conservatory of Music, RBC Foundation, Etherington and Vukets, the Ontario Education Leadership Centre, Peel Region School Board, York Region District School Board and George Douglas.

A bilingual survey of schools, directed toward principals and intended to gauge the state of music education, was available online at www.MusicInSchools.ca and www.musique-ecole.ca between March 22 and May 31, 2010. The Coalition thanks the Canadian Principals Association, the Canadian Music Educators Association, the Canadian Education Association, the Ontario Principals Council, the Catholic Principals' Council of Ontario, and l'Association des directions et directions adjointes des écoles franco-ontariennes (ADFO) for their assistance in distributing information about this survey to their members.

The survey of music education was completed by 1,204 schools, representing 7.8% of the 15,500 schools in Canada. The full sample can be considered reliable within a maximum margin of error of 2.7 percentage points, 19 times out of 20. However, readers should be aware that

schools with music programs may have been more likely to respond to the survey than schools without music programs (or those with fewer music opportunities). The survey found that a large majority of schools teach music as a separate subject (81%), and about one-quarter of schools teach music as part of a more general arts curriculum (23%).

A DELICATE BALANCE

From the survey data and respondents' written-in comments, it is clear that successful music programs rely on a delicate balance. The strongest music education programs have appropriate funding, student interest and time, a strong specialist teacher, appropriate instruments and space, as well as a supportive principal and parents. It is also vital to have support from school boards and provincial education departments, as well as a broader community that values music.

Some respondents commented on the balancing act:

- "In general, we have a very successful music program but there are great pressures on both students and staff in a small school to keep everything in balance and programs healthy."
- "Here are the priorities that will ensure a high-quality music program: an appropriate classroom, musical instruments (selection, quality and quantity), a qualified specialist, and a receptive and cooperative community that supports the program." (« Voici les priorités pour assurer un programme de qualité: salle de classe appropriée, instruments de musique (sélection et qualité et quantité), spécialiste formé dans ce domaine et la communauté réceptive et coopérative pour supporter le programme. »)
- "We are very fortunate to have an arts program at our school that is supported by students, parents and administrators. We are alone in the board with these advantages."
- "We have an excellent music program in our school and are committed to sustaining it. It is part of our culture and is valued by our entire school community."
- "We do the best we can with what we have... which is not much... lucky we have dedicated people who really care."
- "I am very lucky to have school, parent and community support for my music program."

The fragile balance can be disrupted:

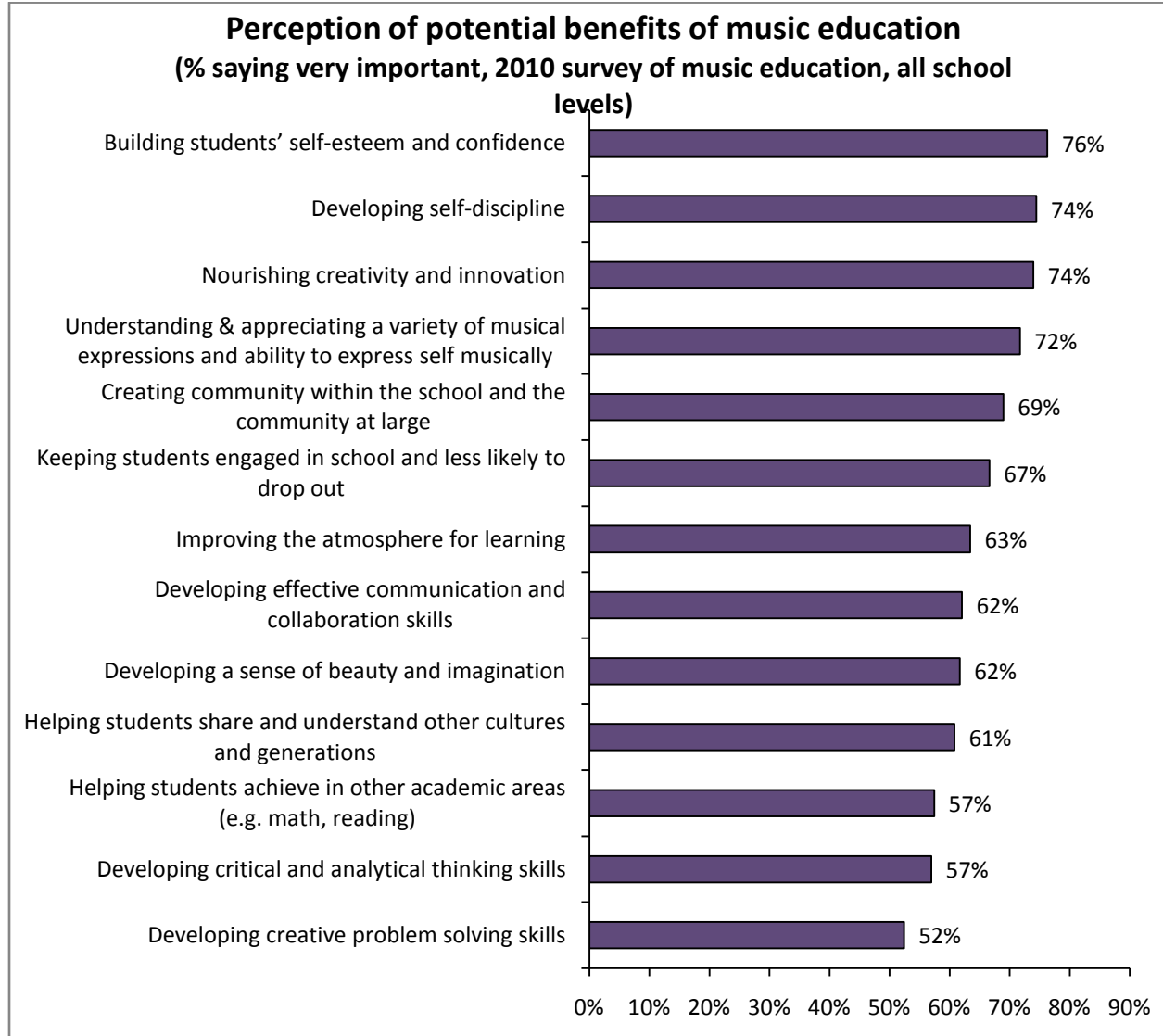
- “I should say that my school really has a good music program because I [the principal] have an incredible and qualified teacher. I do not think that I will be able to say the same thing next year, because she is moving and there is no one else qualified to teach music in our school.” (« Je dois dire que cette école à vraiment un bon programme de musique (50 minutes / un trimestre) car j'ai une enseignante incroyable et qualifiée. Je ne pense pas que je vais pouvoir dire la même chose l'année prochaine car elle déménage et il n'y a pas personne d'autre de qualifier au sein de l'école. »)
- “With so much emphasis put on healthy lifestyles and student obesity, we have had to put in a full time Phys Ed teacher. We do not currently have enough money in the budget to afford a full time music teacher as well. It is a tough balancing act.”
- “Music is vital for the overall development of children. When schools do not have the funding to provide quality instruments or enthusiastic specialty teachers, the benefits of a strong music program are lost.”
- “Music is a tradition in our school that dates back nearly 40 years. We live in a small region where music still occupies an important place in school. I hope that this will remain despite a large decrease in enrolment in our region.” (« La musique dans notre école est une tradition depuis près de 40 ans. Nous vivons dans une petite région où la musique occupe encore une place important à l'école et j'espère que cela restera malgré une grande diminution des élèves dans nos écoles de la région. »)
- “Our province is now implementing full time Kindergarten. I know of another school in our district where the teacher is an Orff specialist and may have to give up his music classroom. It has been mentioned that he will need to move from class to class using a cart. This specialist does not teach that kind of program. People are being hired, at times, who have some sort of musical talent, but are not music education specialists. The quality of music education is suffering.”

MAJOR THEMES FROM THE SURVEY

Six major themes emerged from the survey results:

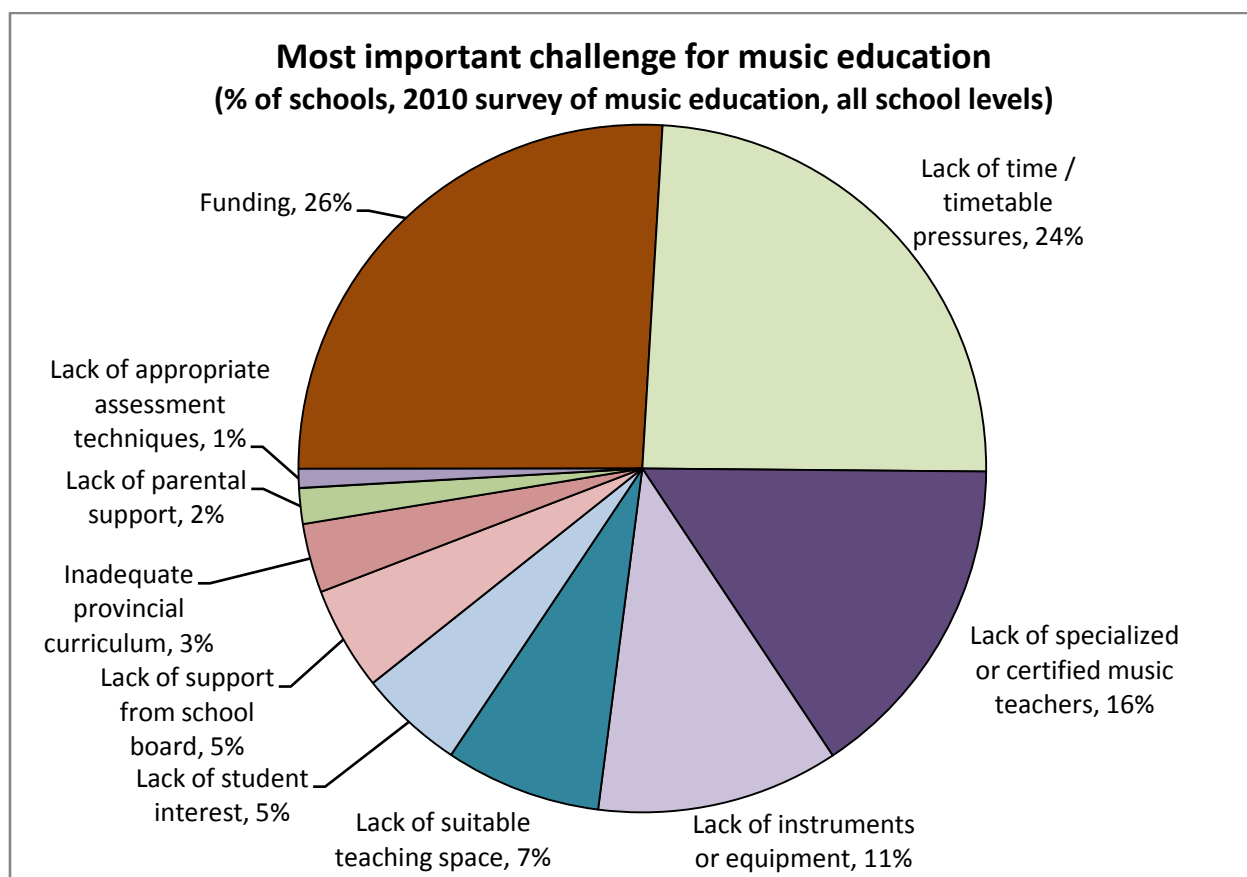
1) The perceived benefits of music education are many and include benefits that the Coalition has been stressing for many years in its advocacy efforts.

- Survey respondents were asked how important they feel 13 potential benefits of music education are for students. A positive sign regarding the situation of music education: a majority of respondents ranked each of the 13 potential benefits as “very important”.
- Self-esteem, self-discipline, creativity and musical ability are the four benefits that received the largest number of “very important” rankings (over 70% each).
- Some “harder” benefits of music education, including overall academic achievement, analytical thinking and problem-solving, are not as widely accepted.



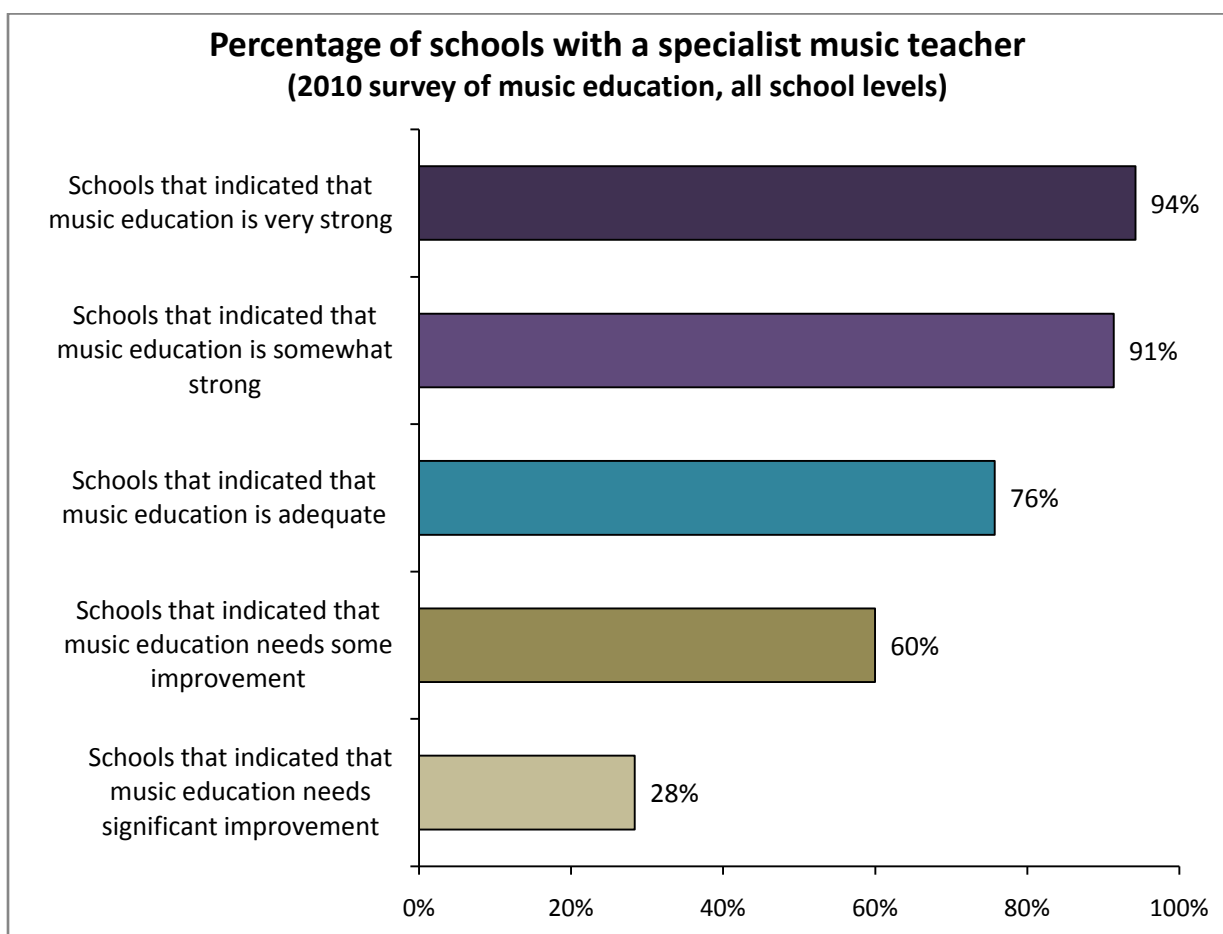
2) Funding continues to be a challenge for schools across the country.

- Funding and lack of time / timetable pressures are the most significant challenges in implementing high-quality music opportunities in schools: 26% of schools ranked funding as the most important challenge faced in their music education programs, and 24% of schools ranked lack of time / timetable pressures as the most important challenge.
- For most of the past decade, funding for music education has decreased in many schools while student participation has been rising. Funding of music education has clearly not kept pace with demand. The survey results show that, over the past few years, more schools experienced funding decreases than increases for music education. At the same time, many schools saw an increase in the number of students participating in music. A 2005 survey showed similar results.
- Although school boards are the largest funding source for music education in nearly two-thirds of Canadian schools, many schools raise funds for music education. Taken together, fundraising, parents, school councils and student fees are the primary funding sources for music education in over one-third of schools.



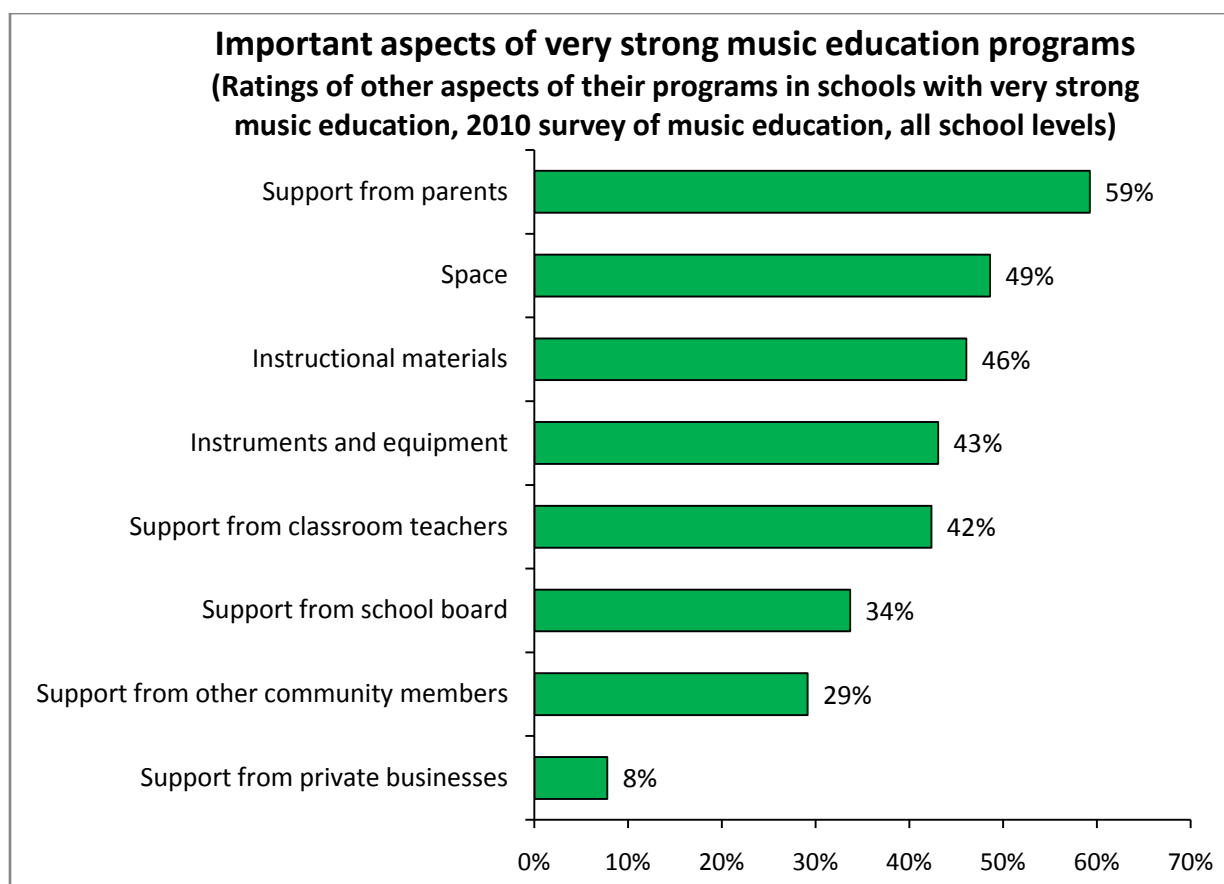
3) Qualified music educators are crucial in creating and implementing strong, sustainable music programs.

- Almost all schools with very strong music education programs have a specialist teacher (94%, much higher than the overall average of 75%). Not surprisingly, schools with very strong music education programs provide many music opportunities for their students (average of 5.9 opportunities per school, much higher than the overall average of 4.3).
- One in three schools cited a lack of specialized or certified music teachers as one of the top three restrictions or challenges in implementing music education and opportunities at their school.
- Despite the importance of qualified music educators, only one-half of the schools surveyed provide professional development for teachers in support of music education.



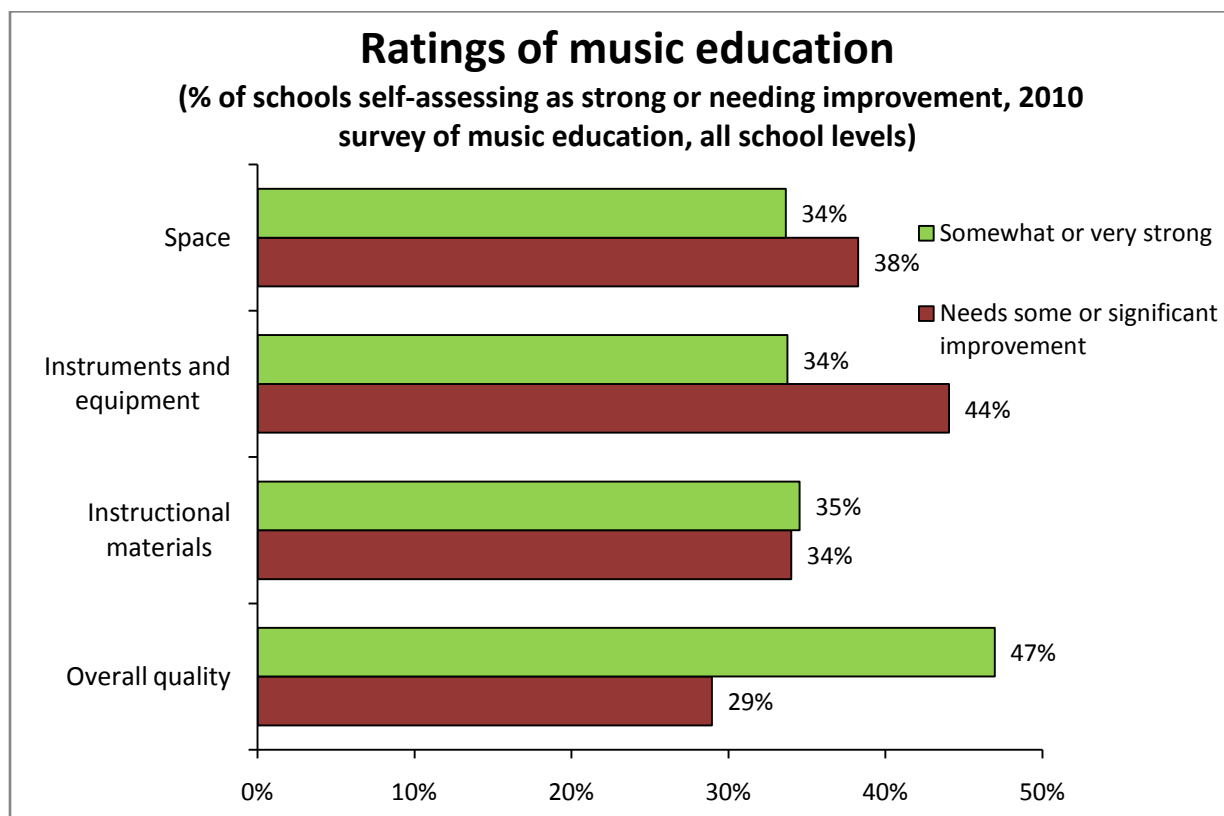
4) Schools with strong programs rely on a delicate balance of support. Parental support, in particular, is a key to success.

- The strongest music education programs have a supportive principal and parents, a strong specialist teacher, student interest (and time), appropriate instruments and space, solid instructional materials, as well as appropriate funding. It is also vital to have support from school boards and provincial education departments, as well as a broader community that values music.
- Number 1 among strong music programs is the support of parents. Of those schools with very strong music education programs, 59% indicate that they receive very strong support from parents (compared with the overall average of 22%). This is a higher rating than any other aspect of their programs, including space, instruments, and school boards.
- There is, however, a disappointing lack of support from school boards. The survey found that many school boards are not providing the supports needed for high-quality music education. In fact, school boards received less than a passing grade from schools: 47% of all schools indicated that support from their school board needs improvement, while only 27% indicated that their school board provides strong support for music education. In addition, school boards are not the largest funding source for music education in over one-third of schools.



5) Schools across the country identify the need to invest in facilities, instruments and equipment in support of their music programs.

- More schools indicated that the spaces, instruments and equipment used in their music programs need improvement than indicated that these areas are strong.
- Respondents were asked to prioritize the top three improvements that, in an ideal world, they would like to make to music education and opportunities at their school. Among the 13 options provided, better quality instruments were selected by the largest number of schools: 20% of schools ranked better quality instruments as their most desired improvement.



6) While performance-based learning is a common form of music education, more passive activities such as “listening” rank high at both the elementary and secondary levels.

- Listening is the most common form of music education in elementary schools, followed by performance-based learning, activity-based learning of music concepts integrated with other arts learning activities, and visits to the school by musicians.
- Among secondary schools, performance-based learning is by far the most common form of music education, followed by trips to hear performances in the community, visits to the school by musicians, and listening.

KEY PROVINCIAL DIFFERENCES

Three-quarters of the schools that offer music education (75%) have a specialist music teacher. The percentage of schools with a specialist teacher is much lower at the elementary level (71%) than at the secondary level (92%). Three regions of the country have a very large percentage of elementary schools with a specialist music teacher: Quebec (87%), the Atlantic provinces (86%) and British Columbia (83%). In contrast, Ontario elementary schools rely very strongly on general classroom teachers with no music background. Ontario has the highest proportion of elementary schools where music is taught by general classroom teachers with no music background (58%) and also the lowest proportion of elementary schools with a specialist music teacher (56%). (Respondents could choose more than one option, so the totals add up to more than 100%.)

Almost one-half of survey respondents (47%) indicated that the overall quality of music education at their school is either somewhat or very strong. There are strong music programs in schools in every province and territory. That being said, compared with the national average of 47%, the percentage of schools indicating that their music education programs are strong is particularly high in B.C. (67%), Newfoundland and Labrador (57%), Nova Scotia (also 57%), Alberta (also 57%) and Manitoba (54%).

These results are fairly easy to explain from the provincial responses regarding ratings of support for music education. Schools in these five provinces give the strongest rating of support to all sources, with the exception of private businesses (which received low ratings everywhere). The ratings in these provinces are particularly high regarding classroom teachers, parents and other members of the community. The ratings of school boards vary among these five provinces but are still higher in four of the five provinces (Newfoundland and Labrador, Manitoba, B.C., and Alberta) than elsewhere in Canada.

While schools in British Columbia believe strongly in the quality of their current music education programs, B.C. schools have the least positive outlook among the provinces about upcoming changes over the next few years.

There are also schools that need improvement across the country. Compared with the national average of 29%, the percentage of schools indicating that their music education programs need improvement is high in Ontario (37%) and Saskatchewan (49%).

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the Coalition for Music Education in Canada has developed a set of recommended actions to improve the state of music education in Canadian schools:

1. More funding for more schools

Funding is among the top three challenges facing half the schools. Increased funding will allow more qualified teachers to be hired along with the addition of material resources. Fundraising, parents, school councils and student fees are the primary funding sources for music education in over one-third of schools. This creates obvious challenges in the equitable delivery of high-quality programs for all Canadian children, particularly those in low-income communities.

2. More qualified teachers in more schools

Ministries of Education and school boards need to hire more qualified music teachers in elementary schools: 94% of schools that self-assess as having a very strong music program have a qualified music teacher.

3. Continuing advocacy

Without a doubt, the Coalition must continue to advocate for all things that make a music education program successful. The perceptions of the benefits of music education, while positive, are still most strongly understood by teachers who see the impact on their students first-hand. We need to engage school boards and school principals with our campaigns, along with parents, teachers and community leaders who will act on behalf of our children.

4. More support for elementary generalist classroom teachers

With 38% of elementary music teachers having no music background at all, our elementary teachers need support in delivering the music curriculum to young students. In Ontario, this number is strikingly high: 58% of elementary music teachers have no music background. Ministries of Education and school boards need to do a better job of promoting and supporting professional development amongst those who are required to teach music but may not have a strong music background.

5. Better training for generalist teachers through universities

Teacher readiness – both pre-service and in-service – is a very large challenge. Our universities in general need to be doing a better job of providing teachers with the necessary skills to teach music effectively. With better training for generalist teachers, more children in more schools will reap the benefits that a quality music education can bring.

6. Further research in schools with weaker music programs

Since we surmise that schools with good music programs may have been more likely to respond to this survey, we may equally surmise that the situation in schools across the country is actually more challenging than is reported here. We need to be able to understand the problems of schools with no music programs or with weak music programs. This would require more labour-intensive research methods such as participant observation, interviewing and other ethnographic methods. The Coalition would be interested in partnering with provincial arts and education associations and universities to develop such research.

A note of thanks

The Coalition for Music Education in Canada would like to thank the Research Committee for their contribution to the development and analysis of this survey:

- Valerie Peters, PhD, Université Laval, QC – Chair
- Mary Dinn – St. John's, NFLD
- Eric Favaro – Halifax, NS
- Kayla Hough – Ottawa, ON
- Greg Way – Aurora, ON
- Jacques Lemieux – PhD, Université Laval, QC

Note: The full report is available from the website of the Coalition for Music Education in Canada (www.weallneedmusic.ca).