

# Guitars in the Classroom

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As a teenager, I recall one particular day walking into my grade 7 band class and observing the band director looking inside one of several large wooden cabinets at the back of our room. The cabinets had long remained a curiosity since they were quite large with doors permanently locked. However, on this day, my classmates and I were inadvertently allowed a peek inside the cabinets. The reaction from my classmates that day left a deeply forged memory and in a small way may have ultimately directed my chosen career path.

Inside those cabinets were a class set of guitars!

I can still remember the shiny multi-coloured wood tones, the taut nylon strings, and nearly blinding metallic tuning pegs. The guitars seemed to call out to us in an attempt to break from their prison. The question everyone wanted answered that day was, “*can we play the guitars?*” For the remainder of the year however, the guitars became the “forbidden fruit” for the members of our grade 7 band.

Why we were so excited to see the guitars, I can’t say for sure. Perhaps we related the instrument to a particular rock icon of the day or maybe we craved a taste of the rebellious attitude sometimes associated with the guitar. More likely though, it was the novelty of playing an instrument capable of recreating the music teenagers enjoy listening to. Simply put, the guitar was then, and remains today a “really cool” instrument. What better way to attract students to music class!

## **Why teach the guitar in our schools?**

The rabid fascination my classmates and I projected towards such a simply designed instrument offers a glimpse into the guitar’s significant appeal, and is just one of many reasons why the Guitar class has become such a popular course in our schools today. One of the best kept secrets is that Winnipeg has positioned itself as a leader in classroom guitar instruction. Currently there are close to 60 schools offering Guitar classes at the middle and high school level. Recent estimates peg Guitar class enrollment in the Louis Riel School Division at over 1500 students. In addition to the regular guitar class program, several schools have also added the provincially recognized Jazz Guitar Ensemble elective. While the Guitar course has enjoyed tremendous support in the Louis Riel School Division, many other schools have recently added Guitar classes and nearly all school divisions in Manitoba now offer the Guitar elective.

The nylon guitar is ideally suited for classroom instruction. The instrument is easy to transport, virtually maintenance free and, because of its popularity, many families already own a guitar at home. Those interested in purchasing will find many opportunities to acquire an inexpensive new or used guitar. It truly is an instrument for the masses.

## **It’s not just “rock n’ roll”**

From a musical perspective, the guitar covers all the bases. Students are engaged in solo and ensemble play, and can explore both melody *and* harmony while accessing musical styles from around the globe. The guitar is also capable of creating a wide range of unique and interesting percussion sounds. Students follow a provincially approved curriculum that emphasizes music rudiments, reading, technique, and performance. Creativity is an integral aspect of the Guitar class and students are encouraged to express themselves through short composition writing and improvisation.

The Guitar class embodies some of the finest elements found in the traditional music class. It's not just "rock n' roll" as one of the common misconceptions suggests.

The variety of music available for the instrument appeals to a diverse student demographic and provides a significant musical perspective. Because of the varied repertoire, students are likely to be engaged in the classroom and most importantly, continue to enjoy the benefits of their music education after high school graduation. Teachers are usually overwhelmed by the level of interest a Guitar class generates while cost-conscious administrators are pleasantly surprised at the minimal funding level required to start-up and maintain a Guitar program.

The Guitar class successfully maintains student involvement in music, particularly at the high school level where student interest often fades. The strongest endorsement for providing guitar education is realized in the sheer number of students who continue to play their instrument on a regular basis after graduation. Lifelong engagement in music is a common experience shared by students having completed school guitar programs.

Solo or ensemble, popular or classical, the guitar is a versatile, inexpensive, and easy to learn instrument that offers a comprehensive and exciting approach to music education. When evaluating strengths such as instrument appeal, cost, and long term dedication to music, it becomes difficult to ignore the tremendous benefits of offering the Guitar class in our schools.