



Majority of music teachers lack musical background: Survey

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The panic hits late in summer, when teachers who can't read a note of music suddenly learn they must teach the subject because there aren't enough specialists to go around.

That's when Kevin Merkley starts throwing out lifelines. As music consultant for the York Region District School Board, he scrambles to find teachers musical mentors, or a quick hit of theory, or to steer them to the new year-long web course designed to help these musically challenged souls face the music.

"The scary part is, without any musical background you could just photocopy sheets about music notation for the kids to fill in all year," said Merkley. "But that's like teaching kids the alphabet without showing them the joy of reading a book."

Yet a new study to be released Thursday warns 58 per cent of Ontario grade school teachers teach music with no musical background at all — a higher rate than in any other province. The national average is 38 per cent.

Overall, the survey of 1,204 schools sounds a sour note for music education in Canada and calls for more funding for teachers qualified to present a subject widely believed to promote creativity, math skills and self-discipline.

"Music is in the curriculum, just like math – but would you want your child learning long division from someone who doesn't do math?" asks Ingrid Whyte, executive director for the Coalition for Music Education in Canada. The group promotes awareness of the importance of music to Canadian life and co-sponsored the survey.

"The 3 Rs are absolutely important, but research has shown learning music helps thinking skills and motor skills and has a direct link to math skills and it also liberates the whole creative half of your brain," said Whyte.

Of schools that responded to the survey, 371 of them in Ontario, many said music often gets squeezed between the push on literacy, a jam-packed curriculum and budgets that treat it as the first frill to be cut.

Sofia Sharma played flute back in high school, but even she seeks help from more musical colleagues about how to teach music to kindergarten pupils at Shoreham School in Toronto's Jane-Finch neighbourhood.

"It's hard to wing it when you teach music. I know about pitch and rhythm but I still want to know how to teach them in an age-appropriate way," said Sharma. "The comfort level is often not there among teachers, and when they're afraid to teach music, it shows."

Among other findings of the report, called *A Delicate Balance: Music Education in Canadian Schools*:

- More than half of schools cited fundraising as one of their top three sources of funding for music programs; 11 per cent called it the most important source of funding.
- Principals complained they often are forced to choose physical education teachers to help fight child obesity, leaving no funds left over for specially trained music teachers.
- Some schools blamed a lack of space for threatening music programs, saying the new full-day kindergarten has forced some music programs out of their own rooms and onto a travelling music cart.
- After-school music programs are available in 40 per cent of schools, one-third of all elementary schools and 58 per cent of high schools. But in more than half of high schools, less than one-quarter of all students take music.