

## **Music Education in the Yukon: State of the Art**

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### **Introduction**

This chapter was developed based on the results of a survey distributed to all music teachers in the Yukon in 2005 by Rebekah Bell, a music teacher who is a voluntary executive member of the Yukon Music Educators Association (YMEA). While it is impossible to capture every element of music education in the Yukon, the results of the survey indicate that there is an enthusiastic, committed group of music educators who work tirelessly to promote music education in the schools and community.

### **School Programs in the Yukon**

As of November 2005, there were 31 schools in the Yukon. Not every school has a music program, and those that do have one are located primarily in Whitehorse and Dawson City. Early elementary music education focuses on vocal music while the middle and senior grades focus primarily on traditional concert band study with some schools adding a jazz component. The table in the Appendix outlines an overall summary of the territory by tracking the school population, location, the grade levels within the school, and the number of students in each school who study music.

Because most schools with music programs employ only one music teacher, and because that teacher instructs a large number of students over the course of a school year, a feeling of isolation is not uncommon. However, Yukon music teachers are developing unique

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strategies to collaborate and network and as a result they are making remarkable commitments to ensure quality musical experiences for their students. For example, the teachers at F. H. Collins and Porter Creek secondary schools work together to promote combined performance groups. As a result of this collaboration, a Whitehorse All-City Senior Concert Band has been established, consisting of senior level students from F. H. Collins, Porter Creek Secondary, Vanier Catholic Secondary—the territory’s three secondary schools—and Yukon College, as well as community members. Co-directed by the music teachers from F. H. Collins and Porter Creek, the band has attracted about 40 members. The group meets weekly and provides an opportunity for students to work with community members, allowing students to see first-hand the concept of “life-long learning” and participation in music. Music for lifelong learning is a theme of the YMEA, and to this end the Yukon Jazz Society sponsors three concerts and workshops at each secondary school in Whitehorse by various professional groups brought in to perform. Additionally, both a senior and junior jazz band of 11–18 members has been established and meets once per week with membership from the two of the three high schools. Furthermore, Grade 9 and 10 students at F. H. Collins and Porter Creek who are currently in “out of school” programs but who want to continue studying music are invited to a class every Wednesday evening. This evening class allows them to keep up with the required curriculum so that they can re-enter the regular class—if it is being offered—when they return to their schools.

A Whitehorse Junior Concert Band program has been established and consists of students in their second or third year of playing (Grades 8–10) from two secondary schools. The band has about 70 members and meets every two weeks for rehearsal, with rehearsals alternating between the schools. In order to provide a number of experiences for their students, several music teachers are involved in the Big Band, the All-City Band, the Community Choir, as well

as a number of other vocal and instrumental groups. Many music teachers serve on the Yukon Summer Music Camp Board, the Yukon Music Teachers Association, the Suzuki Strings Association, and the Rotary Music Festival Committee. Many teachers also continue to be involved with the BCMEA and Carl Orff Canada.

Music teachers in the Yukon work to support music education in a number of additional capacities. Secondary schools are encouraged to be proactive in supporting their own programs by applying to the BandAid program for monies to be put toward band instruments. So far only one school has received funding through this program, but teachers remain optimistic.

Whitehorse Concerts offers discounted tickets for students through music teachers at the secondary level or through private music teachers. Professional involvement in the Canadian Music Educators Association provides Yukon music teachers with access to research and support for their music programs. Finally, teachers are encouraged to share their concert dates with each other and to support each other's accomplishments.

Despite all of these positive, significant activities, it must be recognized that there are four schools in Whitehorse without a music program, one of which is the Whitehorse Individual Learning Centre (Grades 9–12). In addition, the rural communities of Carcross, Old Crow, Faro, Pelly Crossing, Mayo, Beaver Creek, Ross River, Destruction Bay, Watson Lake, Teslin, and Carmacks also do not have school music programs. Part of this can be attributed to program development, but, as in many other provinces, it is difficult to find qualified music teachers for rural areas.

### **Teacher Commitment and Support**

While commitment to the development of co-curricular performance ensembles is high,

there exists a concern about the potential for “burn-out” of these teachers. In a survey of 16 teachers, each indicated involvement in at least three musical groups outside the regular teaching time of the school day, with many scheduled in the evening. When Yukon teachers were asked about the involvement of their schools’ administration and staff, the majority of respondents indicated that they experience a high level of enthusiastic support for their programs. One teacher commented:

We have excellent support from administration that includes both financial and personal involvement. Our principal involves himself in concerts, attends all of our various events, and is positive towards the program. The counselling staff has come around so that communication is very good regarding students’ schedules. On the other hand, other staff members are generally supportive but don’t always really know what goes on in the music program in our school.

Similarly, another teacher reported that

[w]e have a very supportive and responsive administration. The music program is highly valued in our school and the administration has worked very hard to accommodate the music classes over the years, especially given the difficulties in scheduling a full secondary program in a school of 400 or less. This included changing from a 4-block/two day schedule to a 5 by 5 day, which has allowed for 3 hours a week/linear scheduling they are always open to innovative scheduling ideas and this year, for the first time, all of the music classes (Grades 8–12) are linear.

Without a doubt, there are some schools where administrative support has been less than desirable but these appear to be minority situations.

### **Music Education in the Yukon: The State of the Art**

The teachers involved in this survey were asked their opinion about the overall state of music education in the Yukon. There is no doubt that these teachers are fully committed to quality music education programs. One teacher observed that more families with post-secondary education are moving to the Yukon and they tend to encourage their children to become involved in the arts. A second positive comment was the thriving community music activities that are developing for adults to promote and support lifelong learning.

While there are other positive aspects about Yukon music education, it always seems easier to define the anxieties. These teachers' concerns centre on the lack of music programs and music specialists:

The schools that have music programs taught by a music specialist are fine. My concern is the schools that have little or NO music program. I think there is an enormous difference in skills/assets in the children that come from schools with music programs compared with those that do not.

The schools that have music programs are doing well, but there are many schools without music programs. I would like to see music offered in all schools—if not available through a music specialist—at least they should have support and programs available to classroom

teachers to help them deliver a music program. I see myself and other music specialists as resources to teachers and schools that do not have music programs. If we can help all schools to see the need for music and the value of music in helping to teach other skills (i.e., reading, math, social skills, etc.) maybe then we can develop something that would be valuable to all teachers in the Yukon.

Some teachers also commented on negative peer pressure experienced by students taking music:

It seems that school music programs are gradually (at a snail's pace it seems some days) getting more public support. However, students in our secondary schools still seem to think that being in the school music program is not a "cool" thing. Attracting beginning band students in Grade 8 when they have so many new choices and lots of friends to influence them is increasingly difficult.

Finally one teacher summarized her findings succinctly:

Countless studies have been done to prove the value of music education as it enhances the total wellness of a child in fostering success in academic as well as social behaviour.

More needs to be done in some schools.

### **The Yukon Music Educators' Association (YMEA)**

Sometimes it is a lonely process to be the only music teacher working in isolation in a school or area, but the music educators' subject group in the Yukon currently supports teachers

in a number of networking activities both across the territory and with colleagues throughout the country through a variety of affiliations, including the YMEA and the Canadian Music Educators Association (CMEA). Sixteen elementary and secondary music teachers are active members of the YMEA, a forum that meets regularly for sharing ideas, collegial learning, and a support group. In 2004 the executive members of the YMEA established formal links with CMEA and are committed to sending a representative from the Yukon to one CMEA meeting once a year in order to develop and facilitate networks and collaborations. The goals of the YMEA take into account both the long-term goals of music education for the Yukon as well as finite, activity-based outcomes for music education programs. They are:

- to advocate Music and Fine Arts as an important part of every student's education;
- to continue professional development through workshops, visitations, and conference attendance;
- to advocate for more elementary schools to start Band programs at the Grades 6 and 7 level;
- to support and promote the existing elementary Band programs;
- to advocate the offering of grade 10–12 daytime band classes at *all three* Whitehorse secondary schools;
- to continue affiliation with the Canadian Music Educators Association (CMEA) and send representation from the Yukon to their annual general meeting in November each year; and
- to continue presenting concerts in the community.

### **Future Initiatives and Challenges**

As in every other jurisdiction, there are challenges and issues that face music education. The teachers have recognized issues of equity where some schools have music education specialists and programs while other schools seem to have no programs at all. Comments resonate about the traditional nature of band programs with little attention to program considerations for the non-white community. Other realistic issues relate to the balancing act for students who sometimes must choose between the arts and athletics in terms of time commitments and availability of practice/rehearsal times. However, there is a realization that good staff cooperation is required to keep the students as involved as possible in all extra-curricular activities, including taking into consideration the extra demands of part-time student employment.

Despite these concerns, the survey illuminated a number of bright spots in Yukon music education. The development of community music programs that involve adults and students making music together create an increased focus on lifelong learning habits. The collaboration between teachers from various schools draws together students through music making, developing connections that might otherwise not occur. The surveys highlight the strong commitment of music teachers in the Yukon who are willing to commit to co-curricular programs that take place after school and in the evenings. Additionally, the Yukon music teachers are willing to go beyond their teaching roles to act as resource teachers to non-specialist teachers. There are a number of new initiatives in the Yukon, such as *Arts Education*, which will positively impact all Fine Arts secondary school students.

If Yukon music teachers had a wish list, it would include a number of changes and additions to the music programs available at their schools. They would like to lobby the trustees



of individual school boards, the Minister of Education, and the Canadian Teachers Association to ensure music programs in all schools with proper equipment, timetables, and specialist teachers; educate them about the need for music education to support self-esteem, reading, math, etc.; and ask for funding to increase the number of music specialists in the schools and to provide a Music Education Consultant to support teachers. They would additionally wish to develop advocacy materials and information, such as articles for parents for publication in school newsletter/staff professional development about the impact of music instruction. A common wish for the future is to establish greater professional development workshops and opportunities and networks with other music specialists both in the Yukon and throughout Canada.

Yukon teachers feel strongly that their national voice must continue to be heard through the continuation of a Yukon YMEA representative on the CMEA board. The teachers surveyed, like all music teachers across the country, would like to see greater investigation and implementation of arts-based learning programs, and they would like to see study and networking programs made available to current music teachers in order to continue the development of music programs that are appropriate to the Yukon population.

### **Summary**

Although the music teachers in the Yukon may both seem and feel somewhat isolated, it is obvious that they provide support for each other through their own collaborative endeavours and through the links they continue to establish with their counterparts in other jurisdictions. It is significant to note that their successes, concerns, and desires are not unlike those of their peers in the rest of Canada. They seek programs for every student; specialist music teachers; funding for quality programs; collaboration with others; and support, recognition, and encouragement from

administrators, bureaucrats, and policy makers. The words of one survey respondent sum up the state of music in the Yukon: “Music in the Yukon really is vibrant and alive!” But, at the same time, each teacher knows this is not good enough.

### Appendix

Name of School	School pop.	Grades	# of Music Students	% of school pop
F. H. Collins Sec., Whitehorse	720	8-12	72 all year	10%
Golden Horn Elem., Whitehorse	195	K-7	195 general all year	100%
Holy Family Elem., Whitehorse	~ 170	K-7	62+	35%
Jack Hulland Elem. Whitehorse	~ 340	K-7	340 general all year	100%
Porter Creek Sec., Whitehorse	800	8-12	approx. 96 all year	12%
Selkirk Elementary, Whitehorse	310	K-7	215 (4-7 gen.), 23 (6/7 Band) all year	70%
St. Elias Community School, Haines Junction	123	K-12	~ 57	48%
Vanier Catholic Secondary, Whitehorse	430	8-12	76 all year	20%
Robert Service School, Dawson	~215	K-12	45+	20%
Hidden Valley Elem., Whitehorse		K-7	92	
Christ the King Elementary, Whitehorse	~300	K-7	all	100%
Wood Street Centre, Whitehorse	80-90	9-12	24	25%
Ecole Emilie-Tremblay, Whitehorse	~125	K-12	90	80%
Whitehorse Elem., Whitehorse	395	K-7	all	100%