

Reasons to keep the string program in fourth grade

1. String instruments are difficult to master, and require a great deal of technique and finger dexterity. In order to become a really good player, one needs to start at an early age. By starting in the 4th grade, students are already at the upper age, in which it is possible to become a thoroughly competent player.
2. It has been proven in studies recently, that a child's brain develops more efficiently, and a greater level of intelligence is reached, if they are exposed to foreign languages, and given the chance to play an instrument at an early age. The cut off age for this development is at 10 years. Beyond this, there is no significant difference in the development of the brain. Again, we are starting strings at the latest possible age to make any difference for these children. By cutting the Spanish Immersion program, we have also eliminated the language factor. We are returning to mediocrity. One school system in Kentucky has implemented a program in which children start learning a foreign language in kindergarten, and at the same time, each child receives piano lessons. This is an innovative program that is moving forward to do something against mediocrity in public schools.
3. Oak Ridge Schools have been criticized for catering to the above average student and ignoring the needs of the average student. The strings program provides possibilities for any interested child to join and learn an instrument. At Glenwood this year, there are only 10 students in the 4th grade not participating in the strings program, which meets before school. At Willowbrook, the strings program also meets before school. At Woodland, students are meeting at recess times, and at Linden, too, the program is so constructed that students are not missing core instruction time. This provides an enrichment for Oak Ridge students that should not be eliminated.
4. By starting both band and strings in 5th grade, we would be facing 10 year old students with a choice of a marching band, and a string orchestra. Students who start strings in 4th grade now, have a choice of joining band in 5th grade instead. Those students who have experienced a degree of success with a string instrument are apt to continue. Some choose band, only to return to strings if they find out they prefer that sound. If students have not had the chance to experience the sound of the string orchestra, and are enticed by the idea of marching, will never have the chance of trying strings first. I fear this will greatly reduce the number of participants that we have in our program. This year there are 41 string players in the 5th grade at Jefferson, and 43 at Robertsville
5. It has been mentioned that other schools in the area, especially Maryville and Knoxville, start their string program in the 5th or even 6th grade. On January 9, we held an audition for participants in an All East Tennessee orchestra, to be held on February 4,5, and 6 in Gatlinburg. The top players from this orchestra will be eligible to participate in the All State Orchestra in Nashville on April 14 - 17. Oak Ridge High School Orchestra players took 26 of the 68 chairs in the All East Orchestra. The next highest participant was Maryville with 11 chairs. Farragut, which starts in 6th grade did not have any. Oak Ridge will send 8 students to the All State Orchestra, while Maryville will send 4. However, Maryville' High School Orchestra has 105 players, and we have 95. The difference in these programs exists in the fact that we start in 4th grade. If we cut the 4th grade strings, we will be cutting the quality of our string program.