



# THE FORGOTTEN INSTRUMENT?

## Approaching the Challenges of Guitar Education in Illinois

By **Guido Alejandro Sánchez Portuguez**

Four years ago, I established the guitar major degrees (BM, MM, DMA) at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign from the ground up. Since the creation of these programs, my efforts to recruit students have been challenging and often frustrating, necessitating extensive travel and networking with high schools, community music schools, and private instructors. Unfortunately, these efforts have not yielded the desired results in attracting new guitar students to my program. Initially, I believed the issue was simply a matter of raising awareness about the guitar offerings at Illinois. However, it has become clear that the underlying problems may be more complex and systemic in nature.

A simple observation of the music education that middle and high school students receive in the state of Illinois reveals that there is a high priority placed on recruiting students to play in band, whether it's marching band, concert band, or any other type of wind ensemble. Alternatively, if students don't want to play in band, they are often given the option to place into orchestra or choir - ensembles, which are also given a great deal of attention in secondary education. Middle Schools and High Schools usually promote these groups in internal events such as assemblies, games, and concerts throughout the school year, maximizing the exposure these students get among their peers, teachers, parents, and friends who attend these activities.

In contrast, Middle School and High School students who show interest in the guitar are typically a mix of beginner and intermediate guitarists; they are then delegated to the music teacher or conductor, often without clear guidance on curriculum or meth-

odology. In the best-case scenario, the teacher will encounter more seasoned or advanced players who read music and play classical guitar or jazz guitar and can serve as informal assistants. However, having one or two advanced students could further complicate things if there is no clear methodology on what to do with these students. Moreover, in my observations in a few high school guitar classes, most of the teachers did not receive any kind of guitar training in college, resulting in limited experience and understanding of the guitar's role in ensemble settings. The outcome is a complete lack of guitar music in assemblies, concerts, and other official school activities, except for the presence of one or two guitar players in jazz band, provided the school has one.

This scenario ultimately produces a systemic problem: higher education guitar programs lack a substantial pool of high school students from which to recruit. As a result, these programs are at a clear disadvantage compared to those in woodwinds, brass, strings, voice, and percussion. Composition and theory areas also experience greater student recruitment, with the added benefits of offering music technology and other related areas to their major programs.

Other guitar programs across Illinois similarly suffer from the same type of enrollment concerns, with low or no enrollment, a lack of visibility, a deprioritized agenda from their schools, and more recently, complications from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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To the best of my knowledge, only one high school district in the state has implemented a standardized guitar curriculum: Lincoln Way High School District 210 in New Lenox. In this district, students have the option to select guitar ensemble as their primary ensemble. This choice presents them with the same kind of curricular attention as their peers in band and orchestra programs. The guitar curriculum encompasses not only classroom instruction but also provides students with numerous performance opportunities, ensuring a visible and consistent presence both on and off campus.

Although this problem has been identified—especially among guitar faculty across colleges in Illinois—there seems to be little awareness from school districts and higher education institutions about the impact from the lack of guitar programs and how or why it needs to be addressed. Furthermore, a lack of research has been conducted to identify the roots of the problem, create widespread awareness, and propose possible solutions.

In the last two decades, some research has emerged scrutinizing the phenomenon of guitar education in schools and its impact on music education. These studies have explored various aspects of guitar instruction, from its implementation in high school curricula to its challenges and potential benefits. However, despite this increased academic attention, the practical execution of guitar programs in secondary education remains inconsistent and often inadequate.

Guitar education in music classrooms presents unique challenges and opportunities for educators. Seifried (2006) explored the outcomes of rock and popular music instruction in high school guitar classes, focusing on musical achievement as well as non-musical aspects like group identity and personal development. Harrison (2010) examined how the guitar’s unique characteristics and notation systems create specific challenges for music educators. Thompson (2011) proposed a ‘bilingual’ approach, advocating for the use of guitar tablature alongside traditional notation in middle school classrooms.

Some authors have written optimistically about how the integration of guitar programs in schools has been a growing trend in the last 10 years, as noted by Perlmutter (2011). Pethel (2019) commented on the state of guitar education in the United States, noting a lack of specialists in the field of guitar education, despite the recent surge in Middle and High School initiatives. Swick (2017) also realized this problem and published a book aimed at training non-guitarist music educators who are faced with the challenge of creating and maintaining a healthy guitar program in secondary school.

This article examines the current state of guitar education in Illinois secondary schools and its impact on higher education guitar programs. By analyzing the systemic challenges, exploring suc-

cessful models, and drawing on recent research, I will argue for the need to develop comprehensive, standardized guitar curricula for secondary education institutions. This action would not only address the recruitment challenges faced by higher education programs but also enhance the diversity and inclusivity of music education at the university level.

The following section examines the historical context of guitar education in the state of Illinois: analyzing the barriers to implementation, exploring successful casestudies, and proposing potential solutions for integrating guitar programs more effectively into the Illinois music education landscape. By addressing these issues, we can work towards a more balanced and inclusive approach to music education that recognizes the guitar’s unique potential to engage students and enrich the musical experiences of young learners.

#### **HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF GUITAR EDUCATION IN ILLINOIS**

The inclusion of guitar in school music programs can be traced back to the 1960s nationally, with Rafael Grossman’s 1963 article in *Music Educators Journal* advocating for guitar in public schools. The 1967 Tanglewood Symposium further emphasized the need to broaden musical experiences in schools, indirectly supporting the inclusion of guitar.

In Illinois, isolated efforts to introduce guitar in schools began to emerge in the 1970s and 1980s, mirroring the growing national interest in guitar education. The 1990s saw a significant increase in guitar programs across the state. For example, Lincoln-Way Community High School District 210 introduced guitar as a one-semester fine arts elective in 1996, marking the beginning of more structured approaches to guitar education in Illinois schools.

At the University of Illinois, the guitar program’s history reflects this broader trend. Although a guitar program existed in the 1970s and early 1980s, directed by guitarist Paul Cox, a couple of decades passed before I established its current iteration in Fall 2017. The program quickly gained traction, offering several sections of group guitar and opening individual lessons for both music majors and non-majors, demonstrating the latent demand for guitar education.

#### **CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS TO IMPLEMENTATION**

Several challenges have obstructed the widespread adoption of guitar programs in Illinois schools, ranging from limited resources and funding to a lack of trained instructors and standardized curricula. These obstacles have created barriers that require targeted strategies and collaborative efforts to overcome, ensuring that guitar education becomes an accessible and integral part of the state’s music programs.

### *Lack of qualified instructors*

Many music educators lack formal training in guitar pedagogy. This situation becomes evident when observing music classrooms and rehearsal spaces in middle and high schools. Frequently, the educator tasked with leading the guitar ensemble lacks specific training in guitar pedagogy. Their music education background typically prepared them for band, choir, or orchestra instruction, not guitar. Consequently, these well-intentioned teachers often find themselves navigating unfamiliar territory, potentially compromising the quality and effectiveness of guitar instruction.

### *Limited resources and funding*

Schools often prioritize funding for established programs like band and orchestra. Decades of tradition have cemented the place of band and orchestra in school curricula, creating established infrastructures that are difficult to reallocate. This historical precedence, combined with budget constraints and an increased focus on standardized testing, often leaves little room for novel music programs. Additionally, a lack of awareness among decision-makers about the potential benefits of guitar education, coupled with a larger pool of qualified band and orchestra teachers, further reinforces the status quo. Consequently, guitar programs often find themselves at a disadvantage when competing for limited educational resources.

### *Absence of standardized curricula*

The implementation of guitar programs in Illinois schools has fallen behind in part because a lack of standardized curricula and formalized training for educators. Traditional music education programs emphasize ensemble-based instruction in band, choir, and orchestra, with guitar education falling outside this framework. This is a serious gap that leaves many music educators without the necessary pedagogical tools or confidence to establish and sustain guitar programs at the middle or high school levels. The absence of structured guidance and educational resources further exacerbates this issue, limiting opportunities for students to engage with guitar as a viable entry point into music education.

### *Social and historical bias*

There is a persistent misconception that the guitar is a popular music instrument. This outdated view often undermines efforts to establish the guitar as a serious instrument of study in academic settings. Unlike the bowed string family, piano, brass, or woodwinds—which are traditionally held in high esteem within classical music education—the guitar frequently struggles to gain equal recognition. This bias can hinder the instrument's integration into formal music curricula and interfere with its acceptance as a legitimate focus of rigorous musical study, despite its rich classical tradition and significant contributions to various musical genres.

### *Structural and notational challenges*

The instrument's physical complexities, including its fretboard layout and multiple string configurations, can be daunting for beginners and challenging for educators to teach effectively. Furthermore, the guitar employs multiple notation systems—standard notation, tablature, and chord charts—each with its own learning curve and application.

This diversity in notation can create confusion and inconsistency in instruction. Furthermore, the guitar's distinct tuning and tonal

characteristics often make it difficult to seamlessly incorporate into traditional school ensembles, which are typically designed around orchestral or band instruments. These factors collectively contribute to the hurdles faced when attempting to establish and maintain guitar programs within conventional music education frameworks.

## **RECENT DEVELOPMENTS AND SUCCESSFUL CASE STUDIES**

Despite these challenges, there has been a renewed focus on guitar education in Illinois over the past two decades. A few districts have pioneered efforts to integrate guitar into their music curricula, achieving notable success. For example, Addison Trail High School has encouraged music participation through full-year guitar courses by providing school-owned nylon string classical guitars and harnessing technology like SmartMusic for practice and assessment. Similarly, Lincoln Way High School District 210 has implemented a standardized guitar curriculum that positions guitar ensemble as a primary ensemble option, offering students a structured learning environment equal to band and orchestra. At Summit Hill Junior High School, the guitar serves as one of the central instruments for music-making in the classroom, stimulating early exposure and enthusiasm for the instrument. These efforts have not only expanded access to guitar education but have also contributed to increased student participation in events such as the Mid-America Guitar Ensemble Festival (MAGEF) and the inaugural ILMEA Guitar Festival in 2023. These events provide invaluable platforms for performance, collaboration, and community-building among young guitarists, further solidifying the role of guitar education within Illinois schools.

## **POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS**

To better integrate guitar programs into Illinois's music education landscape, a comprehensive approach should be adopted. This can involve implementing steps either simultaneously or gradually, while collaborating with music education programs in colleges and universities across the state. As I mentioned before, some schools are already applying initiatives to promote guitar education, but to make a long-lasting impact, the effort needs to be state-wide. Based on years of informal observations at different K-12 institutions in the Champaign-Urbana and Chicago suburbs area, I have identified several key areas as having significant potential for growth and development.

### *Teacher Training*

Developing comprehensive guitar pedagogy programs for music educators is essential. For example, the guitar studio at the University of Illinois is currently discussing the implementation of a two-semester sequence aimed at preparing music education students to confidently handle guitar education in their future careers. This initiative would equip educators with the skills and knowledge necessary to teach guitar effectively in diverse educational settings.

### *Curriculum Standardization*

Just as band, choir, and orchestra programs benefit from standardized curricula, the state of Illinois should consider implementing a statewide curriculum for middle school and high school guitar programs. Such a curriculum could include components like guitar ensemble and guitar orchestra, ensuring consistency and quality across schools while fostering student engagement. The School of Music at the University of Illinois is trying to address this by developing a comprehensive two-semester track of

Group Class Guitar for music education students. The objective of this sequence is to not only serve as a type of “guitar methods” class but, most importantly, to give music education students the proper guitar pedagogy tools and skills to effectively create and manage their own middle school or high school guitar programs and ensembles.

#### *Technology Integration*

Blended learning approaches that incorporate the guitar into modern music production platforms can revolutionize music education. This might involve integrating the instrument with digital audio workstations, looping technology, and beat-making software. These initiatives would attract students interested in technology-driven music creation, enabling innovative collaborations and expanding the guitar’s role in contemporary education. By bridging traditional guitar techniques with cutting-edge music technology, schools can create diverse and engaging learning environments that reflect current industry trends while maintaining the instrument’s core educational value.

#### *Advocacy and Awareness*

Advocacy efforts should focus on presenting research-based evidence about the cognitive and social benefits of learning guitar. Highlighting its ability to engage diverse student populations and its cost-effectiveness compared to other music programs can strengthen support for these initiatives. Effective strategies might include showcasing student achievements through performances, illustrating how guitar education aligns with broader educational goals, and fostering partnerships with parent groups and community organizations.

#### *Collaborative Efforts*

Building partnerships between secondary schools, universities, and local music communities can create seamless educational pathways for aspiring guitarists. Secondary schools could benefit from guest instructors, masterclasses, and advanced curriculum guidance provided by universities. In turn, universities could use these relationships to recruit talented students while offering valuable teaching experience to their music education majors. Local music communities—including professional musicians, music stores, and performance venues—can provide real-world insights, performance opportunities, internships, and mentorship programs. Joint concerts, workshops, competitions, and festivals could further enhance the visibility and prestige of guitar programs at all levels. By fostering these collaborations, guitar education can become more robust, relevant, and deeply rooted in both academic and professional contexts.

### **FINAL THOUGHTS**

While systemic barriers such as a lack of trained instructors, limited resources, and historical biases have hampered the widespread adoption of guitar programs in Illinois, the success of schools like Lincoln-Way, Addison Trail, and Summit Hill demonstrate that meaningful change is possible. If we prioritize teacher training, standardize curricula, integrate technology, and foster collaboration between secondary schools and higher education institutions, we can create a sustainable pipeline for aspiring guitarists.

Notably, there is already a foundation for growth across the state. Many high schools—and even some middle schools—have guitar classes or extracurricular guitar clubs. These existing initiatives, although very basic, underfunded, and somewhat obscure,

present a crucial opportunity: rather than building from scratch, we can focus on reinforcing and expanding these programs—providing additional resources and pedagogical support—to gradually transform them into full-fledged guitar courses or ensembles. High schools are well-positioned to develop structured guitar curricula that can serve as pathways into collegiate music study or lifelong engagement with the instrument, just like they do with band and orchestra programs.

Expanding guitar education is not just about increasing enrollment in university programs—it’s about making music education more inclusive and accessible to a diverse range of students. As we move forward, music educators, administrators, and policy-makers must recognize the guitar’s unique role in engaging young musicians and take actionable steps toward integrating it into Illinois’ music education landscape. With coordinated efforts and strategic investment in existing programs, we can ensure that the next generation of students can study the guitar in a structured way, ultimately enriching the broader musical community.



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