

# SINGING IN CANADIAN SCHOOLS: COVID-19 IMPACT SURVEY

## Executive Summary

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## Abstract

The onset and spread of COVID-19 have significantly altered music teaching practices and student learning in K-12 schools across the globe. This study examines COVID-19 pandemic impacts on the use of singing in K-12/CEGEP school music programs in Canada. A comprehensive 55-item online survey was used in April 2021 to gather the perspectives of a large representative sample of music teachers ( $N=944$ ). Descriptive statistical and qualitative data analysis techniques were used to summarize and interpret the information collected pertaining to the following investigative themes: COVID-19 pandemic impacts on teaching singing in the music program; overall support for singing and music education; COVID-19 pandemic impacts on implementing the music curriculum; COVID-19 pandemic impacts on assessing students' music learning; COVID-19 pandemic impacts on music educators; recovery and rebuilding music programs with singing; and positive outcomes and opportunities for music teachers and students.

Overall findings confirm that the impacts of COVID-19 on Canadian school music programs involving singing were severe and widespread. Due to rigorous health restrictions placed on singing, thousands of students no longer benefitted from the rich range of opportunities typically offered through regular and extra/co-curricular music programs involving singing and choral experiences. Music teachers were able to implement some, but not all, mandated health measures. Hundreds of music teachers identified five measures that were difficult for them to implement. Instructional time spent singing and the scope of singing experiences offered to students declined immensely, both in-person and online as teachers were suddenly required to find alternative pathways to teach music with little or no singing. It was not possible for most music educators to teach or assess many of the music learning outcomes mandated in official Canadian music curricula through singing, a situation that has led to significant music learning loss, especially related to singing, and incomplete profiles of students' musical growth. Working conditions declined for music teachers throughout the crisis and the majority found themselves working without modified music curricula and assessment tools to accommodate for the mandatory restrictions on singing. Professional development for teachers was inadequate in helping them cope with swiftly changing music teaching protocols, especially for singing. They experienced losses of designated music classrooms, opportunities to perform live with students, and were assigned additional non-teaching responsibilities. Teachers spent more time planning, and mostly without compensation. These factors, including feelings of having decreased support from division administrators and government authorities, negatively affected music teachers' mental health, well-being, and job satisfaction.

Looking ahead, music teachers expressed concerns about how to remediate music learning losses, singing skills, and rebuild music and singing-related programs. Despite these concerns, some positive outcomes, benefits, and opportunities for music education and singing were identified by teachers that arose from their innovative problem solving during 2020-2021. Recommended actions are offered in this report for strategic and sustained leadership for decision makers at all levels including government, divisions/districts, schools, and professional and community organizations

for rebuilding the singing/choral components of school music education programs across Canada. This research study fills a gap in the existing literature in that it targets the impacts of the pandemic on education systems with its focus on singing in school music education. The findings of this study have relevance for the Canadian school system and those in other countries in reaffirming the unique and important contributions of singing in music programs for students and their school communities. Learning can be a deeper and more powerful experience with singing. Singing, alone and with others offers a way of knowing and living in the world through an active, integration of the mind, heart, and voice.

### Select Highlighted Findings

Students were not permitted to sing during regular music classes in **70%** of music teachers' school music programs.

Extra-/Co-curricular music programs involving singing were suspended in **91%** of respondents' schools.

**68%** of music teachers reported that pandemic restrictions limited participation in school-based singing and choral ensembles for diverse, vulnerable student groups.

**Hundreds** of music teachers indicated that they had difficulty implementing five health measures (e.g., singing indoors with increased ventilation).

Live performances with students were eliminated from the music programs of **93%** of responding teachers.

The prominence of singing in respondents' music programs waned greatly.

Music teachers felt a lack of support from the highest levels of authority in education (e.g., Ministries of Education and School Divisions/Districts).

The percentage of music educators who could continue teaching in designated music rooms dropped from 84% to **27%**; most travelled to various instructional spaces using carts or taught online.

Professional development specifically addressing safe indoor singing or modifying the music curriculum to reflect pandemic restrictions on singing was perceived to be inadequate by **55%** of music teachers.

Teachers were unable to teach **60%** of the mandated music learning outcomes in Canadian music curricula due to health restrictions, and they were unable to assess students in relation to **66%** of these mandated learning outcomes.

**67%** of music teacher respondents **did not** receive modified music curricula to guide music instruction and assessment, particularly in relation to the limited use of singing.

## Executive Summary

### Purpose and Methodology

The purpose of this study, *Singing in Canadian Schools: COVID-19 Impact Survey*, funded by Choral Canada and its partners is to provide a national account of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the teaching of singing in K-12/CEGEP school music education in Canada during the 2020-2021 school year. A participatory community-based research approach was employed that involved the principal researcher working in concert with an advisory committee made up of representatives from Choral Canada and stakeholder groups. A comprehensive 55-item researcher-designed survey served as the primary tool for gathering data from music teachers across Canada.

Descriptive statistical and qualitative data analysis techniques were used to summarize and interpret the information gathered around eight themes investigated. Each of these themes is presented and discussed in depth in the final report.

- Teacher Respondent Information
- COVID-19 Pandemic Impacts on Teaching Singing in the Music Program
- Overall Support for Singing and Music Education
- COVID-19 Pandemic Impacts on Implementing the Music Curriculum
- COVID-19 Pandemic Impacts on Assessing Students' Music Learning
- COVID-19 Pandemic Impacts on Music Educators
- Recovery and Rebuilding Music Programs with Singing
- Positive Outcomes and Opportunities for Music Teachers and Students

### Key Findings and Recommended Actions

Several key findings and recommended actions emerged following a thorough review of the data. A selection of these findings has been highlighted and can be found immediately following the abstract. In this summary a complete list of findings and recommendations for each theme is presented using the same organizational structure and order used in the final report. A more comprehensive discussion of these findings, detailed data displays, and teachers' free-text comments can be found in the full-length final report.

### Teacher Respondent Information

- A large sample ( $N=944$ ) of Canadian K-12/CEGEP school music teachers completed the survey which strongly represents all regions of Canada's provinces/territories, student enrollments, grade levels, community settings, school designations, and languages of instruction.
- The overall number of participants ( $N=944$ ) was high considering that invitations to complete the survey were directed only to music teachers in Canada who use singing in their school music programs. This level of participation was gratifying for a comprehensive survey conducted in April 2021 during the context of the pandemic when teachers were experiencing increased stress and workloads.

- Most teachers participating in the study were music specialists (88%) with fewer classroom generalists (8%), or non-music specialists (4%) taking part.

### ***COVID-19 Pandemic Impacts on Teaching Singing in the Music Program***

- The pandemic has had a negative impact on the number of students who had opportunities to sing at school in both regular and extra/co-curricular music programs, a situation resulting in significant loss of music learning, skill development, and aesthetic experiences for thousands of students during the 2020-2021 school year. Some students may have been further disadvantaged by limited access to the benefits of participating in ensembles like choirs (e.g., improved self-esteem, school engagement, and belongingness).
- A critical mass (68%) of music teachers reported that pandemic restrictions limited participation in school-based singing and choral ensembles for diverse student groups, including students with complex needs and those who live in poverty, socially disadvantaged, Indigenous—First Nations, Metis, Inuit, racialized, and/or LGBTQIA2S+ students. This finding is troubling because for vulnerable students, music and choral learning programs are often protective, safe spaces that provide them with a sense of acceptance and inclusion.
- Prior to COVID-19 students were not only singing in school music programs but were also afforded rich opportunities for singing in extra and co-curricular programs such as choirs or vocal jazz groups. This constellation of pre-pandemic singing experiences exposed Canadian students to diverse musical styles and practices and provided them with opportunities to create through improvisation and composition. These varied singing experiences reported by teacher respondents confirm that students were receiving a high level of music learning through vocal and choral experiences in Canadian schools.
- Due to restrictions and mandated health measures in place for singing at school in most parts of Canada, the number of music teachers that were able to continue offering a robust range of singing within their programs declined immensely for both the in-person and online teaching contexts. Most respondents' schools (70%) were prevented from allowing students to sing during regular music classes. In some areas of Canada where singing was permitted and enabled by applying local health protocols, only about 30% of respondents' schools permitted students to sing. Sadly, 91% of respondents' schools were unable to offer any extra/co-curricular music programs involving singing.
- Instructional time spent singing in school music programs dropped dramatically during the pandemic crisis. Pre-pandemic, approximately 90% of music teachers spent at least 25% or much more of their time singing with students in general music classes. In contrast, during the pandemic, over 70% of music teachers spent no time or less than 25% of teaching time singing. Very few teachers reported to have used singing during online classes. Even in choral-context classes, the lack of instructional time devoted to singing in the hybrid/in-person milieu was more pronounced with almost 60% of teachers disclosing they spent no instructional time singing.

- Music teachers faced challenges when they tried to implement the multiple and varied health measures required by their administration units or governing bodies during the pandemic. Hundreds of teachers reported that they were unable to implement five health measures: increasing ventilation while singing indoors, singing indoors for 30 minutes or less after three air exchanges, singing outdoors, singing indoors without increased ventilation, and maintaining physical distancing. The health measures that higher numbers of teachers were able to implement included: singing virtually using remote online platforms, limiting singing as much as possible, humming, masking, no singing, and applying sanitizing protocols.
- After large audiences were no longer permitted to gather in efforts to slow the spread of the coronavirus, live performance opportunities for music students in Canadian schools were all but eliminated. Almost all (93%) music teachers reported that they could not perform live with their students. In sharp contrast, during the three years prior to the pandemic, 99% reported that they performed regularly with students multiple times each year.
- Music learning enhancements for students involving occasions to work with guest musicians (85% ↓ 30%) or to go on singing/choral related field trips (85% ↓ 2%) were almost completely eroded during the pandemic. Furthermore, 71% of music teachers reported a significant decline in educational outreach opportunities designed to support school music/choral programs.
- The number of music teacher respondents meeting provincial/territorial requirements for music instructional time dropped from 84% to 65% during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### *Recommended Actions*

*It is recommended that...*

- Government authorities in education and health work with music education leaders (e.g., government music education consultants, division music education consultants, music education and choral music organization leaders, university music educators) to figure out how singing in schools can co-exist with the coronavirus while mitigating risks and keeping everyone safe. It is important to find ways to reduce the obstacles for *all* students to partake in school-based singing and choral ensembles, but especially for diverse student groups, as music is a critical agent for inclusion and their sense of well-being.
- Government authorities and division/district administrators ensure that students are receiving the recommended instructional time allotments for music in schools so that they have the chance to achieve mandated and/or modified music learning outcomes. For some Canadian students, school is the only opportunity for music education.

- Music education leaders along with government authorities meet to a) reimagine how music performances can continue in outdoor, adapted, and/or virtual environments (if moving forward school music performances for larger indoor audiences are not permitted) and b) review local guidelines for indoor and outdoor events and gatherings with the aim of resurrecting live student performances for their communities that are safe and mitigate the risk of viral spread.
- Canada's music educators accelerate the development of approved pedagogical innovations that will keep students safe and revitalize rich opportunities for singing in curriculum-based and extra/co-curricular school music programs.
- Division/district administrators and school leaders set up steering committees with music teacher representatives with the goal of addressing the challenges teachers identified in this survey that affected their abilities to implement health and safety protocols for safe group singing in schools (e.g., issues with ventilation in schools, maintaining social distancing, singing outdoors).
- Division/district and school leaders support music teachers by providing professional development, technologies, and resources for continuing a broad array of singing and performing experiences, especially for online contexts if necessary. The value of alternative and/or virtual performance experiences for school music students should be assessed, and if considered valuable, then implementation support and resources need to be provided. It is important to recognize that music teachers are leaders that play a key role in schools through their outreach to high numbers of students, nurturing of relationships, and engaging with families.
- Education and health ministries consider redefining guest musicians as essential workers, and not as visitors. Like substitute teachers, they enter schools for short periods to enhance music programs by leading workshops or making presentations. If guest musicians are not permitted to enter schools, then music teachers should augment the involvement of guests in programs virtually, which would offer reciprocal benefits to both students and professional musicians in our communities.
- As music teachers move to recovery efforts, they resume taking students on singing/choral related field trips and participate with them in music/choral education outreach programs. Community engagement is essential to musical development and brings music concepts alive for students. Equally important is collaborating with choral music organizations and cultural institutions on recovery efforts to work in partnerships with schools. It is crucial for music educators to reinstitute the practice of exposing students to a world of musical experiences that may not be opened at home (e.g., musical theatre, choral festivals, workshops, singing groups), especially for groups of diverse students.

### ***Overall Support for Singing and Music Education***

- The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on teachers' well-established curricular practices of using singing, a core component of music education, was profound. The prominent use of singing by respondents in their music programs waned greatly. Given the severe restrictions on singing in Canada's schools, teachers



relied heavily on using other modes of music learning such listening, playing instruments like guitars and drums, or they invented alternative approaches to teaching music with little or no singing.

- Support for singing in Canada's school music programs came from fewer stakeholder groups during the pandemic than before the challenges of the pandemic set in. It was disconcerting to find that the highest levels of authority for education in Canada, division/district administrators and education ministries, were identified less often than other groups as supporting the inclusion of singing in schools in both the normalized pre-pandemic and atypical pandemic contexts. In contrast, music teachers reported high levels of support from several groups (music teachers, parents, school administrators) working to maintain and sustain singing for students in schools prior to the pandemic.
- During the 2020-2021 pandemic year, one third of music teachers reported that funding for their school music programs decreased moderately (18%) or decreased greatly (17%). The remaining music teachers reported that funding remained about the same (53%), increased moderately (9%), or increased greatly (3%).
- Many music teachers lost their designated music classrooms during the pandemic. Music teaching spaces are critical for providing students with optimal learning environments and adequate physical space for safe group singing. Music rooms have been re-purposed and re-distributed to non-music teachers to allow for adequate social distancing of students learning at school. Consequently, music teachers have been working from multiple locations within their schools. The number travelling to and from classrooms using carts took a leap up to 29% from only 7% pre-pandemic, while the number remaining in music rooms to teach dropped dramatically from 84% down to 27%.
- During the pandemic, most music teachers (77%) continued to teach music at school in various instructional spaces (67%) or using online platforms (9%) to accommodate students learning at home. A much smaller group (23%) spent some time working and teaching from home using virtual music pedagogies for students who were also learning from home.
- Most provincial and/or territorial governments had not modified their official music curriculum documents and assessment requirements to account for the reality that in many schools throughout Canada in 2020-2021 singing could not be taught, nor could singing-related music outcomes be properly assessed. One third (33%) of music teacher participants *were* provided with modified music curricula to guide teaching, learning, and assessment, however, most (67%) *were not* provided with modified curricula.
- More than half (55%) of responding music teachers assessed the level of professional development (PD) opportunities received during the pandemic crisis as inadequate, particularly in relation to singing. Smaller portions (38%) of respondents assessed their PD as adequate or more than adequate (7%) for their pandemic teaching needs in music.

## *Recommended Actions*

### *It is recommended that...*

- Education ministries, division/district administrators, and school leaders augment efforts to provide comprehensive support for school music teachers in their pandemic teaching efforts. Music teachers are working hard to sustain singing in schools, confront interruptions to teaching practices, reclaim music classrooms, and rebuild programs. This support needs to include adequate funding, PD, and resources for continuing and rebuilding comprehensive school music programs that include singing. Support is crucial for music teachers' resiliency, recovery efforts, and overall coping with teaching during a pandemic.
- Each provincial/territorial education authority establish a steering committee made up of representatives of partner organizations (e.g., school boards, universities, superintendents, school leaders, parent councils, teachers, music education organizations) to consider ways to develop safe singing protocols for school music programs if the pandemic persists, or another arises.
- In readiness for 2021-2022 and beyond, education authorities work with music education leaders in their jurisdictions to prioritize music learning outcomes that teachers can teach and assess and that students can learn and acquire. While doing so, it is important for leaders to keep in mind that singing is essential and needs to be safely re-positioned in the curriculum.
- Music education leaders undertake advocacy efforts in their local communities, provide curriculum and instructional leadership for music and singing, and offer support to music/choral teachers and school principals.
- Moving forward music educators and organizations who want to resurrect a strong place and role for singing in school music programs engage in advocacy initiatives with students and their families, which are two groups that have considerable influence on educational decision makers.
- All professional development providers, especially division/district authorities in collaboration with music education leaders, and music education and music community organizations make coordinated efforts to provide short-term professional development in targeted areas of need for teachers. Teachers with high needs are those who predominantly use singing and vocal/choral approaches in their music programs and serve students for whom singing, and choirs are crucial to life at school.

### **COVID-19 Pandemic Impacts on Implementing the Music Curriculum**

- Music teachers were unable to address several music learning outcomes (MLOs) outlined in Canadian music curricula while teaching school music programs during the 2020-2021 pandemic context. Findings suggest that curriculum coverage of MLOs through singing was incomplete and therefore, there is a need for remediation. While music teachers used other modes of music learning (e.g.,

listening, instrument playing) in their planning and teaching of MLOs, it is evident that there was less teaching of MLOs using singing and choral experiences.

- As expected, several MLOs requiring students to perform music through singing could not be taught by most teachers (e.g., development of skills such as pitch matching or breath control or singing as a form of self-expression and communication). This finding is particularly concerning because music is a performing art, and therefore, performance-based learning is central to K-12 school music education.
- More than half of the respondent pool reported that they were able to design and implement lessons for six of 15 sample music learning outcomes (MLOs) or 40% of those listed on the survey. These six MLOs were related to listening and responding to music, understanding music in various historical and cultural contexts, and musical creativity.
- Surprisingly, more than half of music teachers reported some difficulty teaching MLOs that would take little effort to address in-person or virtually (e.g., generating ideas for composing songs or self-assessment of music learning).

### *Recommended Actions*

#### *It is recommended that...*

- Education ministries along with division/district and school leaders consider ways to address the challenges music teachers encountered to address the full range of mandated music learning outcomes outlined in Canadian music curriculum documents, as well as the disparities in students' music learning that accompanies this finding. Public health and education ministries should review the most current research on safe in-person singing, revise guidelines and safety protocols for singing in schools, and provide the resources and professional development necessary for teachers to implement them.
- Division/district and school leaders provide professional development opportunities for music teachers that target pedagogical approaches for all MLOs that teachers identified as difficult to teach but, these MLOs should not have been difficult for teachers to address in virtual or in-person teaching contexts.

#### **COVID-19 Pandemic Impacts on Assessing Students' Music Learning**

- Music teachers were unable to assess students' learning of several music learning outcomes (MLOs) outlined in Canadian music curricula during the 2020-2021 pandemic context. This finding is significant and worrisome. Results suggest that teachers' assessment of students' learning involving singing was nearly impossible to implement.
- More than half of the respondent pool reported that they were able to assess five of 15 sample music learning outcomes (MLOs) or 33% of those listed. These MLOs were related to listening, responding to music, and understanding music in

various historical and cultural contexts. Slightly less than half were able to assess another MLO addressing students' song compositions.

- As expected, more than half of the MLOs requiring teachers to conduct performance-based assessments of students' music achievements through singing posed the most difficulties (e.g., development of skills such as vocal production, reading musical notation via sight singing, or demonstrating understandings of timbre by singing) which means many MLO's could not be adequately assessed.
- Unexpectedly, the bulk of music teachers reported difficulty assessing some MLOs that would not present the same challenges as performance-based assessments (e.g., assessments of students' abilities to generate ideas for composing songs; self-assessing learning as performers, composers, or interpreters of vocal/choral music).
- Music teachers (88%) continued formal reporting of music learning to students and their parents/guardians during the pandemic, however reports would have been based upon modified music curricula—what teachers were able to teach and assess in 2020-2021. It is reasonable to conclude that assessment profiles of students' music learning for this pandemic-impacted school year would be incomplete.
- The finding that formal reporting of music grades continued during the pandemic suggests that schools made efforts to continue with music teaching and learning and it remains a valued area of the curriculum in Canadian schools.

### *Recommended Actions*

#### *It is recommended that...*

- Education ministries, divisional/district administrators, and music education leaders take swift collaborative action to develop efficient assessment strategies for music education for their jurisdictions that can be implemented in the short term. A comprehensive set of music assessment data gathered through multiple methods is advocated for all students, which will require additional supports for music teachers who will have to implement the assessments. Profiles of students' music learning are necessary for music educators to address learning gaps, especially related to singing, and then to design teaching and learning plans that address the gaps. For instance, teachers may find themselves having to teach and assess concepts and/or skills that would normally have been addressed in the preceding school year.
- Formal reporting of music grades continues following local division/district guidelines and policies moving forward. If necessary, modifications or adaptations to music report cards should be aligned with modified music curricula, particularly in school situations where essential areas of music learning are being restricted from being taught and adequately assessed. Realistically, students can not be expected to learn and progress through all music learning

outcomes included in official music curricula in the pandemic context due to fewer interactions between students and music teachers and health protocols that are significantly restricting some modes of music learning, such as singing.

### **COVID-19 Pandemic Impacts on Music Educators**

- The situation of most music teachers at work during 2020-2021 was far from ideal with several reporting declines in mental health and well-being (70%) and job satisfaction (60%).
- While 90% of music programs continued in some form, the use of singing in school music programs was suspended or highly restricted. 10% of music programs were fully suspended.
- Over 80% of teachers taught music at school with students while following relevant and mandated health protocols.
- 60% of teachers reported a lack of confidence with and preparation for online teaching. Due to problems associated with internet signal latency, teaching group singing online poses unique difficulties for teachers, as voices cannot sing together in time. The majority did not use hybrid models to accommodate both in-school and at-home learners at the same time.
- At the time of survey completion, few music teachers had been re-assigned to teach in non-music areas.
- Small numbers of music teachers were permitted to teach individual and group singing, but most were required to use alternatives to singing during music instruction. Only 33% of teachers were provided with modified music curriculum guidelines and resources to guide the continuation of singing in schools during COVID-19, while the rest did not have support documents.
- To respond to the pandemic crisis, close to 90% of music teachers spent one additional hour or more each week on non-teaching related tasks such as disinfecting instruments, materials, and classroom furniture. Building on that extra time, 75% of music teachers spent three additional hours or more each week planning new approaches for teaching and learning.
- Music teachers worked much harder than usual in 2020-2021 to keep up with their responsibilities, yet few (about 25%) were compensated with increased prep time. Allotted prep time for 75% of respondents scheduled during the day remained the same or in some cases, time was taken away.
- Music teachers felt compelled to dip into their personal funds and spend it on instructional supplies, resources, and professional development to adapt their practices during the pandemic. The amount of money spent by most did not exceed \$400.00.
- Some, but not all, music teachers participated in choral/music professional development (40%) during the pandemic and stayed connected to choral/music education organizations (35%).
- 35% of music teachers hosted university students preparing to become music specialists during the pandemic.
- Music teachers' free-text comments yielded valuable, nuanced insights into the impacts of the pandemic crisis on them personally and professionally.

## *Recommended Actions*

### *It is recommended that...*

- Moving forward educational authorities and music education leaders reassess risk and intentionally take steps to cautiously bring singing safely back into schools and music programs. Naturally, the health and safety of students is the highest priority for all leaders, educators, and families.
- Division/district administrators, school leaders, and choral/music education organizations make efforts to provide mental health and well-being supports for music educators who have been impacted by the pandemic.
- Provincial/territorial governments take stock of what has been done in their jurisdictions, and if necessary, move ahead quickly with curriculum modifications that accommodate singing, adapted assessment tools and requirements, and related resources for music teachers who using singing. Inequities were found between educational jurisdictions across the country regarding the provision of these supports for music teachers. Some provincial/territorial governments have been slow to respond and innovate.
- Given the additional stresses and changing workloads reported by music teachers, division/district administrators acknowledge music teachers' needs for increased planning and scheduled prep time during the school day and take action to provide it. Such actions could go a long way to counter teacher fatigue and job dissatisfaction in a complex pandemic environment.
- Education authorities contemplating recovery efforts heed the voices and experiences of music teachers in Canada, and those of their students. Relevant and creative strategies to improve the working/teaching conditions of music teachers are needed to resurrect teachers spirits and restore their well-being and work-life balance.

### **Recovery and Rebuilding Music Programs with Singing**

- Music teachers identified a range of concerns when asked to think ahead about planning to rebuild singing programs for Canada's schools. Approximately half of the teacher respondent pool was concerned about gaps in music learning through and about singing, vocal, and choral skill development and how students' learning will be recouped. To illustrate this point, one respondent remarked, "Mostly I fear that after a year (or more) without singing, it will take a long time and a lot of work to get students back to their former skill level and regular singing routine."
- Equally troubling is that music teachers expect to have difficulties recruiting students back into music/choral programs and dropping participation levels. As this teacher observed, "Already, we can see our course numbers dropping as students pursue courses where they are allowed to function as usual/normal—even under COVID-19 restrictions."

- Some music teachers feared they would not have access to performance spaces for making music or dedicated music rooms moving forward, as has been the case during 2020-2021, a situation which one teacher stated is “creating massive anxiety.”
- Other teachers were uncertain about their personal capacity to rebuild music programs. One respondent shared that their energy and motivation levels were depleted—“I feel so completely beaten down and exhausted.”
- A significant number were generally worried that school-based singing-based programs would be reduced or eliminated altogether. To exemplify this worry, one respondent stated, “I am concerned that my school board or the government may decide to exclude music from the curriculum.”
- Some music teachers shared their worries about losing scheduled preparation time, rehearsal time, and/or funding for singing programs.
- A minority identified job security as concerning.

### *Recommended Actions*

#### *It is recommended that...*

- Provincial/territorial education authorities in collaboration with division/district administrators and music educators shift from emergency response planning to recovery planning for the 2021-2022 school year and onward. The core goal should be to return music programs involving singing normal states as soon as possible. A key priority in recovery planning is to ensure that schools are safe spaces for all music educators and students so protocols that address music learning through singing should continue to be implemented as deemed necessary by public health authorities, but more balance is needed. Music learning and skill loss particularly as it relates to singing will be significant for many students and requires remediation.
- Action planning be undertaken at all levels of the education system (provincial/territorial, divisional/district, school, community) to return school music programs using singing to pre-pandemic states and increase supports for music/choral teachers who will be on the front lines implementing these plans. Such efforts require adequate funding for remedial music learning, enabling singing, modification of music curricula, assessment requirements and strategies, music teacher professional development, and supports for music teacher and student well-being. Available funds should be distributed equitably among all curriculum areas, including music.
- Provincial/territorial education authorities in collaboration with division/district administrators and music educators weigh the risk-benefit ratio that music and singing-related programs make to students’ social and emotional growth and well-being as they engage in recovery planning. Singing at school, especially in groups provides important social opportunities for students and fosters vital relationships that have been decimated during the pandemic. Shutting down

music programs that could help students overcome isolationism and rehabilitate their well-being seems counter-productive to education recovery efforts.

### **Positive Outcomes and Opportunities for Music Teachers and Students**

- Many music teacher respondents were able to identify a range of positive outcomes or opportunities that resulted for them and their students related to music education and/or singing at school during the complex pandemic context, while a smaller number could think of none. These ideas reflect the “silver lining” that emerged from music teachers’ experiences and problem solving when continuing to teach music in schools during 2020-2021.
- Worthwhile outcomes for music education more generally included: time to focus on a broader range of essential music learning outcomes, participation in virtual presentations and concerts, the incorporation of project-based music learning, the introduction of some new music programs, a renewed appreciation for music in the curriculum, and discovering that alternative approaches to music education also bring joy to students. To illustrate this category of comments, one experienced high school choral teacher revamped their performance-oriented choir classes which reportedly “morphed into some wonderfully creative composition challenges, song writing workshops, and passion projects utilizing a myriad of artistic forms of expression.”
- Helpful outcomes for singing at school encompassed: a renewed appreciation for singing-related experiences at schools, learning to sing outdoors, producing vocal/choral recordings, learning to sing online, the introduction of some new singing programs, time to focus on a broader range of vocal/choral topics, the incorporation of humming into vocal programs, the use of online rehearsals, and the introduction of virtual choirs. This category of sentiments is illustrated by comments like this one, “It has given me and my students a renewed sense of how important singing together and using our voices is to us. And how much it is a vital part of our community rituals and creating those feelings of togetherness and belonging.”
- Benefits for music teachers included: the discovery of alternative music pedagogies practices, and resources; an increased efficacy with virtual teaching and technology; opportunities for virtual professional learning and development; increased knowledge of students; time to focus on individual students; a decrease in performance-related stress; learning to adapt to a complex situation; increased teaching versatility; time to reflect on the role of music education; and the development of multi-level units of music instruction. This group of benefits evolved from the need for teachers to “think outside the box,” “push outside of [their] comfort zones,” and “get creative.”
- Benefits for music students included: participation in more diverse music learning experiences, a decrease in performance anxiety, smaller class sizes, opportunities to set personal music goals, opportunities for personal growth, and opportunities for therapeutic music experiences. For example, one teacher explained that, “Working in smaller ensembles has certainly been motivating for our students, and I believe that most of them have become better singers this year.”



- Moving forward, music teachers “will be grateful to sing again” with their students, and once they can, they will take along a plethora of new music pedagogies, resources, and experiences that they can use as they see fit in the continuing or post-pandemic context.

### *Recommended Actions*

#### *It is recommended that...*

- Division/district administrators, music education leaders, and music teachers participate in professional conversations to identify music pedagogy innovations and other positive outcomes that emerged from their pandemic teaching experiences and consider ways that these can be used to enhance school music education and singing-related programs moving forward.
- Leaders at all levels in the music and education system use the COVID-19 crisis as an opportunity to re-think school music education and the unique role it can play in education recovery and rebuilding efforts. The unique values of music and singing in education need to be shared in convincing, comprehensive, and compelling ways in ongoing advocacy initiatives to ensure that K-12 music programs across the country are resurrected, strengthened, and championed.

#### **Conclusion**

Navigating the terrain of recovery and rebuilding educational programs from times of disruption and uncertainty presents the field of music and choral education with unique challenges. Choral Canada and its national partners have taken the first critical step in the process by conducting this unique and timely study that offers the profession valuable insights into the impacts of the current pandemic situation on the teaching of singing in K-12 school music education across Canada. Findings reveal deep and comprehensive understandings of several adverse impacts, as reported by 944 music teacher participants across the country. A key message is encapsulated by one teacher who offered a comment using a lyrical line from a popular song—*that you don't know what you've got till it's gone* (Mitchell, 1970).

Indeed, the experience of the current crisis is a powerful reminder of how important music and singing are to the lives of students, schools, families, and communities at large. The attention of all stakeholders in music and education must now shift to what needs to be done in a timely manner to ensure that music learning through singing resumes safely in school music programs. Recommended actions suggest next steps for provincial/territorial education authorities, music education and community leaders, and music/choral teachers interested in resurrecting and advancing singing in K-12 music education once again for all students in Canada, both in the short-term and moving forward into the post-pandemic era.