Understanding Project STEP's Curriculum Framework

A Guide for Students and Families

Over the past several years, Project STEP has been working to make our curriculum clearer, more connected, and more useful to students, families, and faculty.

Our new Curriculum Guidebook gives teachers a shared framework for understanding what students are learning, how skills build over time, and how private lessons, chamber music, theory and musicianship, and repertoire connect to one another. The goal is not to make learning more rigid. It is to give students and teachers clearer goals, a more consistent developmental pathway, and a shared language for discussing progress.

The curriculum is organized around four connected areas: applied technical proficiency, chamber music, theory and musicianship, and repertoire, identity, history, and cultural context. Each area has its own purpose, but they are designed to reinforce one another.

Divisions Are Staying

Students will continue to belong to the STEP divisions families already know:

STEP Division	Grades
Youth Preparatory	1–2
Preparatory	3–5
Junior	6–8
Senior	9–12

A student's division remains their overall programmatic home. Division determines things such as program expectations, course sequence, scheduling, performances, and community participation.

What is new is that STEP now has a more detailed way of describing a student's technical development on their instrument.

Understanding Technical Stages

For private instrumental study, the curriculum includes a sequence of technical proficiency stages.

For violin, viola, and cello, the Core pathway runs from **Foundation through Stage 7**. Double bass follows a comparable instrument-specific sequence. More advanced Pre-Professional stages are available for students whose goals and readiness call for specialized collegiate or conservatory preparation.

A technical stage helps answer a practical question:

What instrumental skills are secure for this student, and what skills should they work on next?

Depending on the instrument and stage, this may include areas such as:

- posture and physical setup;
- left-hand organization and intonation;
- shifting and fingerboard development;
- bow technique and sound production;
- scales and arpeggios;
- reading and clef fluency;
- etudes and technical studies; and
- application of technique in repertoire.

Students advance because they demonstrate the central skills of a stage, not simply because they have reached a particular grade or performed a particular piece.

Secure Stage and Working Stage

Students do not usually master every skill at exactly the same time. For that reason, teachers will often describe students using two stages rather than a single number.

Secure Stage
The highest stage whose central skills the student can demonstrate consistently.

Working Stage
The stage from which many of the student's current technical goals, repertoire challenges, scales, and etudes are being drawn.

For example, a teacher might say:

Stage 3 secure; currently working in Stage 4.

That does not mean the student has "passed 3 but failed 4." It means Stage 3 skills are substantially established and Stage 4 describes where much of the student's current growth is happening. The guidebook intentionally uses this range because development is rarely perfectly even.

What a Technical Stage Is *and* What It Is Not

A technical stage **is**:

- a description of instrumental development;
- a planning tool for the private teacher;
- a way to establish clear technical goals;
- one source of information used when selecting appropriate repertoire; and
- a way to make progress easier for students, teachers, and families to understand.

A technical stage **is not**:

- a grade;
- a ranking among students;
- a student's STEP division;
- a measure of musical talent or potential;
- automatically determined by age or grade;
- determined by the difficulty of one piece; or
- a permanent label.

Most importantly, only applied instrumental study uses this numerical technical-stage system. Chamber music, theory, musicianship, and other curricular areas have their own developmental goals and methods of assessment.

How Stages Relate to STEP Divisions

Because divisions are based primarily on grade and developmental context while stages are based on demonstrated instrumental proficiency, students within the same STEP division will not necessarily be at the same technical stage.

The guidebook provides the following general developmental ranges:

STEP Division	Typical Violin / Viola / Cello Range	Typical Double Bass Range
Youth Preparatory	Foundation–Stage 2	Foundation–Stage 1
Preparatory	Stages 2–4	Stages 1–3
Junior	Stages 4–7	Stages 3–6
Senior Core	Stages 6–7	Stages 6–7

These are developmental ranges, not a requirement that every student in a division be at exactly the same point.

For example, two sixth-grade students may both appropriately belong to the Junior Division while being at different places technically. One may be consolidating Stage 4 while another is working in Stage 5 or beyond.

Skills are cumulative, and advancement should reflect broad technical readiness rather than mastery of one impressive piece.

What This Means at the Beginning of the Year

At the start of this school year, private teachers are reviewing students' current playing and identifying their secure and working technical stages.

That initial placement will help establish an individualized roadmap for the year:

Where is the student now?

What needs to become secure?

What should they begin working toward next?

For some students, the first goal may be to secure their current stage. For others, it may be to secure one stage while beginning work in the next.

This will also make evaluations more precise. Rather than relying primarily on broad division-level milestones, evaluations can speak more clearly about the actual instrumental skills a student has developed, which skills are becoming secure, and what the next priorities should be.

A Stage Is a Starting Point, Not a Judgment

A student's initial stage placement is not, by itself, an indication that the student is succeeding or struggling. Students develop at different rates, and students may appropriately begin a year at different places within their division's developmental range.

What matters is progress over time.

Being toward the lower end of a division's range does not automatically place a student in difficulty. The greater concern is when a student remains below expected developmental benchmarks or ***plateaus for an extended period despite instruction, support, and clearly identified goals***.

When concerns about sustained progress arise, STEP may use the Academic Review process families already know. The purpose of that process is first to identify what is getting in the way, establish appropriate support and clear goals, and monitor progress. A stage number alone does not determine a student's standing in the program.

How Technical Stages Help Chamber Music

Students do **not** receive a numerical chamber stage.

Instead, a student's technical profile helps chamber faculty choose music that allows the student to participate meaningfully. Most of an individual chamber part should already be technically manageable so that the student's attention can go toward the skills chamber music is actually intended to develop: listening, responding, maintaining an independent pulse, balancing voices, understanding musical roles, shaping phrases, giving cues, making decisions, and eventually rehearsing independently.

Chamber development itself is assessed according to the expectations of the student's course or division rather than through a permanent numerical stage.

Technical stages help us understand what a student can play. Chamber curriculum develops what students learn to do with other musicians.

Theory and Musicianship

The revised curriculum also provides a clearer developmental sequence for theory and musicianship.

The beginning three-year sequence moves from:

Decode and Coordinate → Build Fluency and Recognize Role → Understand Function and Shape Music

Students develop reading, rhythm, aural skills, scales and keys, score awareness, and an understanding of how their individual part relates to the music happening around them.

This sequence is intentionally designed around STEP's musical goals and the skills students need in lessons, chamber music, large ensemble, and independent practice.

Repertoire, Identity, History, and Cultural Context

The curriculum also makes more explicit something central to STEP's mission: students should develop not only technical skill, but an understanding of the people, communities, histories, traditions, and artistic purposes behind the music they study.

Repertoire by Black, Latino, and other underrepresented composers is intended to be integrated throughout the curriculum rather than separated into occasional special programming. At the same time, the same standards of preparation, technical rigor, stylistic understanding, and artistic excellence apply to every work students study.

Students will increasingly be asked to understand how historical and cultural context affects actual musical decisions: rhythm, articulation, tone, balance, phrasing, style, and interpretation.

What We Hope This Gives Families

Ultimately, the new curriculum is intended to provide **greater clarity.**

Families should have a clearer understanding of:

where their student is now;
what the student is working toward;
what progress looks like;
how different parts of STEP connect; and
why particular goals, repertoire, and learning experiences are being chosen.

The divisions continue to tell us where a student belongs within the larger STEP community.

The technical stages tell us where the student is in their instrumental development.

Chamber, theory and musicianship, and repertoire/context each describe other dimensions of becoming a complete musician.

Together, they give us a much clearer and more coherent picture of a student's musical growth.