EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the extent, benefits and potential of music education in Victorian schools

Melbourne — 15 April 2013

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Mr P. Brown, Executive Officer, Country Education Project.
The CHAIR — Firstly, I take the opportunity to thank you for appearing again before the committee. I feel like you should almost be on this side.

Mr BROWN — That is all right. It is getting regular.

The CHAIR — This is three out of three so far, which is great. It further demonstrates the importance of what the Country Education Project does in terms of our particular area of interest, so thanks again for your work. Hansard is recording the proceedings; you will have an opportunity of reviewing the transcript and, if there are errors, to have them changed. Also, the evidence is covered under parliamentary privilege, but that is for the hearing itself and not for anything said afterwards. We will go straight to you for any opening statement you wish to make, and then we will have a number of questions.

Mr BROWN — That would be good. First of all, I apologise for Wendy Graham, the Chair, who is involved in a training program today, and for all our board members. This is their first day of term 2, so it was a bit hard to get them to commit, but they have contributed and added value.

My introduction will be very brief. Historically in rural communities we have learnt, especially around music and the performing arts, that there was a lot happening when schools worked together and in partnership with their communities, and that relates to a resourcing mindset and a resourcing model as well as to this notion of a school community interface. Sadly a lot of those partnerships have disappeared for a whole range of reasons, and I think I have highlighted some of those in the submission. While the resources are still there and initiatives like CAP, the country areas program, disadvantaged schools programs and all those resources are still there, the way in which they come to communities is a very different framework, and that has directly impacted on the way in which schools work collaboratively together.

There is some interesting data that is just starting to come out around the impact that music and the performing arts have on other related areas that we in education have a focus on, specifically around literacy and numeracy. We are beginning to understand that the performing arts, especially music and drama, are having an impact on enhancing and improving that process.

The other thing I will say up-front is that a critical role we have found to be essential is building partnerships. There are a lot of people in the music industry who offer a lot to a lot of people, but there seems to be a translation issue around linking those interests, those abilities and those resources to what schools and communities like to see on the ground. That is a role that we have seen diminished, and it was often played by a shared specialist type of role that worked within a community with a group of schools to facilitate that happening. There is only one of those arrangements left in this state, and I have mentioned it to Kerryn. In South Gippsland they run a fantastic music program, from individualised learning right through to group, and it would be great if this committee had the chance to meet with those people.

There are two areas in a really general sense — and we can explore some of the specifics — where I think we need to move forward. One is not so much reinventing but reconsidering the way in which we look at the delivery of music, especially at an educational level and especially when you get away from metro and regional centre sorts of concepts. I think the more we walked down the path of clustering, collaborations and all those sorts of things the more powerful and the greater the opportunity becomes. Where we sit in this current climate, where we have frameworks like Towards Victoria as a Learning Community, provides that opportunity, and research internationally is starting to say that working collaboratively actually gives us a better bang for our buck and also gives us better outcomes. That is the first one.

The second one is that the use of technology in a real sense, rather than in an add-on sense, provides rural communities with a really fantastic opportunity. We were involved with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, Orchestra Victoria and a number of rural schools to implement a similar program here to what was operating in Scotland 10 years ago, and we piloted that for two years with huge success and interest. Sadly the resourcing has run out and schools did not have the investment amount to keep that program going, but that put young people in rural communities in direct contact with violinists, cellists and so on from the symphony orchestras through a link-up process.
They are the two areas we need to explore if we are specifically looking around the rural and remote sort of context. That is a quick overview for you.

The CHAIR — Thank you. Given that there are obviously issues in terms of access in rural and regional areas when it comes to a whole range of things, but we are talking about music here, what do you think the trend has been looking back in the last 20 years? Has there been a decrease in that access in rural and regional areas, has it been about the same or has there been a bit of improvement? Where do you see it?

Mr BROWN — I think there would be a unanimous view, if you look at a state perspective, that there has been a decrease.

The CHAIR — In rural and regional areas when it comes to music?

Mr BROWN — Yes, and I think it would be exponential the further you get away from population centres.

The CHAIR — Why?

Mr BROWN — I think it is just access to that expertise, and the way in which we practise today. I run my school. I do not work with you as a group of 10 schools and then look at ways in which we can enhance. I think the flip side of that is that the groups that we are working with — for example, the previous group, Musica Viva, and the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra — tend to see regional centres as their driving centre now as opposed to seeing them in a much broader sense, rather than going out into the smaller communities and working with them. I think they are probably the three main reasons why that has happened.

The CHAIR — What do you think are the key factors for a lot of those schools in their ability to deliver a good program in their regions?

Mr BROWN — Definitely access to expertise — no question. What the shared specialist model gave them was access to that point; it was a conduit. With the focus on literacy, numeracy, science and those core learning areas at the moment, I think there is a really strong focus in schools that that gets a direct focus. Fringe programs like languages, music and performing arts are the first ones that drop off. It is also that notion that we do not actually work as well as perhaps we could have and historically have done.

The CHAIR — As we just heard from the last witness, there are a number of groups out there providing complementary programs. Where do you see them fitting in, particularly in assisting in the rural and regional arena?

Mr BROWN — Absolutely critical. They are the ones that provide that added extra expertise that you might want or need. What needs to happen is what happened in the 1990s when music was fairly strong in rural communities. There was a brokerage role, if you like, to do that, where information would come up, partnerships were formed and specifics were catered for. I think a lot of schools will say that they get hit by so many music organisations or performing arts organisations, including your drama groups right through to your music groups, that they just say, ‘Too much, too hard, we’ll let it go’.

Ms TIERNEY — In terms of the delivery of music in, say, rural areas — the same goes for regional, but as you pointed out the rural areas are the key areas where there are massive gaps, and a lot of that relates to availability of teachers in those areas, as well as just small class sizes — what strategies can you suggest to overcome some of these barriers, specifically for the smaller rural schools, so that there is some constant music presence and some consistency as opposed to a program that might just come in and do a particular thing and then music is not part of anyone’s life until the next program comes up?

Mr BROWN — The conversation that we have been having is that while at the moment the focus is on the core learning areas in education — and we can look at science, languages, music and the performing arts — rural schools will tell you that they only way that they will be able to do that is by working together.
If we can put a staff member with expertise in that area across a group of 16 schools, who facilitate the learning process but then also give you access to areas or organisations of expertise, then I think that is the model that we need to look at. We keep using the term ‘shared specialist’ because people know what it means. It might be something revamped, or rethought, but it is that concept of groups of schools in a community working together that actually builds that capacity.

The other is that it has a reciprocal effect, in that because the school has a focus on music, performing arts and whatever, it generally spills over into the community and you will find that community artists and other things start coming on board quite often through a generous contribution that they then offer back to the schooling environment.

There are places like Myrtleford that now have a joint performing arts centre across four schools, and that is a school community activity. That came purely out of those four schools working together around developing music and the community arts world coming together with them and ending up with that whole process.

Mr CRISP — Looking at opportunities for teachers to have professional development, particularly in those rural and regional areas, the committee has heard evidence that teachers have trouble accessing professional learning programs in music because they are mainly delivered in Melbourne. What strategies do you suggest for improving the access to those professional experiences for our rural and regional teachers?

Mr BROWN — Peter, I could say exactly the same for maths, science and a whole range of things. The whole concept of professional learning for rural communities needs to be rethought, especially when you talk about education. The majority of rural communities now have access to technology that they can utilise. So I think we have to look at having a balance. We are having significant conversations around this term called blended learning, which is a combination of face-to-face, online delivery and web-based support resource. All the research that we are finding says that has a significant impact. A lot of our professional development programs now are offered on that basis.

We need to give them that access, but it is a reciprocal thing. I choose to live in a community, and I know that distance is a factor, so I am just going to have to wear that from time to time. But I think we can do it differently through a combination of face-to-face, online delivery and web-based resource.

Ms TIERNEY — Can you provide us with examples of best practice in terms of music education being delivered in rural schools?

Mr BROWN — I will give you two. One is South Gippsland, and that is the one that I was hoping you would have the opportunity to go and see working. Do not quote me, but it is a group of, I think, about eight or nine schools in South Gippsland, around Foster and Leongatha — that community. Fifteen to 20 years ago they had a program that shared a number of music teachers across that school, and they have carried that on. They now still have that. It runs from a class-based music program right through to instrumental music. They have a whole range of celebratory events within the community that are massive. That model of schools working together and contributing to facilitate the delivery is a really critical one.

Ms TIERNEY — How long has that been happening?

Mr BROWN — I think 15 years, 20 years. It has been around for quite some time. They will tell you quite openly that it is one of the flagship programs that that community has access to. It is now seen as a community-based music program. It is not seen as just a school or learning program; it is actually seen as a whole-of-community process, and they just all celebrate.

The second one we saw in Scotland. They use videoconferencing and online delivery basically as a linking process to get quality delivery. Their initial program was established with the London Symphony Orchestra to give instrumental music to kids in the Dumfries, south of Glasgow. It was to target those schools with a school population below 50 kids, and it was purely to give an opportunity for those kids to learn to play an instrument.
The department would put a pool of instruments together, the kids would register for it, and then the program went there to facilitate the link with an artist down at the London Symphony Orchestra. We saw that in operation, and it was absolutely sensational. Year 3 kids were learning violin. One was 150 kilometres away. I think we can really replicate that model.

Ms TIERNEY — Was there a rationale for why the region of Dumfries was selected?

Mr BROWN — It probably has something to do with the person who put it together living in that community, but he has now been asked to expand it, so he is going right across the south of Scotland in terms of using videoconferencing as a real tool to link quality staff into that process. Rather than schools having to provide that expertise, the department now provides that centrally, and through a skilled instrumental teacher they deliver it out through videoconferencing.

The CHAIR — Do you think our schools are ready, willing and able to use that sort of technology?

Mr BROWN — No. I think a lot of work has to be done around it. Yes, they can use it, David. As to effective use of it, I think we would need to do a lot of work. It requires a different skill base, and while it requires good teaching and learning, there is that added element of having to be much more engaging because it has that distance factor in it. But certainly from an education perspective I think it is an area that we need to do a lot of professional learning in.

Ms MILLER — The committee has heard that there is a shortage of specialist teachers in rural Victoria. What sorts of strategies can you suggest to encourage them into the regional schools?

Mr BROWN — The first response is, yes, you are right. All the reports we get are across a number of learning areas, and music is one of those where they just cannot get them. After three or four tries they just forget it; they just do not try, which is really sad. I think we have got to go back a step. I was in Western Australia last week exploring what they call a training school. A bunch of rural schools developed a partnership with a training institute, and as part of their training they spend time in a rural or remote context. We saw that in some of the rural communities in the UK and Scandinavia where they look at ways in which they develop relationships with a training institution and put them directly in contact with the rural or remote location for delivery, enhancement and training as part of the training.

We have put that model up to Minister Hall, and he is very responsive to the concept. I think there are real opportunities if we look at the Victorian College of the Arts and those sorts of places and develop some partnerships about how we build up the capacity of our workforce and give access to specialists around music.

Ms MILLER — That kind of follows on from your comment earlier about the partnerships and clusters model.

Mr BROWN — Absolutely, yes. It is critical in the need to facilitate the formation of the partnerships, and we are finding that without that function it is a very difficult task.

Ms MILLER — Would those partnerships, if they are private, provide the funding? Have you thought about that?

Mr BROWN — We have not gone down the path of how that gets funded. For example, with the model in Scotland, the schools fund the kids’ participation and the department provides the expertise. With the shared specialist model — and I think I gave you a quick overview — the department would fund the shared specialist, the schools would support what was required for it to operate, and the kids would pay for their contribution.

Ms MILLER — What about the model that you looked at in WA? Did you look at the funding for that?
Mr BROWN — Yes. It was a fairly similar concept to what was in Scotland. There were things like scholarships for those people who were involved in a training school in a remote area, just to cover things like accommodation and travel and for giving up part-time jobs while they were studying and all those sorts of incidentals. We have that here, but it is minimal and we could do with a lot more.

Mr CRISP — A good chestnut for you — parental contributions to instrumental music education. How do you get that balance between funding programs in what parents can pay and creating barriers?

Mr BROWN — Peter, that is a tough one purely because the expense of getting involved in music is so varied. If I want just one kid to do a basic introductory classroom-based musical awareness process, it is totally different to if I want to learn the bassoon or a range of other things. I think we need to look at flexible arrangements that talk about allowing schools to determine that outcome and what that looks like and how we support that through supporting disadvantaged groups — all those sorts of things and a whole range of other incentives. But if you go back to the shared specialist model where the expertise is provided by our system, the structures provided by the school and the kids contributing for the individual involvement, then it is probably not a bad starting model. Certainly the review of the shared specialist model that we looked at, especially around science, maths, showed it was a model that was fairly well received in a large majority of places.

The CHAIR — Phil, could you maybe comment on some of the added benefits of music programs in rural and regional towns — so any of the kids playing in community bands and local events and all those sorts of things? You might take the opportunity to cite some examples of where there have been shires or whatever that have invested back into a school or supported them to really enhance their programs?

Mr BROWN — I think the last part of that question, David, is a diminishing one. I think that whole-of-community notion is a diminishing one, which I think is really sad. But if you look at, especially from a music perspective, when the school communities have had very successful programs, then the community engagement directly follows.

Coming up to Anzac Day, if you walk around rural communities, you will see a Year 9 kid involved with a bugle and a whole range of other things because of that relationship. You will find that young people will get involved in those local community bands in a whole range of ways. If you go to a place like Wangaratta, because they run the jazz festival, school involvement in the festival is absolutely massive. They took the initiative to start with, but the community has now embraced it and got them involved. South Gippsland is another example of that. It seems to be about getting a catalyst to kick it off, and then it just rolls from there. I will give you an example, and sadly the teacher moved on, but Tubbut is one of the most remote schools in Victoria. Per capita it probably had the best music program. I think they had three artists working with eight kids, and that was purely on the passion of the principal, who had a music background. That was the catalyst. In more recent times we have not facilitated that partnership in a holistic and proactive way.

The CHAIR — So you think that is an opportunity for us to really work on?

Mr BROWN — Absolutely. We deal with a lot of rural communities and we see the expertise. A number of small towns have drama groups and performing arts groups. They all need that sort of concept.

The CHAIR — What do you think could be done to support and encourage communities to get involved?

Mr BROWN — A simple thing would be to get organisations like local governments working more cohesively with these schools; I do not think there is any question about that — with the arts world playing a fairly significant role. I get calls from the MSO, Orchestra Victoria, Musica Viva and The Song Room in February of every year asking, ‘What schools should we go to?’ So there is a role for that process. If you could work at a local level to start building those relationships, it would be really powerful. Maybe there is a support mechanism for schools through information about the facilities that might be available. I know when I was in Mansfield 10 years ago the local primary school wanted to put on a performing arts festival,
so the MMuDS group provided mentoring for the kids depending on which role they had in it. The outcome was just sensational.

**The CHAIR** — Do you think performers in rural and regional areas get enough opportunities to perform in a live setting?

**Mr BROWN** — In talking to them, they would say no. What we wanted to do was bring all of the 140 kids down to Hamer Hall and give them an opportunity to play with either of the orchestras. The plan was there, but we did not quite get there. But it would be fantastic if you had a kid sitting next to the lead violinist of the MSO and they were just playing a tune together.

**Ms TIERNEY** — With the population drift out of rural into the regions or into Melbourne and other communities we have always had this problem of trying to inject expertise back into more isolated communities. Even when the drift was not as dramatic as it is now there was a time when we had the bonded arrangement. I think we all accept it is good for people to have a regional experience and hope they might have that as an ongoing experience in terms of certain parts of their lives, but it is a bit hit and miss. Is there a role in terms of bonded students in particular in targeted areas where we know we have serious and severe shortages?

**Mr BROWN** — The simple answer, Gayle, is yes, but from all the work we have done, and we are just starting another piece of work around retaining quality people, especially in the education world and in rural Victoria, we know that it is short-term; it does not necessarily sustain itself. For example, you can use a system like the one in Western Australia that looks at giving you preferential treatment if you go out into a rural context in that you do not see any bills or accounts. You get housing and all that sort of stuff and you get preferential treatment to go back to Perth or to a major regional centre after three years. So you go straight into the interview process in a leading teacher role. We have seen the scholarship arrangement in this state in a variety of forms, and yes, I think it serves a purpose, but I think it has got to be within a broader suite of services that we offer. What I was talking about in terms of the training schools concept needs to be there. We need to support our new graduates in our communities much better than we do currently, and when you talk specialists, we need to do that a hell of a lot better, because I am often the only specialist in that community, and I have to drive for two hours to get to the next one.

I think if we can offer some incentives to be attracted there, and possibly even to be retained there, that would certainly be another area to look at.

**Ms MILLER** — Just following on from that, Phil, what are your views on whether students in regional and rural Victoria perceive music to offer a diverse range of career opportunities?

**Mr BROWN** — I am not sure they are that much different. I think access is the critical one, but you will often find in rural communities that kids come together much more easily, and it will often be around music — it is either music or sport. You will find them jamming in garages or in people’s lounge rooms or whatever. In terms of a perception of access to the breadth of opportunities and where they take that either professionally or for enjoyment, I think that is limited.

**Ms MILLER** — Just back to the shortage of specialist teachers, if you were to create a career path for those students that go through — learning an instrument through schooling themselves and going on to become teachers and then on the basis that they stay living in a regional area encouraging those students to become specialists — would that increase your numbers?

**Mr BROWN** — Certainly from some of the work we have been doing we know that if you grow up in a rural community, you are more likely to go back to it. There is a stronger element that we are starting to notice, and that is building a relationship with a person so they are embraced in the rural community. For example, in our teacher improvement process we ask universities to give us their final year teachers, and we build up a really strong relationship with a community across seven or eight schools. What we are finding is that up to 35 per cent of those are actually picking up jobs in the community that they had their final relationship with. Both metro and rural trainees are being picked up through that process. So while the research indicates that rural kids tend to return to the rural area at some point, there is also this other
element starting to grow — especially in Victoria because I think we are a bit closer than if you go to Western Australia or Queensland — that if I build up a really positive relationship as part of my teacher training or my training process, then I am more likely to stay and look for a job. Rather than just seeing it as a practical experience, let us give it as a professional experience. Lift the bar and let us have it as a real experience.

The CHAIR — Phil, that concludes our question and answer time. Thank you once again for your contribution and for the great work you are doing. Keep it up.

Mr BROWN — Good luck with it all.

The CHAIR — Thank you.

Witness withdrew.