EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

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

Blackburn High School — Thursday, 16 May 2013

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Mr Stephen Hardie, Director of Music
Ms Sue Wedding, Assistant Director of Music
Mr Andy O’Connell, Instrumental Music Teacher
Ms Christine Simpson, Classroom Teacher, and
Mr Tim Dalton, Assistant Principal, Blackburn High School
Ms MILLER — Thank you very much for coming in today. Basically, what will happen is we will ask you some questions. Your responses will clearly be given and documented in Hansard. You will have what we call parliamentary privilege, where you can say what you like in this environment, but you can’t repeat it outside this environment.

There will be a copy of the transcript of Hansard for you to look at, so if there are any changes that you wish to make it can be done so in an appropriate manner.

Normally, we would ask for an opening speech by the Principal, but given the time constraints we will just go straight into the questions. Is everyone comfortable with that? Great.

Dr WOODMAN — We can probably help out even with the questions a little bit because there are some that really are targeted that one person can answer rather than having all of us, as you’ve done with the students, answer every bit.

Ms MILLER — I guess what we will do in this instance is we’ll ask the questions, and whoever feels that they want to speak up can do so and then we can just go on to the next question.

With the students it was just appropriate that we got feedback from each one, because they’ve all clearly got different experiences.

All right, so I will kick off with the first question. Could you provide an overview of how music is delivered as part of the curriculum of the school?

Mr HARDIE — I’ll take this one. We teach music, I guess, in three streams at the school. I’ll describe each one of them.

First, we have classroom music, which is a compulsory subject at Years 7 and 8. Students get one period per week, seventy minutes of classroom music. The emphasis in those classes is on teaching genuine music literacy skills, i.e. the ability to hear and read and write music and understand it, a beginning, introduction, to understanding of styles, a bit of composition and oral and theory skills.

From Year 9, it becomes an elective subject. Currently we are able to offer the subject for one semester in Year 9 and one semester at Year 10, which we see as an extension of the skills started in Years 7 and 8 and also with an eye on what they’re going to be required to do if they choose to take it as a VCE subject. So, once again, development of oral and theory, creativity and understanding of the different genres.

At Years 11 and 12 we don’t always run every subject, but we always offer each of the VCE music subjects, so that’s style and composition, both Years 11 and 12 performance, in both Years 11 and 12 and also investigation, which is a Unit 3/4 subject, although it is available to Year 11 students, if appropriate. So, that’s the classroom program.

We have instrumental music offered as an elective. Students can choose to have external lessons with are delivered via a withdrawal basis. Students miss an academic class to attend these instrumental lessons. Lessons are obviously provided by specialist teachers who teach at the school on an itinerant basis.

To begin with, they will learn in groups of three or more. As their standard increases, and particularly when they get to VCE level, those lessons will become individual lessons which are specifically designed to support what they’re doing in the VCE music subjects. Also, every school who learns an instrument in the school is required to play in the school’s ensemble program. So, we have a range of orchestras, wind bands, stage bands, choir, guitar, ensemble and so on, and that is a requirement not only of ours but indeed of the regions, that any student who learns an instrument in school is required to play an ensemble of some sort.
Mr ELASMAR — Your school has chosen to focus strongly on music. Could you outline the reasons for this decision and why you believe that it is important that schools specialising in music exist within the government schools sector.

Mr DALTON — I am the Assistant Principal. I’ve been here 25 years. I’ve seen a fair development of the program. That’s why I’m sort of answering the question.

The music started in terms of instrumental music in about ‘75 where it was deemed that it was important that kids not only learn music as a classroom subject, but actually be able to play.

So, a very brief history is that as a result of that, instruments were then taught in schools. Then the government at the time realised that the problem was that if you have a spread of kids learning instruments all over the place, they were never going to be able to play in a group, and that’s when school specialisation came in, and they had these things called music placement schools. Music placement schools were in each region. This was the Eastern Region Music Placement School. The kids would come here, and we would take kids from all over the region if they wanted to learn a musical instrument. This was back in the times when there were zones for schools. They no longer exist. Those kids would then audition and come here and then we’d be able to set up a group of kids.

So, there’s no use putting a trumpet teacher five days a week in a school. You need to spread them out so that they teach the kids, but you also need to enough trumpet players and violin players, whatever it was, to create the orchestras and things that we do for the level of excellence that we do.

When music placements schools were cut out in the early 90s this school has maintained its funding and its program based on the number of kids that are in the school as a percentage of the whole total of kids and based on the groups that we perform and we create, and based on the numbers of kids going through to VCE, what we’ve seen before, those senior students.

So, that whole program has a probably — it’s up to nearly 50 years or 40 years in its making. It has meant that parents and teachers and students have for 30 or 40 years been getting high quality education but also high-quality instruments.

The parents have raised money for things. There’s not too many schools that have a $13 000 bass clarinet. And, those sorts of things have been done by the parents backing the teachers and the kids being aware that they’ve got a very special program here.

The last thing I will say about it is that in ‘92 the kids here paid nothing for their fees. They now pay well over $1000 to their fees to learn instruments. And, the number of kids learning instruments here now is much more than it was in those days. So, you could see the passion that the parents and the community hold and the importance they hold in that.

We’re no longer totally subsidised. We have pay as you go. We’re subsidised, but not totally subsidised.

Ms MILLER — Right. So, just following on from that, the school submission notes the funding for the instrumental music program needs to be supplemented by the school’s budget in terms of the contribution you talked about. What percentage of funding is provided from each of these sources and what do you believe is the optimum balance of funding from these resources? It might be a question for Sandra.

Dr WOODMAN — I’ve got that. Can I continue one with that first one that you asked first?

Ms MILLER — We are limited for time.
Dr WOODMAN — I just want to address the first part, which is why is it that schools specialising in music exist in the government school sector. And, I think that’s an absolutely key concept.

Ms WEDDING — That’s the biggest part of this whole thing.

Dr WOODMAN — You heard from the many students already today about the level of excellence that our program promotes and achieves. I think that every student deserves an opportunity to access that level of excellence, and those students aren’t just those ones who can afford to attend private schools.

The government sector should have a school of excellence for music in the same way that they consider gifted education and have a school of excellence in sport. They have one in maths/science. They have it for high academic. They must have a school of excellence for music, and we are that school.

So, to continue on from where you were talking about, can I also just comment on the submission from the department to the parliamentary inquiry which I found extremely narrow in focus and with very little discussion around music or understanding of music in the secondary sector. I found that quite disappointing.

Ms MILLER — Did you want to table any documents?

Dr WOODMAN — I do want to table it. So, coming back to your question around the funding, I will table a document, which I have here before you, which outlines the funding as it stands. I just want to highlight very quickly a couple of concepts.

As you see at the top, the amount put into our program from the department is $371,000. That is the additional funding that we get because of the size of our music program. It is absolutely critical to the survival of our music program.

Parents put in $220,000, and that has increased, as Tim outlined, dramatically over the last three years, and it had to increase because you’ll see the total program cost $571,000. Our staffing costs $614,000 to staff our program.

Over the last three years — I tabled for you there — in 2011 the deficit for music alone was $180,000 that the school had to find somewhere. So, we made changes to the program. They haven’t all been well received changes, but we have to get the program close to being self-funding.

Clearly, if you were to take that $371,000 out, we simply would not be able to put a program in place. I come back to the statement I made before, that you must have a government school of music excellence.

Mr ELASMAR — Your submission raises concern about the ideal requirements for teacher registration, and how they apply to instrumental music teachers. Could you elaborate on what the issues have been at your school, and what you would like to see done to address it?

Dr WOODMAN — It’s a very long question with a long answer. I will try and be brief.

One of the difficulties we have is that most of our music teachers currently are expert teachers, and the same as an expert teacher in a maths classroom or an English classroom. Now, for a maths or an English teacher they’re employed generally for their entire time fraction at one school. Instrumental music teachers don’t fit that boat. They might be a day here and then another day at four different schools.

Now, it’s extremely difficult in terms of the staffing. They then have a base school, but if I don’t need
them for my time now because I now don’t have students doing that particular instrument, it’s very
difficult to actually manoeuvre them to where the needs are, and we have to actually go through an
excess process, which really applies to your classroom teachers and doesn’t fit with the instrumental
music program.

We need people who are excellent at the music teaching. They don’t necessarily have to be excellent
classroom teachers. So the category of classroom teaching isn’t really targeting the need that we have
for instrumental music teaching. We’ve got many people that we could interview — and some of them
are sitting here — who would be excellent teachers but they don’t have a teaching qualification, and
nor do they specifically need one to actually fulfil the function we need for instrumental music
teaching.

How do we get around that? I actually think they need their own category of instrumental music
teachers that have specific roles and requirements that fulfil that particular task. Yes, we want people
to be good teachers, but they need different skills than the classroom teacher does.

Ms WEDDING — Can I just butt in there. Instrumental teachers are often professional performers,
and they might have their Masters in Performance. They might be really recognised in the community
and certainly professionally as great players like, you know, a James Morrison or we had Ross Irwin
in here before, you know, quite famous sort of people.

You know, they get a job in a school. They decide they want to give something back and teach. Their
years of experience, their years of getting their standard as a professional performer, is not recognised
at all because they don’t have a Dip Ed and so their pay scale is very, very low. So, it’s almost like
creating two levels of sort of teachers.

So, you have people like me. I’m a fully qualified teacher who teaches trumpet, but, you know, I get
paid on a different scale as somebody else coming in who might have their Masters of Performance. I
don’t have my Masters of Performance but they would have, and they would get paid a lot less than
me, even though they have been at university a lot longer than I have, would probably be a better
player, but they don’t get any recognition of that in payment ways because they don’t have a one year
Dip Ed.

Mr O’CONNELL — Can I briefly add to that, too. I think possibly what we see here too is
magnified, the issue in regard to this. Because we’re actually teaching students, particularly in the
later years of school in a specialised environment, we’re teaching them almost pathways into industry
where a lot of these students, as you’ve seen in the past group, are actually going on to either be
teachers or peak performers.

We’re operating much like the old tech schools used to operate where you have specialists in their
particular field, and obviously the requirements for that at this school are far greater than in another
school, where they’re not necessarily going into a professional environment.

But, we need very specialised teachers that are very capable at what they do, and the requirements are
specific as being skill based.

Ms MILLER — The committee has heard that many schools struggle to deliver a strong education
program. What strategies can you suggest for improving access to music education across the state?

Mr HARDIE — The music placement school system that Tim mentioned before, I actually
attended this school as a music placement student, and I’m pretty sure Andy did. Yes.

I actually think that idea works. It’s not feasible to create what exists here in every school. It’s not
going to happen. Never, ever, is it going to happen. What the system needs to cater for is that students
can access a program like this if they are prepared to choose to go to that school in the same way that
they can access an outstanding science program, if they choose to go to John Monash or they can access an outstanding academic program if they apply for and are accepted into a Melbourne High or Mac. Rob High or something like that.

So, in order to improve access to music education, that concept of a series of lighthouse schools around the state, around metropolitan Melbourne, you know, geographically spaced in such a way to make it physically feasible for students to go to those schools if they make that decision, and to make certain that those schools are resourced and funded and that the teachers there are actually trained — that’s a whole other issue, the aspect of teacher training. But, what we’ve just been talking about there, you know, if we’re going to establish these centres of excellence, if you like, then the people teaching them need to be excellent. And, sometimes they will be people who don’t have that teaching qualification.

Those instrumental teachers are delivering something very specialised, and they’re not ever going to be responsible for delivering an entire subject. What they are effectively doing is as a support or as an addendum to what the classroom teacher provides. You know, in the VCE subjects, the classroom component is the oral and the theory and history and all that sort of stuff, but each of these students are playing a different instrument, and they need a specialist teacher, a highly skilled specialist teacher, to provide that. And, you’re not going to be able to resource that to provide it to every single school. It’s just never going to happen.

Dr WOODMAN — Just on the back of that, I note Sean Smith, who is one of our Year 7 students, in his submission to the inquiry, and his is a lovely submission, but he talks about, it can be expensive to learn music, and if you put music across everywhere to the level that we have it, it would be enormously expensive.

And the other concept is that we teach every instrument. And, he also says, ‘And most schools don’t teach my instrument.’

So, it’s not possible to create that level of access across every school and have every instrument and the level of excellence that this school provides.

Ms SIMPSON — Can I add to that. Given that it’s ridiculously expensive to try and offer this in all schools, but to add to that that aren’t the numbers of music students in all schools to be able to hold those ensembles. You need to concentrate it in certain areas so that students will come to the school and therefore we have the numbers to create those ensembles. You can’t do much in a school with a handful of good players in terms of creating this experience for them.

This is my 16th year at the school, and in my first year here, in my Year 12 class, I had a boy from Portland. His family lived in Portland. He came up here specifically to go to Blackburn. I had another girl from Swan Hill in the same class, the same story, and, siblings where the boy was in my Year 12 class and a younger girl who came up every day by bus from Frankston. That was all in the one year. And, quite apart from that being a year that sort of opened my eyes to the attraction this school holds, every year we have so many students enrolling here from the Dandenongs. There’s a strong music program up in the Dandenongs. They want to come here to pursue it.

And, additionally, because you don’t have the congregation of music students and you never could have if you tried to spread it across all the schools in the state, certain subjects at VCE will, quite frankly, disappear.

A lot of schools currently struggle to hold a music class. They put units 1 to 4 all together in the one class and they’ve still got number that aren’t really sufficient. Most schools do not hold music style or composition. And, we’re the biggest provider of that subject next to distance ed, which highlights the fact that students are desperate to have a music school to do it. Most schools don’t hold it, so they go to distance ed. They are the biggest provider followed by VCASS. And, if we look at VCASS as
being a specialist music school, we are in a completely different boat to them, because those students go there through audition. With many of our students, we nurture them from scratch. They come here and they haven’t played a note. They pick it up in Year 7. Like, Bethany, who you would have seen in the last little meeting that you had, hadn’t played a note until she came to Year 7 and she goes and she wins a scholarship to Singapore. Those sorts of students aren’t going to go VCASS. They don’t even know they’re going to be musicians.

Ms MILLER — Stephen, did you want to comment?

Mr HARDIE — Just on the subject of the distances that students travel, I mean, you could sort of hear a story like that, and you could think, well, surely the solution to that might be to create other schools where these kids can go.

I think the real point is kids and their parents will make the effort to get their kids to school like as long as the program is worth coming to. If you start to dilute the resources around the place then no one is able to provide the type of program that we’re currently running and it is not available to anyone basically.

The resources have to be concentrated in the small number of discrete locations, and that be set up in such a way that any kid, if they are prepared to make the effort, can get to those schools or get to one of those schools.

Dr WOODMAN — Can I just add very quickly to that. That’s also supported by our network schools. Talking with them last night, every one of them said to me you’ve got to go and emphasise that we want you to be the music specialist school, because they can’t deliver it.

Ms MILLER — That’s coming across loud and clear. Are there any final comments that anyone would like to make?

Ms WEDDING — I worked for nearly fifteen years in the country at Ballarat High School before I came here. Just deliverance to country schools is very, very, very difficult. This is away from Blackburn High School but I think like, say, if we were a music specialist school, I think with Skype being as good as what it is now to deliver to, you know, Nhill and Dimboola High School and places like that and have it function as a music specialist place that can deliver that and maybe, you know, like twice a year for a week-long thing that the kids in the country gravitate to somewhere like this and they have live-in weeks, you know, maybe farmed out with home stays with our students.

It’s not unfeasible with technology today that I could be teaching a trumpet lesson and I could have two students from here at Blackburn High School and I could have another child on Skype in that same lesson. I reckon that should happen. So, you know, I could be teaching someone from Dimboola at the same time as two kids here, and they would just know that that was their lesson time and they turned up for their lesson on the computer.

So, I think we need to be looking further than just us. We need to be thinking how we can share it. I think the country does it really, really hard, you know. If you lose a double reed teacher in Ballarat you do not get another one because you can’t attract them to the town. So, you know, you have to be able to provide, and the country kids deserve a music education, too.

Ms MILLER — Any other final comments? No.

Well, thank you very much for taking the time out of your day to contribute to this inquiry. It’s been really significant, and clearly this school has a very good reputation, not only within the school community, but beyond, within the region. So, I commend you and your teaching community on all the good work that they do.
Dr WOODMAN — All the people sitting here.

Ms SIMPSON — Can I just add one comment. I’ve taught in an incredible variety of schools from the western suburbs and a lot of private schools from Firbank in Brighton, Corowa, Eltham College. I’ve taught at selective entry schools such as Mac.Robertson Girls’ High School. Nowhere have I taught is there the passion for music that you see here.

There’s a culture here that when I first came here 16 years ago I thought this won’t last. I see 20 to 30 Year 12 students leave and think how on earth are we ever going to replace that. I thought once you got maybe six years of students for the school, when you have new ones come in it would all change, and it hasn’t. The culture here is something —

Ms WEDDING — It’s ingrained.

Ms MILLER — I think that’s a really good place to stop there.

Can I also put on the record the amount of experience that’s on the table right now is paramount, and that just nicely fits with your comment about the culture within this organisation. Congratulations to all of you, and keep up the good work.

Witnesses withdrew.