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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Ms Linda Todd, Parent
Mr Phillip Sametz, Parent
Ms Elizabeth De Maria, Parent
Ms Heather Pennings, Parent, and
Ms Jo Dema, Parent.
Ms MILLER — Good morning everyone. What will happen will be we will ask you some questions. There will be an opportunity for you as parents to give us your answers. It will all be recorded an Hansard. Everything you say is under what we call parliamentary privilege, so you can say whatever you like comfortably and freely. There will be an opportunity to review the Hansard should there be any errors or incorrect information. You will have that opportunity to rectify it.

We are running short of time, so we’ve probably only have about 20 minutes, so we will step through the questions as best as possible. What I would also ask you to do is to speak clearly in an appropriate time and say your first name first so that the Hansard can record your responses.

So, I will kick off the questions. And, anyone can answer and say your name and jump in.

The first question will be Blackburn High School is recognised for its excellence in music education. How much did this influence your decision to enrol your child at the school, and why is it important for you that your child receives a high quality education?

Ms DEMA — The only reason that we came to Blackburn High School was for the music program. Clearly, at that time, however many years ago, walking through the school, one would not want to go to Blackburn High, because it was so in need of repair. However, the standing of the music program was the reason that we picked the school, so that is why we came to Blackburn and why we stayed at Blackburn because the standard of the music program is extraordinary and exceptional.

Why is it important to receive a strong music education? For me, it is hardly a question I even need to answer, because it is obvious to me that a music education is part of a well rounded education. A child needs to be educated in all areas, and music for me for a student, has benefits that are lifelong, and anyone who appreciates music would understand that. To understand music is to have a whole world of joy in your life, and is very important socially, educationally, and in their development as well because of the benefits of learning music.

Mr SAMETZ — If I can just pick up on what Jo is saying, we moved from Sydney, not to come to Blackburn High, but when we moved to Melbourne, living near this school was quite important to us for the same reason.

I think one of the critical things for me about a music program of this quality is that it’s another way of thinking about teamwork. We often think about teamwork in a sporting context — and we can hear it now. But there’s a very different kind of outcome where teamwork manifests itself musically, because it’s about listening and it’s about working as a group, and the outcomes are quite different to the outcomes in a sporting context. The skills that you acquire are quite exceptional.

The other thing I’ve noticed about the way this program operates, is that it’s driven in part by the kids’ own desire to do really well. There’s something that’s very self starting about the program here. The kids want it to be great; they want to play well; they want to do well. And, they have an enormous pride themselves in the quality that’s achieved here and in the variety of ensembles that are here.

When we first came to the school, I was astonished. There were something like 25, 26 ensembles in a school that had fewer than 1000 kids in it, which I think is an astonishing achievement and they’re in an ensemble within months, within weeks sometimes, of picking up their instrument for the first time, which means that the social implications are just extraordinary.
If you’ve come to the school not knowing anybody from a different part of Melbourne, within a week you’re standing next to someone playing the same instrument. It’s going to make an enormous difference to your ability to, you know, acclimatise to this environment.

Mr IACONO — We actually live in Balwyn, but when our son was in Year 6, we searched around for schools for him to attend in secondary schools. There are a lot of excellent schools in our area, Balwyn High, Koonung Secondary, Camberwell High, and they’ve all got music programs, but none focus on music like Blackburn does. He actually chose to come to Blackburn High. So, he’s got a 45 minute commute each way, but he’s happy to do that to attend this school.

And, on another slant as to why music education is important, because of my ethnic background I’ve got an Italian background but I also worked in Germany for seven years, so I’m tri-lingual. I think the language education is also very important, not only for the study of the language per se, but also the benefits it gives you in other subject matters, streams.

The difference I find for Australian kids to learn foreign languages and to learn music is that there’s no engagement in foreign languages. The motivation just isn’t there. Whereas, from what I can see in music, the engagement is really strong. Music can provide that benefit in other subject matters.

Mr ELASMAR — We in the committee heard and understand that instrumental music can be costly for parents. So, could you describe the costs involved and what strategies can you suggest to prevent costs becoming a barrier for students participating in instrumental music?

Ms NETTE — I’ve got a daughter — she’s just finished — she started about seven years ago in Year 7, and when she started the fees were around something like $150 a term. It was just sort of like a set amount, and you could learn whatever number of instruments you wanted to. So, some students would learn two or maybe three instruments. You just sort of paid a set amount, and then you just were in the program. And, it was a great opportunity to come into a public system and not be bound by really expensive fees.

And then, gradually over that time the subsidies to the school — I’m not sure how it’s worked out — have been less, so that the school has had to charge more. Gradually over time now, you know you have to pay for each instrument, so there are less opportunities. So, now, basically we’re paying I think it is $1000 each year per instrument. I’ve got two sons, one in Year 7 and one in Year 12, and they both want to do jazz improvisation classes, which I don’t mind encouraging because it just teaches them so many life skills as well, but that’s been seen as another instrument as well, so now their fees are doubled again there. Extra costs include camps and buying instruments and things like that. So, it’s really great hearing they subsidise — the school has got some of the larger instruments and so you don’t have to fork out on one of those, which is a good help.

Basically, I just think it would be really good if somehow the government could look at covering the costs of the teachers’ salaries so that when parents come the school could maybe work out some sort of amount that would cover them being able to buy extra instruments and chairs and other facilities.

At the moment, all the money that parents give, just goes straight to teachers’ salaries. And, because, you know, the school is struggling to sort of pay for the program. So, it’s just interesting over the time when my daughter went through, it changed so much in that period of time. I just wonder what would happen in the next period of years. It would just be a shame for the program to fall over if there wasn’t enough funding to cover the teachers’ salaries.

Ms MILLER — So how has music benefited your child?
**Ms DE MARIA** — Both of my children are in the music program. Mathew is one of the music captains. You might have spoken to him. I think it gives them confidence. They become team players. It teaches them not to let other people down. I think it’s like sport, but it’s better than sport, because it’s a life skill they can carry with them throughout their lives.

I just think they don’t like to let each other down. When they are playing together they can create something magical together. Neither of my children have ever been bullied at this school, and I think it’s because of the music program. Because there are multi-age bands, the kids respect each other and get along together. I think it gives them life skills that they’ll take beyond school.

**Ms LAMPERD** — It’s interesting, sports come up a few times, and my son has never been sporty. He was always like a bit flat footed and not competitive. You know, he couldn’t see the point in chasing a ball around. He actually started in another school, in high school, and took up the trombone, but he was actually ridiculed there for playing that instrument. We’re so thankful that he had the courage to move schools in Year 8, because here — exactly what Elizabeth said — you know, it is a team and there’s no other size of team in any other extracurricular activity. Like, there’s debating, but they’re all very small teams, debating, and you can’t really think of any others outside the sport.

And, here he was in the majority of students; there he was in the minority, and that’s why a specialist music school is really important.

**Ms MILLER** — So, just following on from that we also heard about the important role parents play to their students’ learning of music. For example, transporting students to extracurricular activities, which can be frustrating, I know.

But, could you provide the committee with an overview of what is involved for you as parents in supporting your child’s musical interests.

**Mr SAMETZ** — If I can just leap in here. One of the things I’ve learnt is that both boys have been here — one is still here, and one finished in 2010, but have come after rehearsal or in conversation with their instrumental teacher or with the teacher who is leading their ensemble and will say, ‘Dad, we’re playing this amazing piece, and you’ve got to hear it.’ My view is one of your roles is to really encourage that, to keep their ears open to allow them to really engage with the material that they’re working on.

I mean, yes, you do have to sometimes nag them to practice, and you sometimes have to make sure that they’re particularly focused at exam time. But, apart from the kind of physical things you have to do to get them to rehearsals or get them to performances, I think it’s encouraging their love of what they’re doing, because they do love it. And the worst thing that can happen is they come and get no interest from you or, ‘I’m too busy. Talk to me about it later.’ It’s one of those things I feel you have to find time for as a parent, because it encourages them, it re-energises them when they come back the following day for rehearsal.

**Ms DEMA** — The role in supporting our child is the fabulous fact — as Phillip said — that your child comes home and is fired up and wants to say, ‘Have a listen to this. This is what we’re doing in this band’ or, ‘This is what I’ve composed today.’ So, they’re fired up. What we want is for our children to be engaged at school, and they are fully engaged in music. They love it, they want to share it, and they want to do it, and they want to do it well.
If I can backtrack, because we’re flying so fast, the question on funding, the reason that the fees have gone up, obviously the bucket has not increased that goes out to state schools for the music programs, so if the bucket doesn’t increase but the cost of running a program increase as in wages increase, then obviously there’s going to be thousands and thousands of dollars shortfall, and that’s why the parents have had to pick up the cost of your fee, which is around I would say $26 a lesson I would say of I was going to average it — I may be incorrect. It is a little less than what you pay out of school to learn but, of course, you’re getting the ensemble experiences as well as the instrumental lesson.

So, the reason it’s gone up is because of funding. That’s obvious. The bucket hasn’t got any bigger for that across the state. So, if it were to be lessened any more we would be in trouble.

Ms MILLER — Are there any other final comments as parents you would like to say?

Ms DE MARIA — I just would just like to say that I think we have a really strong parental community in this school, and I think that goes to like supporting the children. You know, of course it’s a lot of running around and participation, but we get so much joy from that. Like, I think it brings the community together. The parents, I think on the whole, are so enthusiastic. The kids get to those things because we love it and we want to be there and we want to see them participating and enjoying each other and enjoying what they are doing.

Ms PENNINGS — One of the things I think is really beneficial about the music program, is that it teaches kids to learn and to want to learn, and that spills over into their academic life. When they get jobs it spills over there. It just teaches them lifelong skills, not necessarily music. I think that’s been a tremendous benefit for my kids. One of them is doing music.

Mr ELASMAR — The committee received many submissions from parents about the funding of an instrumental music program in schools. Why do you think it is important that some schools, such as Blackburn, are funded to provide strong music programs?

Ms PENNINGS — It’s important that you have sort of select schools that can do this because if we only have the local kids coming to this school, we would have a smaller pool of musicians, and I think you need some sort of critical mass to provide a large enough number for this program to work. If you only had a small number of students, the costs of the different instrumental is not going to work. You need money and enough students to have all the different musical instruments to have the large number of ensembles for this whole thing to work and to sort of — I don’t know, for me it is this amazing snowball, output.

Mr IACONO — I think Blackburn High School should be the catchment for all the music focused kids in the eastern suburbs. I think the program should be strengthened and kids, like from other schools that want to do music, should be encouraged to come to a specialist music school like Blackburn.

I mean, after all, we have specialist or selective schools for academic like Box Hill High. So, we should have a specialist school for music, and they should be strengthened.

Ms DE MARIA — I just want to make the point this school has always taken all comers. It’s not zoned. People come from the Dandenongs. I know a family from the Dandenongs that come to access the music program at the school.

The other important point is that because we have a large school of children who want to do music,
children can play with children at their own level.

So, there are four bands like concert bands, that come into this school. Kids can come in, and instead of like a Year 7 who’s not very good at trumpet being paired in a band with a Year 12, who’s very good and not getting the satisfaction of being able to play well together, you know, kids can play at their own level throughout the music program in all areas. There’s lots of bands.

Ms DEMA — If we are not able to fund Blackburn High the way we have been, or increase that funding, we won’t be able to have specialist music teachers. So, if we don’t have, say, lower brass teachers such as tuba and French horn, then the fact that Blackburn has a symphony will be compromised, and not many state schools have a symphony orchestra.

So, if we have a trumpet teacher teaching French horn, it’s not going to work. You’re going to compromise the quality of that, or if the love of woodwinds go, the same thing is going to happen, a flute teacher teaching that. So, to maintain the quality you need to maintain the funding for this school.

Ms LAMPERD — Not only do the best music students gravitate here, but the best music teachers gravitate here as well. So, everyone is together, focused on doing well.

If the funding is diluted, surely the results will be diluted, but also a mediocre teacher will turn a student off for life.

Ms MILLER — Well, I think that’s a very nice place to finish.

Thank you all for coming and sharing your experiences. You are obviously great parents, because your children are just living and breathing music, which is really nice to hear, and obviously have enjoyed their time, or are enjoying their time at this great school. Thank you very much.

Committee adjourned.