CORRECTED VERSION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne — Thursday, 16 May 2013

Members

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Witnesses

Mr John Albiston, Principal,
Mr Peter Sharp, Director of Instrumental Music, and
Ms Sally Bredin, Director of Music, Frankston High School
The CHAIR — Welcome, everybody. Thank you for taking part in our inquiry. You know why we’re all here. So, I won’t go into too much detail other than we’re really keen to hear about some of the programs that you currently offer at Frankston High School and also what we could be doing as a government to further support music in schools.

If I could also introduce my colleagues, Gayle Tierney, who is the Deputy Chair, and Elizabeth Miller. And, assisting the committee, who you’ve met, are Kerryn Riseley and Anita Madden.

A couple of things that I need to point out is firstly — it all sounds very formal is that the information you give us today is covered by what we call parliamentary privilege, which is the same privilege afforded to members in Parliament, so feel free to speak your mind. That, unfortunately, doesn’t apply to outside of the hearing proper, so only what you say during the hearing.

The second thing is we’re recording all the information today. You will have the opportunity to view that information and make any changes that need to be made as part of that.

What we will do, is we’ve got a number of questions which we will ask you and then maybe if we haven’t covered anything off at the end, give you the opportunity to do so then, if that’s okay.

Mr SHARP — Sure.

The CHAIR — So, I might kick off.

You have provided to us very much a strong submission which showed us the extent of your music program. But, could you outline for us how your school has achieved the program it that it has, how it’s gone about doing that, and what advice could you provide other schools that were looking at setting up a similar sort of program and how they could go about doing so themselves if they wanted to model, if you like, what you’re currently doing.

Mr SHARP — Okay, how have we achieved the program? Obviously, like anything, it’s a combination of quite a number of factors.

I think the first one would have to be a sense of commitment from the school administration and the school council and the school community, that they want a music program. It does take some financial backing, and at the initial stages that can be considerable. Rather than do it incrementally, Frankston High School really bit the bullet and went off in it in a big way.

We had a small program for a couple of years and then the school made a commitment to build an instrumental music centre which cost in 95/96, which is when it was constructed, around about $200,000, which was a lot of money back then. And, we built it with the knowledge with that building being well equipped with good equipment, the program would grow into it, and that’s exactly what happened.

Now, coupled with that I think you also need a strong team of instrumental teachers. I think we’ve been very lucky — well, not lucky. I’m not going to say ‘lucky’. I think we’ve lobbied hard for what we’ve got, and we worked hard for what we’ve got. Essentially, we have two staff in the instrumental program which are there full-time. One woodwind teacher, which is myself, and brass teacher, which is Mr Leonard De Bruin. And, the two of us worked together hand-in-hand to develop the program.

Between us we can take any ensemble, so if one can’t do it, the other one can. Between us we can teach most of the instruments as well. So, all those bases are covered. Now, the advantage of having the staff there full-time, too, is that we are able to, first of all, work very closely with the classroom because we are there on a permanent basis. We can also follow up on anything, we create strong bonds with the students, all of those kinds of things which itinerant instrumental teachers can’t
develop, as hard as they try. As much as I appreciate with all the work that itinerant instrumental teachers do, with only one or two days in the school it is very hard to develop any kind of bond or any kind of identity. So, I think that also helped.

There are other supplementary staff who have taught specialist instrument areas which perhaps Leon and I can’t cover, and the school has been willing to put in money to employ those teachers, particularly things like flute and double reed.

I think as the program progresses, working very closely with the classroom program as well, has been an integral part of our growth. I actually prepared a statement here where I pointed out we now are in the situation where some of our instrumental teachers also teach in the classroom program, and that we’re at the point now where classroom and instrumental actually share some curriculum ideas, and we work to a very common goal about what we’re trying to achieve with our program. I really must point out that that collaborative working between the two departments is very important to building up a music program.

I mean, when we use the term ‘music program’ I’m not necessarily just referring to an instrumental program, I’m also referring to the classroom program as well, and the two really have grown side by side. Where that’s most different evidence is in the growth of VCE students. The number of students that come through — I mean, when we originally did VCE it would be a compiled class of VCE 1 to 4. We’re now at the stage where that hasn’t happened for some time but we’ve got two separate classes; they’re quite strong. Those students at the three to four level are achieving above the state mean in their performance, and that’s all because of our collaborative work.

I think also the other thing, too, for us, for Frankston High School — I really want to say, too, I think it’s a never cut and dried situation. Each school has its own set of particular circumstances and how it can operate. For instance, the majority of the students go home by bus or do they walk home? Those things affect how well you can run your instrumental program. But, I think for us, too, is that we’ve had a very direct approach to what our program is about — I’m speaking now about the instrumental program — in that we decided very early on between Leon and myself that we are band program, so everything we do is related to creating basically four bands. We have a training, a junior, an intermediate and a senior band. There’s a very clear line of progression for the students. When they come in at one end, they are going to work through to the senior end.

We create curriculum around those four bands so we all know what the training band is doing, we all know what the juniors are doing. We use similar resources to help teach that. Basically, with the instrumental music, if you are an instrumental music teacher you can miss an instrumental lesson. You can never miss a band rehearsal. You will be hunted down — that kind of thing.

Therefore, there is a strong identity with performing and, dare I say it, there’s a product at the end of it as well. So, school council or school administration can see a band and say that’s a great band. We have a very strong performing program and that’s all part of it and we’ve got kids — as we said, we’re playing here on the 25th of June. That band already know they’re coming and they’re working towards that, but it’s all part of their curriculum. That’s how we structure it.

The CHAIR — Now, just as a follow-up, in your submission you talk about offering professional learning development to other schools within the region.

Mr SHARP — Yes.

The CHAIR — Could you just elaborate a bit further about that.

Mr SHARP — Yes. Our building itself is used on a reasonably regular basis for professional development. We host regional professional development days. We also host what’s known as a
reading day once a year from one of the music companies. A couple of schools do this around the state. The companies bring in a pile of music. It’s all coordinated through the region, and the teachers from schools of a fair way out come in and we play through new music that might be used for band for the following year. So, it’s basically curriculum based stuff.

We also help some teachers with their teachings. So, perhaps we’ve — I have taught a couple of teachers in relation to the direction of their band program, as it were, in how to coordinate it and fund it, too. Some people often need a lot of help with that. Also, some of the schools don’t quite have the technical expertise some of us do. Like, a person like my trumpet teacher, who is a very well recognised trumpet player has perhaps been to a school like Mt Erin Secondary College and just given a few hints to a teacher there who is actually a trombone teacher, not a trumpet teacher, things like that. So, we’ve helped one another in that way as well.

Ms TIERNEY — Your submission notes that the strength of the school’s music program has helped to improve the public perception of the City of Frankston.

Mr SHARP — I believe that, yes.

Ms TIERNEY — And contributed to strong student attendance records.

Mr SHARP — Yes.

Ms TIERNEY — Can you talk us through why you believe that the music program at the school had led to these benefits?

Mr SHARP — Okay. Can we do it in two halves? I will talk about the wider community first. I will ask John to maybe speak about attendance records and what have you.

We have, from very early stages, taken a policy of getting involved on a musical basis with the local community. I have myself for a long time been a member of the Frankston Susono Friendship Society which is a Japanese exchange group, and I’ve done a lot of work with those. But, I’ve also worked very closely with Frankston council where we do performances in the park, historical things, Mayor’s picnics, all that kind of thing, which gets us out to the general public of Frankston.

However, in a wider sense, working in, say, Melbourne city itself we have attended a lot of festivals where our students have just performed so admirably. They’ve very well disciplined. I believe we’ve taught them that discipline. I believe we trained them well. They behave impeccably in public. They play beautifully, and people are just impressed by how well they work.

Now, you know, I will say to you without any exaggeration, nearly every event that I go to, particularly if it’s a schools event, we often get great feedback from the coordinators who say to us we wish other schools were like Frankston.

Another anecdote, if I can use anecdotes. Is that perfectly okay?

The CHAIR — Yes.

Mr SHARP — A couple of years’ ago up to the end of last year there was a very large schools music event called The Melbourne Schools Band Festival which was operated by Billy Hyde and Allans Music. Unfortunately, with the demise of that company, that event has gone, and a new one, hopefully, will arise out of the ashes.

Now, I took along my Year 7 band, which is very, very big — probably 74 kids. It takes a bit of controlling, but no, they worked beautifully. One of my parents came along to the event to hear the
band play and she came out afterwards and grabbed me by the arm and just said to me, ‘I want to thank you, not only for what you have just done for my child but you’ve also done something for Frankston. I said, ‘What do you mean?’ She goes, ‘Well, I was sitting in the audience and there was a lady from another school’ — who I won’t name that’s obviously got a higher, supposedly higher profile than Frankston High, and the two ladies got talking and the lady asked my parent, ‘Where do you come from?’ ‘Oh, Frankston’. And, the lady kind of went, ‘Oh’ like this. And, this lady’s school came out and I have to say, you know, they were a mess, quite frankly. They just stuffed up their stage presentation and mucked around, and they played in an okay fashion. Frankston High School came out and were impeccable, because that’s what we want them to be, and they looked magnificent on stage. Their stage presentation was fantastic, and they played beautifully. And, this parent turned around to my parent and said, ‘Well, that was amazing’. My parent said, ‘What did you expect?’ like this. So, look, people do see those things and I hope — I believe — that it does change people’s perception.

Now, working through the Frankston Susono Society we have done a couple of international trips, which have all been very successful. The highlight of those trips has been for me, and I think for the school, was our senior stage band performed in 2005 at the Japanese World Expo at Nagoya, and we got to perform at the Australian pavilion during Victoria Week. It was an arranged early on and I won’t hesitate in saying that I think Arts Victoria at first were very reluctant to follow through with the commitment. I can’t say I pressed the point, but we fought the obstacles. And, our students did a truly magnificent job, and we received so many compliments from all the people involved. And, I do believe that some of the obstacles were due to prejudice. I would like to think not, but I think they were. And, I do believe that we changed people’s perception right there and then with that performance. And, the fact we were able to commit and follow through — I think all of these things were important.

**Mr ALBISTON** — I just want to mention a couple of things to add to what Peter is saying, though. Peter is a fantastic leader of our instrumental program, and he’s worked on it I think from the beginning. I think it’s 15 years — 20.

**Mr SHARP** — Twenty.

**Mr ALBISTON** — I have been really fortunate as a Principal to inherit this high quality, fantastic program, which is a real flagship for the school. But, Peter always points out to me — and I think it’s very true — that it’s taken 15 years to build the program to where it is today. You just can’t invest. That’s not the only thing that you can do. So, we did have locally raised funds that built the music centre before my time. But, it’s working on recruiting the right staff, it’s having staff with high expectations, and the result of that is we are able to have students who do perform impeccably in public, they show great manners, and we get this feedback, and people are quite astonished because they have other perceptions via the media about Frankston, and the young people who are part of the Frankston community. We’re very proud of them, but it’s thanks to the people who work with them.

What I’ve really noticed as Principal of Frankston High, we have a really extensive co-curriculum program, so music, sport, leadership, debating, and the list goes on and on. I really think it is true to say that the students develop strong friendships through their involvement in those programs. So students, and, over time, the number of students involved in music has significantly increased. They find friends who have similar interests and they meet over at the music centre. They are coming to school and they love performing. It’s great for their self-esteem, and the feedback they get from their teachers and also the public. The same through sport, the same in leadership and everywhere else.

So, as a result of that, I strongly believe they’re coming to school to join in with those co-curricular activities and that’s where they’re getting the strong friendships. They’re not just coming to school to go to a maths class. They gain a strong sense of belonging to the school community through their involvement in the music program.
And, so, as a result of that, our attendance at Frankston High School is well above the state average in every year level. I would be confident in saying those students who attend really well, are the students who are involved in our music program and the co-curricular programme. So, as well as developing incredible skills in the students, it also gives them a real sense of connection to our school community. We just can’t not emphasise schools aren’t all about developing literacy and numeracy skills. It’s about having students develop as whole people, and they’ve got to be at school if we are able to nurture them in that way.

So, I think it’s, you know, the co-curricular programs — and music is a great example — is one which really connects and gives our students a sense of belonging. That’s 180 students who are in our instrumental music program. So, that’s significant. It is 10% of the population who will stay every week to rehearse after school or at lunchtime to be a part of the choir, and they’ll dedicate that time I think because of the relationships they’re developing with their peers and with their teachers. And, it’s not just academically gifted students.

We will often come across those students who are perhaps socially isolated, perhaps have poor social skills. They can be the trumpet players who are often very disruptive in the classroom, and it’s there that they can have success. I think some of those students — especially those extreme end ones — may not come to school if they didn’t have those sorts of opportunities, whether it’s through music or sport.

Mr SHARP — Look, there is most definitely — that last statement from John — every year I get one or two parents every year who say to me the only reason why they come to school is to do that band. That’s definitely part of it.

Can I also say, too, that part of the strength of the program is the way that classroom and instrumental work together. We also have a believe that music is more than just a past time. It can be a serious academic study. We treat it in a fairly serious manner. Everyone has a good time, and it has to be a positive experience but is also a serious academic study.

If I could just quote a figure. In the last 16 years, we’ve had 43 of our students who have gone on to tertiary study, a lot of them to Monash University. So, if you want to talk about change of perceptions, we do have a strong bond with the music department at Monash.

Of those 43 students, 41 have found ongoing employment in the music industry in some form, either as director or performer, teaching or as technicians. So, we have that alumni as well. We have all a strong following. In the end it almost gains its own momentum.

Mr ALBISTON — And that’s all about building a culture, I think.

Mr SHARP — And also with the band, if I can just choose another anecdote — it’s all part of the evidence, I guess.

We have just recently been to Mt Gambier. It’s a very big jazz festival. You’re nodding your head so obviously somebody has spoken to you about that. We keep a lot of contact with a lot of our ex-students and 10 ex-students all got in cars and drove to Mt Gambier. They came to see us play, but also came because a big band from America came out this year, and we’ve been talking to them about that band for probably the last five years, those kids, and this was their only chance to see it.

So, 10 of them from different parts of Australia got in cars and drove down and met us at Mt Gambier, and, you know, they paid their own way and stayed in their own accommodation, but they were there. So, we do have that strong alumni.
Now, another example of it — I don’t want to keep going on — but later in the year, in November, we are doing a promotional thing with Frankston business chambers called Proudly Frankston, and we’re doing this large performance with James Morrison. It’s going to be working with some of our school students, but we also needed somebody of a much higher calibre. And, with just a few phone calls we have created a band from alumni students, and all of them quite capable of playing at a very high standard, good enough to back James Morrison. They will come to the school in October and they have all made a commitment to do it, and they will do two rehearsals and then do the show. That’s our alumni.

Ms MILLER — Just following on from that, the balance between funding sources from the instrumental music program, in the submission, the details about the funding to the instrumental music program comes from a combination of specific funding, the school’s budget, and parent contribution.

Do you believe there is currently the right balance between these funding sources, and if not, why, and what do you believe would be the optimum balance of funding between these sources?

Mr ALBISTON — That’s a really difficult point. Is that the one I’m going to try and answer?

We’re noting the gap widening in terms of the school having to — and I can only talk about a situation. So, last year, for example, via the region we were given $186 000 to cover the funding of salaries of our instrumental music staff. We were cut back from the previous year because there are only so many funds and there are schools that are in growth areas that are trying to build their programmes. So, a decision was made to take funding from us and give it to another school that was funding its program. So, that cost our school $10 000.

So, at the moment we are putting in about $43 000 extra, cash to pay for instrumental teacher salaries. I’ve got to find to cover the staffing on top of our credit allocation from the government of $186 000. I am anticipating over the last, I don’t know how many years, the level of funding that’s come through the government has stayed the same, and we’ve been able to survive in that system, but the gap is certainly widening in terms of those funds need to be shared across more and more schools who are really interested in developing their music programs.

At our particular school, our credit allocation, we have a high cost staff. Sixty of my teachers out of 130 are at the top salary level, so we have a deficit every year. We manage to have cash reserves that we put aside to pay off that deficit, but it’s becoming more and more difficult. I guess the dilemma is I’m really worried about being able to sustain the quality of the music program, but we would really like to build upon it as well. Peter is often coming to see me about increasing the range of instruments that we’re offering and the lessons, which we would love to do. But, we obviously can’t do that, and we’re struggling, I guess — I suppose you hear a similar response from other schools — just to maintain the quality of the programme that we’ve currently got. I see it as a priority. I am really committed to it, but I could imagine it will become more and more of a challenge if the level of funding stays the same.

I’m not sure about what the answer is and what the balance should be. Our parents currently contribute $20 000 through levies to pay for salaries of our staff. We are in a community where it is not extremely affluent. So, certainly we have students from working class backgrounds who participate in the music program and we don’t want to increase the levies we charge parents.

Ms MILLER — Does Dandenong High School have a music program? I am just thinking down that way, who you are competing with when you talk about sharing resources. Do they have a music program?

Mr SHARP — Sharing resources —
Ms MILLER — No, no, does Dandenong have a music program or —?

Mr ALBISTON — Well, with Melbourne, Melbourne High, Mac.Rob, so they’re really big music schools —

Mr SHARP — The southern region —

Mr ALBISTON — Yeah, it’s the whole region, so there’s a growth area out through Narre Warren where there are more new schools.

The CHAIR — Could I just quickly add on that one. Just extending to the question, which may be where you are going anyway, in your submission you suggest that the resources from the instrumental music program should be allocated according to those schools that have got the most emphasis and focus around music. Could you —?

Mr ALBISTON — I’m not sure whether I actually meant that. But, there’s a problem with the concept of equity. And, so, what I really like that’s in place is that the regional instrumental music coordinators know about the quality of the music programs. So, they have this very complicated formula as to how they allocate funds. But they do have the ability to make a discretionary judgement. So, sometimes funds are allocated to schools that don’t use them really productively to develop their music program. So, it’s really difficult to argue about equity when funds are going to schools and they don’t necessarily invest as much as a school like ours does, in their music programs. So, in effect, it’s not really equitable, because our students could be missing out, because they’ve got fantastic opportunities. Yet, the students in another school aren’t necessarily receiving that instrumental music tuition for whatever reason, but the school is receiving funding for instrumental music.

So, I think in terms of a funding model, you have to be really aware of the quality of music programs and what schools are actually doing in terms of having a priority focus on music. So, I can only compare it to sometimes in other schools I’ve been in, like a primary school, for example, there is a credit allocation for LOTE, and the primary school may decide well, we don’t think LOTE’s that important, and they invest. So the government is expecting that the money will be invested in LOTE and the primary school may decide well, we can’t get a LOTE teacher so we’ll spend it on something else or literacy skills in English may be more important.

That’s my fear, if the funding model was incorporated into the credit allocations, so it was just done on numbers, a school could decide, well, we can’t hire a music instrumental teacher in double reed or whatever it is and invest those funds elsewhere.

So, it’s good — I like the model which currently exists, but it is being really stretched because it seems to be the same bucket of money spread among more schools to me. The coordinators use their discretionary judgement to ensure government instrumental funding is directed towards schools that use such funding in their instrumental music program.

The CHAIR — Do you like the way the discretion is set up in terms of how the money is spent once it’s allocated, or do you think the model should be more targeted in terms of what it is being used for within the schools?

Mr SHARP — Well, you are speaking specifically instrumental music?

The CHAIR — Specifically about allocation of funds. Currently it is quite discretionary. It’s the discretion of the school in terms of how it’s then allocated.

Mr SHARP — Allocated as in terms of what instrument groups?
The CHAIR — Yes.

Mr SHARP — I think the discretion is essential because not every school wants to have a band program like ours. There are a lot of mitigating factors that make the program work. As I said, like, how do your students go home and things like that? You know, if the instruments are overly large they can’t take them on a bus. All these little things make a difference.

Some schools may prefer to just have a vocal program or they may want to have a small rock program or something like that. It just depends what they think is going to work within their own school environment. For us, definitely the band program works very, very well.

Mr ALBISTON — But it’s not discretionary in the sense of in the current model we apply for funding for specific areas. And we’re accountable for using those funds to employ instrumental music teachers to teach specific instruments. We’ve got to have a good argument as to why we would be employing those teachers, don’t we?

Mr SHARP — We do.

Mr ALBISTON — We don’t just get the money and decide.

Mr SHARP — Yes, that’s right. In the southern region — I don’t know how other regions do it, because they all do it slightly differently — but in the southern region, Frankston High School, for instance, we have tagged and untagged allocation. For instance, my position is tagged. It’s five days of woodwind. That’s what it has to be. It doesn’t matter what those woodwind instruments are but it has to be five days of woodwind. Three days of the trumpet teacher’s time is tagged.

Then, you also have untagged allocation, which gives you some discretionary use in how you can use that time, but it is probably at a ratio of two-thirds tagged and one-third untagged at the moment.

But, can I also say, though, with the funding side of things too, with what parents are paying for their lessons we also have to consider the instruments as well. Now, we as a school provide a lot of instruments. We own a lot of instruments, but can’t just hand them out, we have to hire them out. So, the upkeep is high and getting more expensive. In the last two years, repair bills have shot up enormously and we have to charge fees in relation to that. But, we try to stress the value of owning your own instrument. Now, some of them aren’t cheap, and families are willing to pay. They can see the value of learning it, because we’re not just talking about a school. We like the concept of it’s after school as well. Into adulthood you might still play your instrument, and you should try and own it. But, these things are not cheap. So, there is the burden of the parents paying for the lessons but there’s also the equipment as well.

The CHAIR — Time flies when you’re having fun, so we do have to wind up. But one two very, very quick things. I want Sally to give us the opportunity to speak.

Ms BREDIN — That’s fine.

The CHAIR — And also one question I have is do you think kids are actually — or parents, rather — are choosing your school because of the music program?

Ms BREDIN — I would say definitely, yes. Well, we have a lot of students and we have a scholarship at Year 7, so have a number of students out of zone.

Mr SHARP — I forgot about that. Two scholarships.
Ms BREDIN — Two scholarships. It used to be one, but now it’s two, that out of zone will try to get into the school through music.

I’m also finding just in general just the increase, say, in middle school. Like, we used to just run two subjects at middle school. We’ve got three middle school subjects running. As we’ve mentioned, there is an increase in VCE. So, I think the whole program, the instrumental — I mean, it feeds into the classroom music as well, and our VCE program is pretty outstanding as well. We have had quite a few who have got into top class, you know, the concert, and had outstanding results. Some have been chosen to get the scholarship at Mt Gambier, the jazz scholarship.

So, I suppose I’m seeing, as the classroom music coordinator, just how — I mean, it’s true, we work together really well and they feed into each other. We also have two staff that are examined for VCAA so I use them to examine my VCE students.

So, I suppose, yes, the effect is that they’re seeing a very high performance standard in not just the bands, but as solo performers and small group performances as well.

Mr ALBISTON — And we do have a number of students enrolling from Year 9 to Year 12 to come across to studying music because their schools don’t offer VCE music or they want to come over early to prepare for their senior VCE studies in music.

Mr SHARP — I’d hasten to add we don’t pursue those students.

Mr ALBISTON — No, no, they —

Mr SHARP — They come to us.

The CHAIR — So they move over at Year 9, so they’re not just using the music program, they’re moving —?

Mr ALBISTON — Or, they’ve studied music privately.

Mr SHARP — They may change schools.

Mr ALBISTON — Their schools can’t offer VCE music and they’ve decided they want to go down that pathway.

Mr SHARP — And I would have to say that trend has increased in the last three years, too.

The CHAIR — We’re going to have to finish there. Sorry. You’ve provided us with so much great information.

Could I also ask — I know you’ve got a statement that’s there. Are we able to take that in — oh, you’ve made notes or something.

Mr SHARP — I’ve ripped them.

The CHAIR — Why don’t you — are you able to email that across?

Mr SHARP — I can email my statement, yes. It’s a rundown of our program and everything we’ve spoken about.

The CHAIR — And if it hasn’t been covered, we can then incorporate that as part of the information.
Mr SHARP — Thank you very much. Yes, I’ll send that to you later.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much. Keep up your great work. If I can get down there, I will.

(Witnesses withdrew)