EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne and via regional link-up — Thursday, 16 May 2013

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Mr Syd Jackson, SGSMP Co-ordinator
Ms Cheryl Glowrey, Principal
Ms Colleen Smith, Business Manager

MIRBOO NORTH SECONDARY COLLEGE

Ms Karen Layon, Principal
Ms Rebecca Woodall, Music Teacher

WONTHAGGI SECONDARY COLLEGE

Mr Gary Dennis
Ms Sara Beale
The CHAIR — Firstly, I wanted to thank you all for participating in our committee hearing today and especially for taking part in the opportunity for us to utilise this technology. I know for many of you, it’s the first time this program is being used. It certainly is the first time we have used it from our end. But, it certainly gives us a great opportunity to learn how these sorts of things are done. It does benefit us as a committee and also just in the whole teaching and learning aspect of how we can potentially utilise more of these sorts of things. So, thank you for persevering. Hopefully, we will be able to get through without too many hitches today.

If I could begin by just reintroducing my colleagues. With me, I have Gayle Tierney, who is the Deputy Chair; Elizabeth Miller, who is also with me on the committee; and we’ve got a number of questions that we’re going to ask you shortly.

Also, I need to point out that we will be recording the information through Hansard, and you will all be given copies of that information and have the opportunity to review that. Secondly, the information that you give to us today is covered by what we call parliamentary privilege, which is the same privilege afforded to Members of Parliament. So, that applies only to the evidence that you give today, not anything that’s said outside of this hearing proper.

This is a very, very important area for us, and obviously for all Victorians in terms of how we can better offer music in our programmes in our schools. So we’re very, very keen to hear from you in terms of what is currently happening in your schools and how we could improve things.

So, what we might do is we might give everybody the chance initially just to give us an introduction about an overview of what is currently happening in the school, in the South Gippsland School Cluster Music Program, and what is on offer in your schools in terms of music, both formal and informal programs and just a little bit of background. So, we will get one at a time.

If I could also ask when you speak every time that you speak if you could for us, just give us your name and the school that you’re from. I know it might sound tedious but we need to do that just to ensure that we’ve got everybody recorded and the information alongside your name.

So, whoever would like to go first, if you can click the button and click your hand, and I will identify you.

Mr JACKSON — So, a quick overview of South Gippsland Secondary College. We have a program with our three concert bands, a big band. There’s roughly about 80 or so students involved. The school itself is a school that has about 340 students in it.

The SGSMP itself, incorporates the primary and secondary schools throughout this region. An essential function I suppose is in identifying music programs and resources, or whether that be more about more concrete resources. I will let others speak now.

The CHAIR — Okay, thank you. We’ve got Mirboo.

Ms WOODALL — We have got just over 50 students enrolled in our music program here. We run a senior concert band which is probably really at an intermediate level, which has about 13 students involved, and a junior concert band, which is our training band.

We also have a guitar ensemble that runs outside of our music programs, run by one of our staff members that involves probably about between eight and ten of our more senior students. Classroom-wise, we run Year 7 music and we’ve got VCE music running this year as well.

The CHAIR — Okay, anyone from Wonthaggi?

Mr DENNIS — We have a program involving around 70 students at the moment. It was probably up
around 110, 115 several years ago. We ran the whole range of bands. At the moment we still run the whole range of bands, but we're probably a little tight on numbers and we're hoping to build our numbers over the next year or two. Sara is probably the one to go next, and she can add a little to that.

Ms BEALE — We have three concert bands at Wonthaggi at the moment. We have a junior band, an intermediate band and a senior band. I’m responsible for the senior band. We have 20 students in that at the moment.

As well as that, we’ve got a guitar ensemble that operates with the guitar students. Yeah, so that’s sort of our range of ensembles, plus small things that special interest groups that students have at lunchtimes and so forth.

The CHAIR — The next question I have for you is just in terms of the cluster music program in South Gippsland, could you tell us how it operates, why it was formed, what are the benefits of schools working together in a cluster, and what are some of the challenges for schools in terms of establishing a cluster arrangement and ensuring effective operation of a cluster, particularly for those that might be looking at establishing one if they don’t have one already.

Ms GLOWREY — Our program celebrated its — our cluster celebrated its 25th anniversary a couple of years ago so we’ve certainly worked through a number of the issues.

The cluster was formed initially because it seemed a very sensible arrangement for schools to pool their instrumental music money to be able to provide breadth of instrumental teachers across a number of schools. I believe it was started by teachers and principals from four of the secondary schools and Wonthaggi joined a few years later to make the fifth school.

The arrangement means that we can appoint a coordinator who then looks after the staff, allocates timetables, and works with the schools to make sure that their instrumental needs are met and also coordinates across the band program.

It is challenging for schools to decide to give up some of their budget and to put it together in this way because there is always a risk of what the group can do. The decisions made at the group level might not meet the individual school’s needs. However, through the committee of management structure, which involves all of the principals, staff reps and the coordinator, we have been able to work through issues over the years and to develop what I think is a very effective program.

Mr JACKSON — If I could just add on the end there. Another very important function is the attraction of staff. The school’s program down here is somewhat isolated from the large pool of instrumental classes up at Melbourne and so without the ability to say to a staff member, not just offering one day at one school, but we can actually offer four days at a combination of four different schools. I think it’s essential to get staff down here, to attract staff with experience, preferred as well.

It’s also good to have advisers in schools who can talk together, walk through different problems and different solutions and develop it with each other. That communal aspect cannot be underestimated, the development that that offers in schools is quite essential, and in some ways attractive, such as when I came down from Melbourne a few years back, to implement the program down there.

Ms TIERNEY — I really wanted to ask some questions about the delivery of music education in regional Victoria.

You have just answered I think part of my first question, which is what are some of the advantages of music education initiatives. What are some of the good initiatives that are happening? You’ve already indicated a lot of that is through your cluster arrangement.

Are there some other examples of some very good initiatives, and what other advantages there might be in regional Victoria? But, also what support or policies do you think could be put in place to further improve the provision of music education in regional Victoria?
Ms GLOWREY — I think both Karen and Gary could respond to this. From my point of view here we see more schools like Mirboo North and South Gippsland Secondary College able to provide a much broader program to all of our students, and the students themselves have the benefit of being able to join with students in other schools for music events to combining bands, to combine the camps, again, the experience of teachers who are working across schools and working with other students and teachers. So, there are lots of real advantages.

In terms of policy, I have found over my many years in schools that clusters are all stronger when they are formed by people who choose to work together. To artificially create clusters, can sometimes cause quite a few issues. So, I think it terms of policy, I would be looking at calling for volunteer schools rather than trying to form clusters, if that’s the sort of way you were thinking.

Mr DENNIS — I echo everything that Cheryl said there. I think the key advantage to us as a school, and probably the other schools, is that rather than going out and employing one day of teachers in a range of different instrumental areas, we can employ full-time people who can then work across a number of schools. So, it means that we can provide tuition to all the different instrumental areas, and I think that’s a good thing.

As far as our cluster goes, our geography puts us together, but we still have large distances between the schools. So, we probably tend to get together only on special occasions for concerts and camps and so on. But, nevertheless, through the teachers moving between the schools we get a cross-pollination of good ideas and good practice.

Ms LAYON — I agree fully with both what Cheryl and Gary said. But, coming from a small school, the enrichment that our students actually can access by being able to perform with other bands and other kids is actually beyond the classroom stuff. Because, our students, once they go on a music camp, they basically make friends for life. They have other like-minded people. In rural isolated communities, those connections to a wider community, are really important.

But, in terms of what we offer at the program, if we had this vibrant music program it actually gets kids interested in music in terms of the bigger picture. We are now offering them VCE music which I don’t believe that we would have ever have had the opportunity to do, if we weren’t part of this actual program.

Ms MILLER — I have got a couple of questions but I will ask them one at a time to keep it simple.

My first question is the committee has heard anecdotal evidence of a shortage of specialist music teachers in rural and regional Victoria. Have you experienced any difficulty in finding specialist music teachers to teach at the school?

Ms LAYON — That’s probably the beauty of our cluster arrangement if we had a greater ability to attract people to our area, because we can offer them a full teaching load. The reality for me is that if I had to offer a specialist 0.2, nobody would take those jobs. It is actually harder. So, we need to have something that will attract people, and also that cluster arrangement where the staff work together is also professionally a really good thing for those people to have, because it not only develops them as a group of professionals, but they feel connected to the whole program.

Mr DENNIS — Just adding to what Karen said I think one of the positives in marketing our program to prospective employees is that collectively we have far more success than what we could have individually. That collective success ensures that we generally have people who are keen to be part of the program. The program celebrates milestones, 20 years and so, and there are many, many who have returned to those celebrations. So, it’s become well established in the area and quite well-known beyond the area.

Ms MILLER — Okay, the next question I have is the committee has heard that some rural and regional schools can struggle to attract a viable number of students into VCE music. Has this been an
issue for your schools, and what strategies can you suggest to ensure that interested students in rural and regional Victoria can study VCE music?

Ms LAYON — We’re in a pretty good position at our school. We’re co-located with the primary school, so we actually encourage our primary school students to get involved with the music program. So, essentially we have a smooth transition from primary to secondary, and a lot of the students in primary school continue along with the music program into the secondary school. So, for us it’s actually quite easy. I’m not quite certain how it works for the other schools.

Mr JACKSON — That aspect of the involvement of the primary schools in the music program that we run here cannot be underestimated. I think it’s something that is very important and a strength of the music program as well.

I actually teach VCE music via Polycom, so I suppose a comparable format to what we’re doing now over the Internet, in effect. It’s one which enables me to teach students from two other different schools, both of them are regional, and both of them do experience very similar issues to what we experience in these rural school. So, without this Polycom way of delivering VCE music, it would be very hard to justify the funding of VCE music classrooms to be operating in each of those three schools.

The CHAIR — Just a follow-up question for that: when you as using the Polycom system are you actually using video as well to actually see the kids in the classroom?

Mr JACKSON — Look, Polycom does allow you to see the visuals, which is very, very useful on many levels. It allows discussions and read people being able to see a mass, a group of students, and understand which ones, body language, which ones may be struggling etc.

The CHAIR — Just a follow-up question if I could around VET music. Do any of your schools offer VCE VET music? If so, what is the take-up of this subject with students? And, how important is VCE VET music as a pathway for students interested in working in the music sector?

Mr DENNIS — We currently don’t offer VET music. We would like to — we’re a relatively large school, with 1200 students, but we would struggle to offer VCE music and VET music. One would potentially detract from the other. We would like to offer it, and have looked at it closely; maybe in the future.

The CHAIR — Just as a follow-up to that, how many kids are actually taking up VCE music in your school at the moment?

Mr DENNIS — Our take-up in VCE music is we’ve got a small group of about 10 students in Year 11. We’ve got none in Year 12 this year. It tends to be a little seasonal depending on the quality of one or two individuals that can attract others. We had a very successful group a couple of years ago and had one of the students who got potentially the best score in the state.

Ms LAYON — We had offered our students access to a music VET class, through the TAFE as part of VET cluster but that course has actually been discontinued. So, that was part of our logic in putting in VCE music instead. Our numbers, we’re looking at, we had nine Year 11 students and one Year 12 student. So, to make it actually viable to have VCE music, sometimes combine, is not ideal, but that is a way that we can actually make certain we can have a broader range of subjects on offer.

Ms GLOWREY — We don’t offer VET music here. We prefer to offer VCE music because it gives us a little bit more flexibility, and we have students who have expressed an interest in becoming music teachers, which means they need a tertiary pathway in VCE music to be able to do that. We have offered VET music to individuals in the past where there has been a really high need to do so, but it’s been for one student who was sort of working with another class through the program at the time.
The CHAIR — Just as a general question, what would you all think we could be doing more to encourage young people to participate in music programs in schools? If you had sort of a magic bullet and said that this is one of the key things you would like to see more of, what would that be?

Ms BEALE — I think the key thing that students need to become enthused about music is to have access to quality music performances. I was just talking to some of my students previously and they were telling me that they didn’t really know about the instruments that were available for them to learn until they came to high school and saw them here.

I think kids in metropolitan schools certainly, even just with their families, would have more ability to go out and see, you know, good, live performances, and see interesting instruments that they haven’t seen before. So, I think exposure is definitely something that, you know, would really help students in regional areas to become enthused about music.

Ms SMITH — I would just like to add the finances and the funding that we actually get to run the music program.

Going back about eight years ago the students only had to pay a very small amount to be involved in the program. As the funding has been reduced over the years compared to the cost of wages, we are actually charging the students a lot more, and some families just can’t afford to be in the program. So, obviously, more funding would be ideal to help encourage more students and families into the program.

Ms WOODALL — Just supporting Sara’s comment about exposing kids to performances, being a relatively rural school, for us to run excursions to take kids to see performances, it comes down to a money thing as well. We can’t be putting that much pressure on our families to constantly be paying, you know, $20 or $30 every time they want to take the kids out to a concert. And, even bringing in guest performances, that is quite expensive as well and that’s another pressure our classroom budget can’t handle. So, I think that’s a point that probably needs to be considered, is just the costs involved with trying to expose the kids to music. It’s something we all try to do, but it just is sometimes out of our hands.

The CHAIR — Okay, thank you for that. Just a follow-up question around primary schools. How important is music education in primary schools insofar as your view, and do you think that all kids should be learning music at primary school, and if so at what age level?

And, then, as part of that, the committee understands that some of the local primary schools are also involved in your cluster program. Maybe if you can provide an overview of their involvement and the reasons for the involvement in the cluster program.

Mr DENNIS — Our experience is probably a little different from the other schools because many of the other schools have two key primary schools that they align with. We have probably nine feeder primary schools, and resource-wise we can’t expand our program to support all of those schools. If we could, or if there could be a music programme in those schools, then that would certainly enhance what we could offer and the quality of our outcomes at secondary school. But, at the moment it is purely a resourcing issue and we can’t really align with one primary school without also being involved with the others. So, we tend not to be involved with primary schools. As I said, our experience is a little different than others.

The CHAIR — I believe Mirboo North had an issue hearing a question. I’ll repeat it for them. If you can’t hear it again, just if you could type it out for me and I will try and just do it via text. But, it was just about the importance of teaching in primary schools. Do you think music should be taught to all schools at primary schools and, if so, at what age would you start?

The second part of the question was around the cluster program and if any of the local primary schools are involved in your cluster program and what is their level of involvement?
Ms SMITH — The second part of the question about students involved from the primary school, across the program there’s about 17% of the students in the SGSMP who are from primary schools. From South Gippsland Secondary College we have got about 10 or 12 students who come up from the primary school and play in our junior band and some are actually in our senior band, who have been playing for a couple of years. It helps with integrating into the secondary school students who have played in the primary school when they come up here to just feel at home, because they’ve been coming up for quite a few years. It’s a great asset to have them come here, and it would be fantastic if they also had some music programs in their school and we didn’t have to actually fund their instrumental cost as well.

Mr JACKSON — I just want to emphasise that point of transition of primary school students into the secondary system. I think music programs can play a real vital role in that secondary students can go to the primary schools, and play to the students. And of course as you heard, the primary school students being involved with the secondary school students as well.

Our local primary schools have not got a music teacher. They advertised for a classroom music teacher but they couldn’t get one. A nearby primary school, and Minyip Primary School also struggled to get a classroom music teacher. So, it is hard to sometimes get the staff to run a classroom music program in these primary schools. But it is one which I think is essential to expose students to in each school where they may wish to learn a musical instrument.

Ms BEALE — I was just wondering if I could add something. I think it is really important that students should have access to music right from prep. I think in local schools in Wonthaggi students don’t have access to specialist music teachers. Look, I might be wrong on that point. But, also what I encounter, being a specialist instrumental teacher in a high school is that often kids have had people coming into the primary school acting as instrumental teachers who aren’t properly qualified and then when, you know, I get the students at high school level, they’ve got really poor technique because they haven’t been taught by specialists and have just sort of been following their nose, and it’s been really difficult to, you know, undo years of bad use and to get these kids ready for a pathway to VCE. So, I think we need to see more specialists in the primary sector.

The CHAIR — That’s great. Just for everybody else, Mirboo North seems to have an audio problem so they’re typing their answer.

Ms WOODALL — I think that kids at primary school should be exposed to some music at all levels, even if it mainly consists of singing and rhythm games.

The CHAIR — That concludes the questions that we’ve got from this end. Is there anything participants would like to add that hasn’t been covered already in terms of what is currently on offer or how we could improve music in schools?

Ms SMITH — I would like to add something about the benefits that all students get who are involved in the music program. It’s not just actually learning music, it’s the teamwork that they learn, the leadership skills, and just being involved in a whole school community event.

Just some statistics over the last 12 years — 10 out of our 12 duxes at the school have been through our music program and 9 out of our last 12 school captains have run through our music program. So, they do learn a lot more than just music being involved in the program. I think all students should have access to having these skills.

The CHAIR — Has anyone else got any final comments they wish to add?

Mr JACKSON — The nature of the small community which we work in down here, really values the classroom — those music programs in the schools, and you just see it time and time again. An example of this is the sheer number of students who come back and help tutor at the music camps and the sheer number of staff who have actually been through similar kinds of music programs and a few
of them have been through the exact same music programs that we run here. The effect is really, really valued by many and is long lasting. I know that the running the sessions they talk about reunions and how lots of people come back as well.

**The CHAIR** — That’s great. Any final comments from anyone else?

If there be none, I just wanted to thank you all for participating today. The information you have given us has been really, really helpful.

I’m not sure how you all felt the technology worked. I know with Mirboo North, unfortunately we lost them in the audio, but it certainly worked a lot better in this session for us. So, probably the more you participate and utilise the technology the easier it becomes.

So, thank you very much for what you’re doing in providing the programs. Congratulations on the programs and the offerings that you’re currently involved in in your schools. Keep up the passion.

We look forward to delivering our report towards the end of the year, of which you will be receiving a copy of that report. So, thanks again. Thanks for your participation, and also if you could pass on thanks to your kids who have participated today as well.

**Witnesses withdrew.**