EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

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

Mildura — 1 May 2013

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Witnesses
Mr G. Barrow, Performing Arts Coordinator, Robinvale P–12 College; and
Mr G. Cupper, Principal, and
Mr B. Browne, Music Coordinator, Merbein P–10 College.
The CHAIR — Good afternoon, and thank you for appearing before our committee. You would all be aware of what our purposes are. We are very keen to hear about some of the things you are currently involved in in your schools and in the music programs that are on offer and about what we can be doing to encourage more people to participate in music programs within schools. Hansard is recording the information that you present to us today. You will have the opportunity to review the transcript at a later date and, if there is anything wrong, have it amended. The other thing I need to point out is that the evidence you give today is covered by what we call parliamentary privilege, which is the same privilege afforded to members of Parliament. That applies to the hearing proper, not what may be said outside of here. It all sounds very formal, but it really is a discussion to hear a bit more about what you are up to and about what we can be doing to improve music in schools. Thank you for joining us. I am going to kick it off with the first question. Could you begin by providing a brief overview about your school and the music program that you offer?

Mr BARROW — I will kick off. I am the Performing Arts Coordinator at Robinvale P–12 College. I am one of two teachers, and then we have a lot of instrumental teachers who do a lot of other jobs throughout the school. Our performing arts program is constructed around probably one to two sessions a week for the preps to Year 6s. This year the Year 7s are actually getting a bit of a bum steer, because they are missing out on a little bit compared to the Year 8s. For the Year 9s, there is not much for performing arts, and then for the Year 10s there is VET music, and that is due to the structuring of staff at the moment. I am actually having to teach PEC. With the school, we have a higher level of music-orientated students who do a lot more instrumental programs. We have a fairly solid instrumental program; we have brass, guitar, drums and piano. That is fairly solid, if you want to know about it.

Mr CRISP — Is there a choir?

Mr BARROW — No. We do not have a choir at the moment, just due to time constraints.

The CHAIR — How many kids?

Mr BARROW — In the school?

The CHAIR — Yes.

Mr BARROW — I think there are about 340–346.

The CHAIR — And how many would be studying a music program?

Mr BARROW — Roughly around about 48 at the moment, instrumental.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Glen. Graeme?

Mr CUPPER — We are a P–10 college. We have about 400 secondary students and about 200 primary students. We have been in existence as that entity for about three years now, so we are trying to find our feet a bit. Ben is probably a bit more of the expert, but just in general terms, we provide music from prep through to Year 10. It is limited in the earlier years. As we get into Year 7s and 8s, it becomes an elective for students for two hours a week and then for Years 9 and 10 it is 3 1/2 hours per week as a more significant elective.

We are also producing a VET element to our music program at Years 9 and 10 particularly and leading into the senior college transition. We have just started pretty well this week our new recording studio. We had some specialisation funding to help set it up — $50 000, which will be greatly appreciated. We have a terrific resource which we are really excited about. It will add not only to our music program but also to just general digital productions and radio-type shows — productions about, for example, Anzac Day or Remembrance Day, those sorts of things, that we can work on with students and prerecord and share.

We also have performance elements. Bands, rock bands particularly, are pretty strong. Kids take part in the eisteddfod competitions. We have had choirs. We are trying to work with different choirs, but that is probably an area we need to work on a bit. Ben might want to add a bit more.

The CHAIR — Just before Ben does, how many kids would be studying music, out of the 400-odd?

Mr CUPPER — In primary, every child has access to music. It is probably not like the VCE-type model, but it is a specialist area. How many Years 7 and 8 electives do we have, Ben?
Mr BROWNE — Quite large class sizes.

Mr CUPPER — How many groups do we have there?

Mr BROWNE — You are probably looking at roughly 20; it would be around 150 to 200. Quite large.

The CHAIR — Quite substantial. Did you want to add anything, Ben?

Mr BROWNE — Just the fact that because we have merged now onto the one campus obviously the opportunities have evolved, such as 5, 6 in primary. Now we are trying to start a bit earlier, so that leading up to Year 7 they have already got some background knowledge in the structure of how things work. So we are offering musical instruments at a younger age, hoping that we can follow through, obviously up to Year 10, and then they move on to senior college with broader knowledge on their instruments. We are trying to shape that specialisation with our instrumental staff also.

Mr CUPPER — And probably ICT is becoming a really powerful part of our music program. I think all Ben’s classes have access to a keyboard and it is all integrated into a computer system — and that is very engaging for kids and motivating. When they write a piece of music, they can play it back straightaway, get instant feedback.

Mr BROWNE — Yes. We were having a conversation about the fact that ICT now has very much improved what we can do in music with the facilities of programs like Sibelius and Mixcraft and all those types of technologies. That is sort of where we are heading with ICT, because it just seems to be the easy way to get kids involved. They all love a computer, but the fact that we can integrate piano keyboards and the ICT has been a huge advantage for us.

The CHAIR — Just before we move on, Glen, do you have ICT as a component of your music?

Mr BARROW — Yes. A lot of our stuff is music technology; that is my speciality. I am sort of getting my head around what we are talking about. We have a big brass band; we also do a roadshow with school. But I was lucky enough to get Macs and get really into the ICT sort of area and have a pretty similar set-up to what these guys have got.

Mr CRISP — Perhaps while Glen is here there is something we probably need to get on the record with Robinvale. It has a very unique cultural mix, with a lot of nationalities there but a big strength in Pacific Islander communities, which comes with some predisposition to musical involvement.

Mr BARROW — Yes.

Mr CRISP — It is a really interesting mix, and I would appreciate it, Glen, if you could give us a quick walk through that.

Mr BARROW — When you think about that sort of area, with the cultures, we actually do a roadshow, which sums up the whole aspect of that. With the roadshow we actually get funding for it and we go out to communities that are really monoculture. I am actually a design tech teacher and I love music, and when I got put into the performing arts and music side of things I had to come up with an idea. I basically got the students teaching other students about their cultures. From that developed the roadshow; that was sort of already there with their performances, because they are very involved in their music, especially the Polynesian kids. Even the Indigenous kids, they all love dancing and love performing. That got them involved in class and got them active.

So we put it together and took it on the road. We go out for about three or four days. We go to a heap of other schools. They share it and actually do workshops. The didgeridoo players teach some of the boys how to play didgeridoo, the brass kids teach brass and the guitarists teach guitar in the morning, and then they do a performance in the afternoon, or vice versa. It also helps with the VET music crew. It is very student orientated because they have a music background and that is what they love to do. We get them active and in class and actually on task.

The CHAIR — Fantastic.

Mr ELASMAR — The first part of my question is: who teaches music at your school at the primary level and the secondary level, a generalist or a specialist music teacher? The second part is: many submissions suggest that music should be delivered by a specialist music teacher at the primary school level. Could you provide the committee with an understanding of whether this is feasible under the current student resource package allocation for your school and the types of factors a school would weigh up in making the decision to employ a specialist music teacher at the primary level?
Mr BARROW — We are lucky enough to have a young fellow who has come down. He is a generalist primary school teacher but majored in music. We are lucky enough to have him down there. He is also teaching some of the instrumental. But in previous years there was me, who was not qualified, if that makes sense. We are lucky enough to have that now. At that time I was not qualified, but since then I have gone on to get qualifications. On the secondary side, it is me, and I have had to go and do lots of extra study to actually be qualified in that area, with VET music as well as classroom, teaching music. To a point it is sort of a little bit specialist, because I am more music technology than actually classroom music. What was the next question?

Mr ELASMAR — The second one is about the current student resource package allocation to your school and what types of factors would be weighed up in making the decision to employ specialist teachers at the primary level.

Mr CRISP — It is a tough one for Glen.

Mr BARROW — A tough one for me, yes.

Mr CRISP — We will have to defer to the principal in the middle, perhaps.

Mr CUPPER — Building on what Glen is saying, we have a generalist teacher in the junior area. Ben is a specialist music teacher. I would love to clone him and have him everywhere, not simply because of his music. As a musician he is well trained, but also his understanding of ICT and how that can be integrated into learning is really powerful, so when I think Ben has worked with our Year 5s and 6s and has shown very quickly the benefits of having a qualified suitable person — that is probably the first tick. I noticed you did ask about access to rural and regional employment opportunities and getting suitably qualified people to do this but — yes, certainly upper primary. Ben took the risk and had a go at it. He was a bit apprehensive initially, but it has worked out to be a really beneficial outcome, hasn’t it?

Mr BROWNE — Yes, definitely.

Mr CUPPER — It also boils down to your SRP and how many dollars you have and what the priorities are and what you can afford to spend. You need money but you also need to make sure you get the right person. They are probably the two critical bits, and having a specialist music teacher who cannot relate to kids or work with people is probably not a wise investment. It is like all teaching, I suppose: it is the quality of the teacher and their ability to provide an engaging curriculum and get kids on board with them, to relate well to them and be able to work with groups of people. They are things that probably stand out in my mind. I do not know if you want to add to that, Ben?

Mr CUPPER — I guess Robinvale and us share that ability. I suppose Glen, did you want to add to that?

Mr BARROW — No, it is all right. I am still trying to gather my thoughts. In primary school our teacher is trained but he goes in there to cover classes that need the other teachers to be covered. So I find that when he goes in there he is going in there to teach music but it is more a case of, ‘Hey, we need time for these other teachers to go and get a break,’ so we shove him in there to do some music. I know myself we have been working to get a proper curriculum in there but at the moment there is nothing really developed as such in the primary area as a solid curriculum compared to what we do in the secondary level.

The CHAIR — And your view would be that, by doing that, it would certainly help into the latter years, if you had more of a structured program?

Mr BARROW — Yes, definitely. So getting someone solid in that junior level who will definitely get music in those lower levels will bring on progress in the senior levels.

The CHAIR — Just very quickly, would your views be that all kids should have access to a music program at primary school level?
Mr BARROW — Yes.

Mr CUPPER — Yes, definitely.

Ms MILLER — Have you faced any difficulties recruiting specialist music teachers in the region, and what strategies can you suggest to ensure that rural and regional schools have access to specialist music teachers?

Mr CUPPER — It is like many areas. Attracting a psychologist, for example, has been hard in this area; the pool of applicants is probably not as strong often as it might be in metropolitan areas. We can be fortunate; we are really delighted to have Ben in our school. Sometimes we have not been quite as fortunate, so there is a bit of a lottery element to it. Can you repeat the second part of your question, please?

Ms MILLER — Yes. It was more about what strategies you think you could implement to actually attract specialist music teachers to the region.

Mr CUPPER — In Ben’s case we went towards South Australia. For a lot of curriculum areas we pick up some really good people from South Australia because that is geographically close to Mildura, so that is a way to get on the front foot in a range of curriculum areas including music — to try and promote this part of our state of Victoria; with the opportunities and the potential benefits of working here. So music is very much part of that broader strategy. I think our last teacher before Ben was also from South Australia. That is probably one strategy we use in this part of the state because of the geography. Other than that you use your networks, you use whatever you can and obviously you advertise; you try to come up with the right person.

Mr BARROW — In Robinvale, for instance in the last eight years, I have been part of the program and of organising instrumental teachers. Luckily enough of some of those who are there, one is a classroom teacher and the other is support staff. They do not just have roles as instrumental teachers; they have actually been incorporated into the support staff. That is how we have been able to maintain those teachers. But, for instance, with other specialists like drums, we have really struggled to get anybody down there. At the moment we have a young fellow who travels down. To maintain him, for him to afford to be able to come down to Robinvale, for him to see the attractiveness we need to be able to — —

Mr CUPPER — Provide some incentives.

Mr BARROW — Yes, the incentives. I suppose it is not my place, but I know the business manager has to work to get to get people in from Mildura to come down and entice them to Robinvale to be able to teach. But as soon as they get a better offer or something nicer — say, solid — then they are basically, ‘Sorry, Robinvale is off the tick’.

Ms MILLER — Do you currently have, say, a specialist that might go to different schools?

Mr BARROW — No, we do not have that.

Ms MILLER — Is that a realistic option for you?

Mr BARROW — It would be good if they were dedicated to us and got employed by the region, but we do not fit into that.

Mr CUPPER — We are fortunate in this part of the district because we have the IMT program, the instrumental music teachers program, which I think is a good model in the sense that we cannot afford one drum teacher at our school full time, but sharing across the district, a group of schools, makes sense. The same would apply to brass and other instruments. I think Robinvale is out of the loop in solving that one, which is a bit unfortunate.

Mr BARROW — That may have to be looked at again because we are in a different area now.

Mr CUPPER — Yes, the networks have all changed and we are trying to get our heads around that as well at the moment. The model is that the Senior College host actually coordinates that program and manages the employment aspects and the reviews and so on. That works well from our perspective. I guess the challenge for them and for us as a consequence is getting the right people. We have a vocals teacher who is about to take family leave shortly and the dilemma is do we try — —

We do not know of anybody definitely out there who would be an outstanding candidate, so what do we do? Do we try and do it internally for a while until we can get it sorted, or do we take a punt and try and employ someone?
Ms MILLER — Do you sort of target the students that are doing their last year in teaching and/or some music thing, like at the university level, to try and get the first piece of the pie, so to speak?

Mr CUPPER — Yes. That is, I think — —

Mr BARROW — That is the principle.

Mr CUPPER — Ben was a graduate through that pathway.

Mr BROWNE — That would be a great option. The other thing we spoke about briefly was that with all the ICT available and the fact that a lot of people will not travel here, whatever the reason might be, why can we not do it via correspondence?

Mr CUPPER — Videoconferencing as far as online stuff is concerned.

Mr BROWNE — That way we can may get some of the better academic teachers but do it via correspondence.

Ms MILLER — Is that something you are looking at now?

Mr BROWNE — Yes, that is something we are looking at.

Mr CUPPER — An example for us is, say, with Mandarin, a Chinese language. We have our Year 10 students along with Red Cliffs Secondary College who now go to China — a group of Year 10s every year. There is a need now to develop Mandarin as a language.

Bendigo Senior Secondary College is looking at setting up an online videoconferencing blend of programs for specialist maths, which is another hard-to-staff area for those schools that have VCE components. Mandarin is another one, so next year we are hoping there will be an online model so that we can as a school — we might have only 10 kids and we cannot afford to teach it — use that as a way of delivering a program. It is a bit better than the old distance ed. sort of thing. It is much more interactive and with fast-speed broadband technology it can be like you are almost there. With music we were thinking there could be the same sorts of benefit and opportunity there as well. I think that is opening up possibilities we may not have had in the past.

Ms MILLER — Is that for this year or next year?

Mr CUPPER — If it gets to the point now, I believe any time from now on we would probably have that capacity if we get improved broadband speeds. At the moment it still struggles a bit in a school with lots of demand on it. I think that is a model they are working with in specialist maths and a couple of other areas in Bendigo. I think they have a team of about 12 people developing those online courses now and they did signal recently at a conference I was at that they were moving to Mandarin, but then again instrumental music would be another field that would probably be worth a try.

Mr CRISP — You have all spent some time talking about some of the barriers in rural and regional schools and you talked a little bit about some of the strategies, but is there anything more you want to add about strategies to improve the provision of music education in rural and regional schools? You do share instrumental music teachers around other schools. Perhaps we could have a little information on that. We have talked about the IT side of things. Is there anything else you want to add before we leave that topic?

Mr BARROW — Just access to professional development without having to travel, and even getting specialist teachers up to do that in the local area or on site, because studies show that you actually learn better in your own environment than you do elsewhere. It would be that sort of thing.

Mr CUPPER — A network of music teachers, I suppose. Ben is the main guy here again, but our music digital studio pretty amazing technology. Even in the few months we have been looking at it, it has just leapfrogged so quickly and we are hoping we can provide some support for the local teachers in the use of that and have more collaboration between schools and other schools might develop a bit of an expertise. Sharing that is probably an important part of it, too.

Mr BARROW — I did not get funding for ours; I just built it.

Ms MILLER — Build it and they will come!
Mr BARROW — Then I told the principal that I built it. I know for COSAMP with Ben we are on the same TP network. Ben and I had our first meeting last year in regard to a whole group of teachers around here who teach VET music under COSAMP, which is an RTO. I think their idea is of bringing all the teachers as well. I know we have talked about getting together and having that, but having those facilities to be able to do that and time allocated to be able to do that is probably the hardest thing, because we are all caught up in our own schools and what we are doing. So it is the ability to be looking for that, to mix with other teachers and see what the best practices are and how they are going with their students and seeing teachers with similar cohorts and what works best — what equipment worked well and what did not et cetera.

Mr ELASMAR — Does your school receive instrumental music funding from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and does this cover the costs of your instrumental music program?

Mr BARROW — I can answer that straightaway, because I did actually ring the business manager today and she said we get funding. I think we get $36 000 a year, but that may cover one teacher. But, like I said, we have multiple teachers who cover different areas and the kids still have to pay $120 a year to cover any instruments that they use or any bits and pieces that they use — class materials, all those aspects. I think that is an added enticement to get people down. That gets really taken up by that funding.

Mr ELASMAR — So you are happy with the current system?

Mr BARROW — No, I am not.

Mr ELASMAR — What other change would you like?

Mr BARROW — It would be nice if the students did not have to pay as much and we had a bit more funding to allow us to entice more students —

The CHAIR — Just on that, do you think that if they did not your numbers would change?

Mr BARROW — I think if they did not, they would probably attempt more instruments. At the moment that is probably just for one instrument — to be able to cover — because we can only have so many students with one instructor, because most of them are instructors so you can only have three or four students in there. Then that time gets taken up. If we can actually have an extra instructor, then we will have more kids involved in it. Does that add up?

The CHAIR — Yes. So you would not necessarily get more kids, but the kids that you currently have could undertake more of the program?

Mr BARROW — More of the program, rather than just maybe one instrument, and have probably a theory, then an actual instrument — things you do not cover in class, or more a one-on-one.

The CHAIR — Sure. Graeme.

Mr CUPPER — In this area we pool that funding together so it is coordinated through the Mildura Senior College. Probably they are battling at the moment as the managing school to make it break even; I think they are a bit behind the eight ball historically. Our vocal teacher is taking leave shortly. The dilemma is: do we try to find somebody? We really cannot afford it, but can we afford not to, as well? I think probably Andrew Ough might be a good person to speak to. I do not know if you will have a chance to speak to Andrew.

Mr CRISP — After lunch.

Mr CUPPER — After lunch. I am sure he will give you a bit more of an insight into that, but I know that at a meeting yesterday morning — we work with principal class people who meet fairly regularly — that was one of the dilemmas: ‘We can’t really afford it but shall we try and replace this person, or don’t we?’ I had the conversation with Ben to say, ‘Can we manage without that?’, and he thinks that in our case we can, and I know that Chaffey would be keen to find someone. I think it depends on your capacity within your school to some extent, too. It is a valuable support, but whether it is sufficient — I would probably suggest it would be good to crank it up, but I think everyone would probably say that. But I think Andrew will probably give you more detailed insights into the actual deeper, finer points about that. We use a fairly collaborative model, and in this area we have had to do that in a lot of areas. We rely on it working and, I guess back to your question a bit earlier, Peter, that networking and sharing and collaborating between our schools is something we have learnt to do pretty well in this area, through necessity.
Mr BROWNE — I would only add what Glen was saying about the fact that with certain instruments there are hire fees attached to that, and that gets passed on to the student. That might be something where the student might not — depending on the background of the family, the sort of money they can spend might determine if that kid or that student gets the opportunity to take on that instrument. So yes, I would agree that maybe there could be some funding allocated towards that.

Mr CUPPER — Even subsidised to some extent to cover the cost of it.

Mr BROWNE — Subsidised, yes.

Mr CUPPER — If you are wavering — and we have a pretty high proportion of kids who are financially disadvantaged; they might just baulk at that if it is too much.

Mr BARROW — If they are trying it, too, they are not going to pay out big funds to go and buy a $1500 instrument.

Mr BROWNE — You can buy it on eBay.

Mr BARROW — I know we actually rent a lot of our brass instruments from the Bendigo region, and even that comes out of that money, and that is two and a half, nearly $3000, for a year. The bonus is that they have got lots of other instruments that we can swap and change. But we have had those instruments since I have been there, that is eight years, so imagine that. We could have actually bought all of our instruments for that price. It is one of the things you have to weigh up.

The CHAIR — Just on the Indigenous programs, do you have programs at school to support Indigenous kids, particularly around music? And also do you use music programs for non-Indigenous kids to learn about Indigenous culture and everything through music?

Mr CUPPER — It is probably an area that we need to work on. Robinvale has a fairly high proportion of Indigenous kids, and we do too now. Probably 80 or 90 kids out of our population are from Indigenous backgrounds. We have the NAIDOC-type cultural weeks where we bring in a person who might share a dance or an instrument. Last week we had a member of the local community come in to talk about how they make didgeridoos, what sort of timber they use and how they select it, and we had a group of kids do a Murray River-type program looking at sourcing their own timber and making their own didgeridoos. There is that cultural element to it.

It is something that we probably need to explore a bit more seriously, to be quite honest. They all have access to music through the normal channels, but they need that special focus and that sharing of culture. We are getting involved; we have a room set up in our school now which has the didgeridoos that these kids have made, so we have that symbolic cultural thing, but we do not have a didgeridoo band or a didgeridoo performance group. I think that is probably the next step. The girls in particular like the dance, so maybe we can combine the two. We can probably learn a lot from Robinvale because they are really — —

Mr BARROW — With the roadshow, it is really important in regard to the students’ cultures. I really push the fact that it is actually student driven and they want to do it. But because of the time constraints in class, with everything getting pushed towards maths and English and a lot of time being put into literacy and numeracy, we have lost out on time. I know last year most of our practice or any student learning in regard to the roadshow, which we do every year, had to be done in their own time, at lunchtimes or after school. That was fairly big. The good thing for the kids is that they actually came at lunchtime and recess and took up all that time. They wanted to do it because it was their culture that they were sharing with everybody else, and that was just something that came in the form of performing arts.

Robinvale has got a fairly big emphasis on cultural performance in general. At the moment we have got the REFHL festival, which is Robinvale and Euston Festival for Healthy Living, incorporating a lot of healthy living. It did have a big music component to it, but that has gone this year. We are now in the middle of realising, ‘Hang on, now the music program has to get back into what it was doing’. So it really shuffles around depending on where the focus is in the school. The focus at the moment is on literacy and numeracy and we are sort of on the backburner.

Mr ELASMAR — Does your school offer VCE music?

Mr BARROW — Not VCE music. We offer VCE-VET tech production, and that is only because I am qualified to teach that. We do not offer VCE music.
Mr ELASMAR — If students are interested why do you not offer it, and what are the options for the students?

Mr BARROW — Why do we not offer it?

Mr ELASMAR — Yes.

Mr BARROW — Because they have not got anyone qualified to teach it, and they would have to go to Mildura.

Ms MILLER — Just following on from that, in terms of the VET music program, what is the level of student interest, what does the program involve and what are the benefits for the students?

Mr BARROW — It is VET music tech production, so I do not do the performance side of things. I do tech production, which is sound engineering. I have got 15 students, mainly music students who want to be involved and that is where they can go. That is what I am trained in and what I can actually offer them, so it is sort of the only choice they have if they want to do something in the music area. I try to cater for them as much as I can in regard to offering music, but technically I cannot sign them off on things because I am not qualified enough to do that.

Mr CRISP — What about partnerships with community programs or other community organisations to help enhance your music programs?

Mr BROWNE — We are heavily involved. Last year we had the Vanilla Slice, which is a community event that they hold every year. We were asked to write the jingle for that, promote that and have students perform.

The CHAIR — What is the vanilla slice?

Mr BROWNE — The cake itself?

The CHAIR — The cake? Was it a competition?

Mr BROWNE — Yes, it was a competition for who could make the best vanilla slice.

Mr CRISP — I had to judge one section. I am so over vanilla slice!

The CHAIR — We have come at the wrong time.

Mr BROWNE — You have to head up here in August.

Mr CUPPER — I think it arose out of Jeff Kennett driving through Ouyen one day, wasn’t it, Peter?

Mr CRISP — Yes.

Mr CUPPER — He liked the vanilla slices and suggested they could become an annual event.

Mr CRISP — It is a competition taken very seriously by bakers, but it requires a large amount of community input, and that is where the Merbein school was involved in supporting that and writing the jingle. Well done.

Mr BROWNE — That was a big thing. It got radio play and kids went through the song-writing process, the recording process and then the performing process — everything, basically. It was a great experience for the students, but also a great way for Merbein P–10 to get its name out there as well. That was great. We try to do a lot of things like that out in the community if possible to promote the school.

Mr CUPPER — Like the roadshow idea. We also have some support from the Merbein Community Bank, the Bendigo Bank branch in Merbein, to augment our specialist funding. They have put in some money because one of our ideas was to try to provide a forum or venue for local musicians — the younger ones — in the Merbein community and wider if necessary. They can come and use this recording studio. That outlet is provided for them. We have only just finished it, but we are getting a couple of kids who are ex-students and musicians interested.

Mr BROWNE — The word is getting out there, that is for sure. We have the battle of the bands, which is supported by the local council here. That is for youth events. We are hoping to get on board with that. There will be people there who want to record demo CDs and that type of thing, so they can come into the studio and use the facilities. We are trying to branch out to the community in that respect with the studio.
Mr BARROW — It is a small area and a small community, and having being there for so long, our involvement is cemented with tech production. The whole idea of including tech production is so that the kids can perform and do all those things. I wanted to teach the kids how to set up and do that. They used to employ people from Mildura to bring equipment down. The community now knows the kids can actually do it. All our kids set up in the community. With any sort of event our kids are out there running it, performing in it or doing something in regard to the actual event. It could be the theatre or the community ballroom. Somehow our school or our kids are actually involved in putting it on or even event management. Anything that is going on, they are in it. They are usually asking me, ‘Sir, can we borrow this? Can we borrow that?’ That is what it is there for.

Mr BROWNE — That is where the VET comes into play. We are offering these VET skills which give these kids an opportunity. If they cannot play instrument, that does not mean they cannot do music. It is giving them opportunities to set up PA systems, do radio shows within the school and those types of things. They all come under that banner.

Mr BARROW — The next event we have coming up is a junior variety day. It has developed from the variety nights that we have had, and those usually encompassed a lot of the older students. This came around because of the teacher strikes and nobody wanting to work after hours. We thought we would do it during the day. The older students will be running the show and the younger kids, the primary students from P to 6, will perform. That is where the other teacher is putting together some performances. There is that sort of involvement in the community. That will go out to the community, and hopefully parents will love that.

Mr BROWNE — One other thing, while I remember: last year Triple J — we all know Triple J — was running a competition for high school bands, and that was a great thing. We got the students involved. They had to write the original song, upload it, create a profile through the links. Then it went onto the net. It was a nationwide competition to see where you place. The only way to go up the ladder is for people to come in and vote for your music and that type of thing. We got a really great response, and it was great for the kids, being that we are from regional school, to be associated with that bigger scale. They ended up placing 56th out of 600-plus bands. To make it to 56 of the top 100 was a great achievement for those students. That is another way of getting to the bigger picture of things.

Mr CRISP — Perhaps on a slightly different tack, Glen, you went back and studied to get yourself qualified for music. What did you study? Where did you study and how long did it take?

Mr BARROW — I sing as a bit of fun, but I actually go and take singing lessons as well as AMEB. I am doing my Year 6 this year, so hopefully I will be able to do VCE music. We will see if I pass. It is time consuming. But as regards the tech production, I was a qualified technician before I came into the schools. I did not start teaching until I was 30. A lot of that background was recognised prior learning as well. I was lucky enough there. But I still had to go and finish off a few units with COSAMP and a few other areas just to get qualified. It was only TAFE. I did a few different units all over the place to meet the requirements.

Mr CRISP — You were able to do that locally. Did you have to return to formal study?

Mr BARROW — I had to go to Melbourne to complete some of the tasks and get some of the required components done.

Mr CRISP — So you have put together a program that ended up in what sort of qualification?

Mr BARROW — Tech production.

Mr CRISP — Tech production.

Mr BARROW — It was actually a Diploma of Tech Production or Associate Diploma of Tech Production, whichever is the lower one.

Mr CRISP — Thank you, Glen.

The CHAIR — I just want to cover off a couple of little things. You mentioned the issues with pressures with literacy and numeracy. We have heard a lot of evidence so far to suggest that music assists a lot in preparing kids and advancing them in their literacy and numeracy. Is that something you are starting to hear around the traps in terms of arguments for more focus on music, or has it not really caught on here?
Mr CUPPER — I suppose it depends on which group you are looking at. We had a bit of a chat before about how anecdotally kids who are generally showing interest in music happen to also be strong academically. There is more than an average proportion, I think, based on the many years that I have been involved in teaching students. I think there is a correlation there. I still think there is an enrichment value in music from prep right through to Year 10. I saw 3s and 4s last year with one of our teachers who was musical singing songs together. There was that whole sense of the buzz of the satisfaction you get out of an activity like music, particularly in a group, and from the cohesion. A lot of other things come into it other than purely just literacy and numeracy, although clearly there is a fair bit of physics, science, maths and communication in it. I am sure there has been research done to confirm that. I have not had the time to chase it up. I think there is certainly a connection there. There is an enrichment value as well as possibly an academic thing. I guess the challenge is getting kids who might be at risk to want to take it on and motivating and engaging them in music. That is probably the tricky bit.

Mr BARROW — I know we quoted some stuff from the Herald Sun in one of our meetings the other day, just to enlighten people. I know that people do not necessarily go out there to say that music is not important but they will think, ‘That’s all right, it is only music, they can miss out on that’, whereas I find a lot of our kids actually need it to be able to function in class sometimes. At the moment you can see the behaviour of some of the students when they do not get their dose of performing arts weekly; if they miss out on something, they do not have — —

The CHAIR — Just on that, and particularly given your cohort of kids, do you think that having the music assists in reducing absenteeism or creates better attention among the kids in their schooling?

Mr BARROW — Yes, I believe that. I would say that. Over the years that I have been in Robinvale, I have seen where we have done some solid programs, especially with Indigenous kids. I have had kids that rock up at 8 o’clock in the morning to practise drums and maintain that. Then the following year when they were not part of my classes, they were going off the rails. So, it is that discipline and that routine and something that they enjoy doing, and they also felt that the music room was a safe place to go.

I have done my own experiments, where I have shut the shop up because some kids did not do the right thing in there. You can even notice in the schoolyard — they go off and cause havoc somewhere else. But when they are in the music room or the performing arts room they are solid into putting something together, or creating and making, and really working together with each other. They sort of have to work together. It is interesting to watch.

Mr BROWNE — I think music is one of those subjects that everybody can relate to in one way or another, and finding out what that is and getting students engaged is a part of it that I enjoy. We have had students that do only rock up to music — I mean, I know this is probably not a good thing, but at least they are rocking up and getting the marks and showing that they are enthusiastic and that type of thing. It is weird to hear teachers talking about students like, ‘They are not doing this and this in this subject’. Then you think, well that student is perfect in my class, so obviously there is some sort of connection there with the kids. Actually, last night in the recording studio we had our open night, and we had students fighting over who was going to record next and that type of thing. It is definitely one of those areas where students can socialise and it is academic.

Ms MILLER — Have the reality programs like The Voice increased the level of interest?

Mr BROWNE — Definitely, yes.

Ms MILLER — And do they all want to be rock stars and famous? Like Glen over here — he will be on The Voice next! Get his autograph now, before we leave.

Mr ELASMAR — We will not be the judges.

Mr BROWNE — You need to get those chairs where you hit the buzzers!

Ms MILLER — But, seriously, programs like that have really helped.

Mr BROWNE — Actually we had a student the other day saying that they wanted to get a petition going for The Voice, so they wanted to have a version that would be the ‘Merbein Voice’. So they want to run something similar to that at the school and get students involved in that.
Ms MILLER — One of my primary schools has a competition in performing arts — there is an idea for you. It is in all sorts of different areas, so they have song, dance, instrumental. They had week 1, 2, 3, and then on fete day they had an outdoor live performance of the top five, so it was an opportunity for them to perform.

Mr BROWNE — That would be perfect.

Mr CUPPER — I just want to add to that point: I know I talked about that connection between academic kids and music, but there is also the group that you have touched on who are bright kids, but music is their thing. That is an avenue for them to become engaged in school life. We got a couple of kids who were in the Year 8 rock band last year who are kids that could go either way. Music is a way you can build relationships with them, and they have a passion and they love doing it, and you can often turn kids around through it.

Mr BROWNE — It is great to see that turnaround point, where they are used to failing in other areas, and then all of a sudden they just get that, ‘Okay, this is what I’m good at’, and they follow that, and that drive just pushes them through to the point where we have one student that is now taking on TAFE courses as well as school to pursue some of that musical interest. It is good to see.

Mr CUPPER — Just talking about attendance, in my tech production I get 100 per cent attendance.

Mr BROWNE — That is right, yes.

Mr CUPPER — They are in the process of organising events. One of the events they were organising is they were thinking about a fete and putting on a big performance there, but then they said that that was getting a little bit too hard with all the red tape they had to go through, so they actually then decided to think about a teachers karaoke night, so that was interesting. And they looked at me.

The CHAIR — Just one last question from me, linking to what you have just said: what about the music industry as a whole, particularly locally — do you see that the sort of programs you are running are contributing to kids going out and doing some stuff around production, mixing, DJ-ing, bands and all sorts of things?

Mr BROWNE — Yes, definitely. Like I said earlier, I mentioned FreeZA — that is the title of the event — and that is becoming a big thing up here. You have the local muso clubs and stuff like that, where students are now taking what they are doing at school, but they are meeting other people in the community, so that community involvement is now starting to spread. Definitely with the VET stuff that we train these students in — like the studio stuff; we had open night last night and parents were walking into the room saying, ‘This wasn’t here when we were at school’. To have those sorts of opportunities and to give those kids real-life skills that they can then take out into the community and beyond, I think that is where it is heading.

The CHAIR — Great. Excellent. We have concluded our questions. I want to really thank you for coming along today and sharing the sorts of things you are doing at your schools. Congratulations. They sound like really good programs. It has certainly helped us in terms of finding out what is happening locally.

Mr BROWNE — Thank you.

Mr CUPPER — Can I take the opportunity to thank the committee and the whole inquiry? Obviously we value music. We think it is a really critical part of enriching kids’ learning and their life pathways. I hope that you come up with some worthwhile findings and some ideas that help us push it. I am speaking as a maths and science teacher. We get a bad rap in terms of these sorts of things, but I happen to also enjoy music. I have seen the value of performing arts and music and how it can affect kids, engage and unify a school and make a big difference. Thank you.

The CHAIR — It is a pleasure. Thank you very much.

Witnesses withdrew.