CORRECTED VERSION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne — 27 March 2013

Members
Mr P. Crisp  Mr D. Southwick
Mr N. Elasmar  Ms G. Tierney
Ms E. Miller

Chair: Mr D. Southwick
Deputy Chair: Ms G. Tierney

Staff
Executive Officer: Ms K. Riseley
Research Officer: Ms A. Madden

Witnesses
Emeritus Professor M. Comte, and
Mr C. Stevens, Australian College of Educators.
The CHAIR — I welcome the Australian College of Educators, being represented by Carl Stevens and Emeritus Professor Martin Comte. The process this afternoon is that we will shortly ask you to give an introductory statement and then go straight into questions. I point out that today’s hearings are being recorded by Hansard. You will have the opportunity to review the transcript, and if there is anything that needs changing in terms of typographical errors, you will have that opportunity. I also point out that your evidence today is covered under parliamentary privilege, which means that you have the same rights and privileges as a member of Parliament, so feel free to say what you wish, but that privilege does not extend outside the hearing proper.

Welcome again, thank you, and over to you for an opening statement.

Mr STEVENS — I might simply start by introducing the Australian College of Educators. It is a national body representing education in all the sectors from preschool to tertiary. It is a professional association that is over 50 years old, and the Victorian branch — whose president is Annette Rome, signatory to the submission — has made this submission to the inquiry into music education. The college is very keen to make this submission because it believes that music education is a very high priority in the school education space. That is a broad introduction.

The CHAIR — Excellent! Did you want to add anything?

Prof. COMTE — No, I do not.

The CHAIR — We will get straight into the questions. I note the Australian College of Educators’ submission highlights access and equity as being a key issue in terms of music. Could you elaborate on what types of schools and regions particularly have that difficulty in terms of access and equity to quality music education and what are some of the barriers that those schools may face?

Mr STEVENS — I will start but Martin will come in. I think we alluded to schools, particularly smaller schools, particularly primary schools, and schools in rural and regional areas, but they are by no means the only schools that would have difficulty in mounting a quality music program and attracting professional and qualified music educators.

We rather think that the primary area is of greater concern, but that is not to say that there are not concerns in the secondary arena, particularly in Years 7 and 8, and particularly with the creative curriculum issues that are really finding their way not only into primary schools but now into lower secondary schools with the onset of the Australian curriculum, for example. There are a bunch of interrelated issues that form barriers to quality provision and equitable provision.

Within the metropolitan area I would say that certain regions would probably find it more difficult to mount quality music programs, and I do not have detailed knowledge about that. I am sure other people appearing today have talked about that, but I would suspect that the western and northern regions are probably less able to attract quality music and qualified music teachers compared to the eastern and southern regions and bayside regions. That is a generalisation, admittedly, and individual schools would vary enormously.

Prof. COMTE — My comments really relate to perhaps the last 15 years since I retired from the university. For 11 or 12 of those years I conducted triennial school reviews for the education department on a contract with Melbourne University, and for a couple of years I also conducted performance and development culture reviews for the education department, so I saw several hundreds of schools and tried to assist them in terms of their entire curriculum, management and so on.

But I was, firstly, concerned about the lack of arts in country areas, and secondly, in the western suburbs in general. Of course there are always exceptions, but there were certain areas there where nothing much was happening at all. Perhaps the overriding thing for me was that you may find a school where you have a music teacher for one year in primary school, the music teacher goes or the staffing changes or the emphasis from the education department or the government is different, and so the funding of the money...
that could have gone into staffing a music teacher has to go into something else — it might be technology or whatever.

There was no consistency. It was quite stark at some of the schools where they have not had music at all. What also concerned me was that there are certain organisations that run the various programs for kids — and I say this having been on the national council of Musica Viva for many years, and Musica Viva runs a wonderful Musica Viva program in schools where children can access going to a concert and there were some pre-activities the teacher can do, and some post-activities for teachers and students. But, when I discussed it, most of the principals who had done that regarded it as having been the music program for the year. So it was one concert, some activities the teachers and students could engage in, and then they could tick off that as the music for the year. That was my concern, so I would argue, as ACE does, for the sequential, ongoing notion of a music program.

Ms TIERNEY — Obviously I am assuming you support the notion of specialist music teachers, is that correct?

Prof. COMTE — And also generalist teachers.

Ms TIERNEY — Yes.

Prof. COMTE — Generalist teachers of music, yes.

Ms TIERNEY — How would you see the best way, or what model should be adopted, of recruiting and training specialist teachers to work in tandem with general teachers?

Prof. COMTE — If we start with the primary school, I believe strongly that music has to start in the primary school years — in my individual submission I mentioned that very strongly — in the same way that I believe language teaching has to start in the early years. It is not that it is too late in the secondary years, but that kids are basically on the back foot if they start later on. We need specialist teachers in terms of instruments, but we also need classroom teachers who can offer a generalist music program throughout the year. It would be nice of course if all schools had a specialist teacher at primary school level where kids could access the instruments and all schools could have generalist teachers who could teach music — or perhaps a specialist teacher in the school who could work across the classes and so on. But it is unrealistic in terms of the budget and everything else, and I think it is going to become even more unrealistic when the Australian Curriculum is fully in place.

At the secondary level so many programs have started. I was teaching in tech schools in the 1960s when the instrumental programs started, about the same time they started in high schools. It is wonderful to introduce students to instruments then, but it is in a sense much better if they can be introduced to the learning of the instrument earlier. Then you have the problem of children learning instruments at the secondary level, when they do a generalist classroom program often for one or two years and there is often little relationship between the instrumental tuition and the other. In many private schools I have been to there is much more synergy in my experience, but not in government schools. There are exceptions. We all know them: Melbourne High, Balwyn High School, Mac.Rob, University High and so on.

Mr STEVENS — Regarding the primary schools and your question about training and preparation for teachers to teach music in the classroom, I think Martin is right. We need to strengthen the skill base of generalist primary school teachers so that they can at least offer some fundamental music literacy programs, whether it is classroom singing or musical appreciation or that type of thing. It can perhaps be integrated with their more general program. Most schools do not have the luxury of being able to use a specialist teacher. It really is important in teacher education programs that music preparation is strengthened. That is a big ask of course because many areas are saying the same thing. I know that teacher education providers are squirming from all the demands that are made upon teacher education courses in the same way that schools are being asked to provide for all sorts of areas, such as physical education, driver education and the arts. We have not even talked about all the other arts yet and how they are going to be feeding into the curriculum. But it seems to me that there need to be some alternative ways to strengthen the existing teaching profession at the primary level at least, whereby they could do a graduate
diploma or something of music education or arts education with a heavy music component — some other avenues whereby teachers could be encouraged to pick those up.

**Prof. COMTE** — I began lecturing in teachers colleges in 1975 and at that stage it was compulsory to do music for two years. It was three hours a week for three terms for two years. In the next couple of years it became compulsory for one year, and by the way it was also compulsory to do art for two years. These days many students can do teacher training having done four weeks or something like that of music teaching, so what is happening now is we have graduates teaching in primary schools who have no background whatsoever.

**The CHAIR** — Why do you think it has been that way? What has led to that policy decision to phase it out?

**Prof. COMTE** — Having been a dean of a faculty of education, when I started teaching, a student had to have 160 days primary teaching in schools in three years. Because of state and federal funding cutbacks, by the time I was the dean many years later, we got it down to 40 days. That is one-quarter of the teaching practice they used to have, and that was 40 days in a four-year degree of bachelor of education compared to 160 days in a three-year diploma of teaching in 1975 — a drastic cutback.

**Mr STEVENS** — Another reason would be that the emphasis on literacy and numeracy in the primary curriculum is crowded out by many of the other key learning areas.

**Mr CRISP** — I would like to extend Professor Comte’s earlier comment about implementing the Australian Curriculum, if I could tease that out now, and have a look at what guidance and support schools and teachers will need to implement the music area of the Australian Curriculum.

**Prof. COMTE** — I have some wonderful experts on this right behind me who could talk about this, but one of the problems is that traditionally music and visual art have been the arts subjects in the curriculum at the primary and secondary level. Now it seems to me in the Australian Curriculum that the arts are competing. Theoretically we may have to have music and so on, but in practice when principals do not have the resources, a principal might say, ‘We might have drama in the school and we won’t have dance’. Or is the principal going to say, ‘We have to have an hour a week for the arts, or 40 minutes a week for the arts. Do we give music 15 minutes, do we give dance 15 minutes and do we give drama 15 minutes?’. That is completely unrealistic. It is because of the crowded curriculum that people have been writing about for the last 30 years and teachers been complaining about for the last 30 years that unfortunately the arts seem to suffer. It is sad that we are now in a position where art form is going to be fighting art form. In my day, music used to fight the English department or the maths department. Now art form is fighting art form, and I think that is sad.

**Mr STEVENS** — The battle is just beginning because, as we know, the implementation of the Australian Curriculum is happening in phases. I think the first stage subjects — English, history, science and mathematics — were supposed to be coming on stream this year, but I think that might be put back. The Arts is in the second phase along with geography and languages, and then there are the remainder. I do not know who amongst the authorities has been giving any attention to how this is all fitting together. That is what schools are going to be concerned about.

At the moment we are in a situation in Victoria where there is this amalgam of the Australian Curriculum and the Victorian version called VELS. You have AusVELS, which I am sure people have spoken about. The VCAA and the various school sectors are managing this transition process through the AusVELS until we have the fully implemented Australian Curriculum, but what I think primary schools in particular will need is some sort of guidance on how you program all these areas in a meaningful way that gives appropriate attention to all the key learning areas. I do not know that there is much advice about that around at the present time. Obviously the VCAA, Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, in Victoria could give that advice. That would be its role, I am sure, in conjunction with the national authority, ACARA, that is taking a whole-of-curriculum look at it. I think that curriculum advice and programming advice to schools is really crucial, and I think we mentioned that in the submission.
Mr ELASMAR — How do you think schools should divide the time in curriculum between music and other arts such as visual arts, drama and dance?

Mr STEVENS — My personal view about music in particular is that it is a rather unique art form and it is a rather highly developed art form. I am not going to say anything disparaging about the other forms. Clearly they are all important in their own ways, but we have five of them to deal with and I am not sure that they require equal time in the curriculum. I think music is a well-established art form over centuries and certainly well established in the Australian and Victorian contexts in school curricula, and there is specialised knowledge about that and specialist teaching that needs to be preserved and indeed expanded. We should not be going along with the notion that they all require equal time every year. I am not even sure that primary schools and indeed even secondary schools are going to be in the position to do that.

Prof. COMTE — In the early childhood years certainly children need to do music and they need to do movement or dance. I think that is essential. So in terms of performing arts, they are the two art forms that I really support strongly. But as children get older there are various developmental considerations, and more and more they can engage in role play. There can be a coming together, in some sense, of the arts. But music is still a unique art form in itself, and it entails singing and many other activities. Children learn so much else just through singing activities and singing games. One of the best ways to learn an instrument is to make sure that kids can sing too. I take Carl’s point that, for example, drama can wait a bit later in terms of formal tuition, but if there was a drama person sitting behind me now, I perhaps would not say that quite so strongly. But that really is the problem. With music you need to start early and you need to start young. I also think with dance you need to start early and young. Having sat on the board of the Australian Ballet School for many years, I know if children had not started ballet by the age of five or six, the chances of them ever becoming a dancer were very, very slim.

The CHAIR — You mentioned earlier the conflict of putting arts up against each other in terms of competing needs and all the rest of it. Do you see the opportunity for a model that actually has more of a cooperative approach — that you can be teaching a number of these things collectively in a setting?

Prof. COMTE — Yes, I had not come along to discuss that, but I am very happy that you have raised it, because in 1978 I designed a graduate diploma in the visual and performing arts. In those days we had to get it accredited by the education department, and it was one of the graduate diploma courses that made teachers eligible for promotion. My argument was that we have primary school teachers who will never be music specialists, dance specialists or visual arts specialists, but maybe in a two-year part-time course or one-year full-time course we can give them enough skills in music, dance, drama and visual art that they can conduct a generalist-type program, a sequential program, at any grade level, P–6, in the primary schools. It was taken off the books only a few years ago. Yes, it did work, but at all times when I argued that and when we finally put it into place, I also acknowledged the need for specialist teaching in music in parallel with it for kids who want to learn instruments and so on.

Mr STEVENS — To add to that, yes, I think that is a way of trying to accommodate not only the various art forms but other key learning areas. There are ways you can, for example, learn or develop literacy through, say, media or music. There are clever ways of doing that.

Some of this whole-of-curriculum programming advice that I am mentioning that the VCAA can offer to schools should be able to detail exemplars of programming that will do that. Primary schools are pretty good at pulling this type of thing together. Obviously in secondary schools you have a situation where it is a much more subject-oriented approach and the divisions between the different learning areas are more clear-cut. That is not necessarily the case and should not be the case in primary school. There are opportunities for some levels of integration of the different learning areas to mutual benefit.

Ms MILLER — Just following on from your comment before, when and why was it stopped?

Prof. COMTE — The teachers colleges stopped being part of the education department in about 1975. We became the state college system, then we became autonomous and we all became universities and so on, and so teachers did not need to do that sort of thing for promotion. In the 70s and 80s they needed to
have an extra string to their bow, as it were. But it worked very successfully, and teachers were able to do it. It went on for many, many years. It did not apply to the secondary level, although we did have some secondary teachers do it, because that is quite a different thing again when students are doing specific subjects.

Ms MILLER — That is sort of my next question. Looking at the secondary sector in government schools, what quality and availability do you have of access to music programs?

Prof. COMTE — In my experience, again from triennial school reviews, there is very little that happens. Often you will find in a school in semester one in Year 7 the children will do music and in semester two they will do drama. In Year 8 in semester one they will do visual art and maybe some sort of elective in semester two in Year 8. In some schools it is limited to that. They may be lucky enough to get one or two semesters of music, and it is a generalist course. Complicating it then is the fact that by that stage some children are learning instruments, and so they are ahead of the other kids in terms of musical knowledge and so on, and often for them it can be a very boring class to have to sit through. It again comes back to the need to consider instrumental instruction, teaching and learning, and also the needs of generalist music for the teacher and the student.

Mr STEVENS — That is an important point that Martin has just raised about the junior secondary years, Years 7 and 8 in particular. It is not just in the art forms where there is often token attention or one semester of each of the four or five art areas; it happens in languages, too. You do ‘try before you buy’ French, German and Japanese, and then you pick it up. The same problem arises, which is that you have a rather token effort, and then you only really get down to it in any depth as an elective in, say, Years 9 or 10. But at the generalist level in some schools it is not a very in-depth development of music education at all.

The CHAIR — You mentioned parent contributions to assist with instrument music tuition. What are your thoughts about that contribution potentially being a barrier to students taking up music?

Mr STEVENS — It can be. Clearly parents make a significant contribution now for extracurricular music tuition in many schools, and in that situation certain schools in certain socioeconomic areas are going to have more capacity to ask parents to pay fees for private lessons than other schools. By and large, in the schools that have a strong instrumental, vocal and ensemble music program, parents make contributions not only in financial terms but often through support, for example, for the music society. A group of parents get together and they organise concerts, fundraise and all that type of thing. That is very useful, and it is a good way to get parents involved in the education program in the school.

But some schools are very well placed for that, and they tend to be high-fee schools or schools in higher socioeconomic areas. Other schools are not so well off. Sometimes you get the mutual disadvantage, or the additional disadvantage, that the classroom program is not particularly strong and the extracurricular program is not strong either, because there is not a great capacity to attract fees.

The CHAIR — Would you argue that this type of approach would better suit, say, the secondary level? Once you have young people in music programs, interested and engaged, then the level where they are looking at concerts and other additional support is where the parent contribution may come in?

Mr STEVENS — At secondary?

The CHAIR — Yes.

Mr STEVENS — I do not see why it should not also occur at primary. Parents I think would be very willing to provide support. They may not be able to provide support financially, but they would be able to provide time.

Prof. COMTE — It goes back to your very first question today in terms of access. There are some parents who, with the best of intentions, could not support it — they simply cannot afford it. They are living in the western suburbs, both parents are working or maybe there is only one parent. The second part
of that then is the whole notion of culture. I just finished last year reviewing the music department at one of our exclusive private schools, and they can do anything. They can buy anything. They can buy any sorts of instruments. It is part of the culture. The parents went to that school in many cases and so on. But if we are talking about getting to parents in government schools and talking them into doing it when we cannot even get enough teachers to teach music, it is a non-issue as far as I am concerned. It will just not happen.

The CHAIR — Is there anything that we have not covered that you wanted to make mention of before we conclude?

Prof. COMTE — I did say in my individual submission that I have been looking at and involved in making submissions for the last 40 years. I chaired the committee for music for the Australia Council and the Schools Commission in the 1970s. Nothing much has ever happened. I wish you all the best, and I hope that this is a first where we really see some positive changes in terms of music education in schools.

The CHAIR — So do we. Thank you very much for coming along and for your contribution and submission.

Mr STEVENS — Thank you, and we appreciate the time you have given us.

Witnesses withdrew.