EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

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

Red Cliffs — 2 May 2013

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Witnesses

Mr A. Adams, Parent,
Ms C. Browne, Parent,
Mr G. Collins, Parent, and
Ms P. Hill, Parent.
The CHAIR — I want to thank you for coming and appearing before the committee today. I know that all this sort of stuff can seem a little daunting, but it really is a conversation that we want to have with you to find out your views on what is going on at the school, music in general and how we can improve music in our schools.

There are a couple of quick things to point out. These microphones are recording for Hansard. We make a transcript of today to assist our ability in gathering information. You will have the opportunity to review that and make corrections. Also, I have to point out that the information you give is covered by parliamentary privilege, which is the same privilege that members of Parliament enjoy, so you can say whatever you like and do not have to worry about anything. However, that applies only to what is said in the hearing proper.

We might kick off. I am conscious that we may have other parents join us as well, which is fine. Firstly, how important do you believe it is for your children to receive music education as part of their schooling, and how has music benefited your child?

Ms BROWNE — I will start. I am a mum of two. I have a 16-year-old and an 18-year-old, who you actually just met. They were both in here. I am not a musical person at all. I play the stereo. That is my limit on things. For me, to have the children learn music, which is something they enjoy, I needed somewhere for them to learn, and school has provided a great base for that because they have had the theory education and the chance to do the instrument of their choice. They have been able to try different instruments. My son now plays something like six or seven instruments because he has had a chance to try them. We have done private lessons, but they are expensive, so in school we have been able to afford to keep the private lessons going but also widen that and allow him to choose other instruments to try and to see where his passion really lies.

Mr COLLINS — My son started high school this year. He is in Year 7. He really had not shown any interest in music at all, and this year in a class they got out some instruments and let the students have a fiddle, and he made a beeline for a French horn — and surprise, surprise! He plays with the band. His maths was pretty reasonable in primary school, and this year I would say that it is exponential. In his maturity you just notice that change. It is the discipline or whatever that music gives. You do notice a change.

The CHAIR — Would you put that down to his music as part of the discipline and learning?

Mr COLLINS — Yes. After reading a couple of articles from Richard Gill, this sort of fits in. He is also learning to fly gliders, and that discipline could be contributing as well, but he is taking it to like a duck to water. As Cheryl said, it is very cost-effective. We are paying $75, and privately that would pay for one lesson, probably. I do not know, but that is for one year. It is giving benefits to his education — not just to music, but his overall education — and his attitude to what he is doing.

Ms BROWNE — Life skills; that is what I call them.

Mr COLLINS — Life skills, yes, and all of that.

The CHAIR — Did you choose the school because of the music program?

Ms BROWNE — We live in Red Cliffs.

Mr COLLINS — Exactly. We live in Red Cliffs.

Ms HILL — I live in Red Cliffs as well, so my four children have come here. Two of the boys started with the drums, and then they got to Year 10, I think, and gave it away, but my third boy is playing saxophone and going all the way through. I have to agree with what Cheryl and Gerry have said — that music gives you that discipline. I suppose you really have to think, especially with notes, about where they all go and to fit them all in and to play. That really gets you to think, and that probably flows on with other subjects. My son is working very hard at everything he is doing. You can play an instrument on your own,
but here we have a school band, and they play with others. You have to listen to what everybody else is doing, and you have to listen to the instructor.

Ms BROWNE — For team building.

Ms HILL — Yes, it is a team building thing too.

The CHAIR — Adrian, how are you going?

Mr ADAMS — Good.

The CHAIR — We were asking the others: how important do you believe music is for your child as part of their education and schooling, and how has it benefited them in their overall schooling?

Mr ADAMS — Certainly. My daughter is in Year 8. She has had private music lessons since she was a youngster. It started with piano. Coming into Red Cliffs Secondary College she was most attracted to the music program because she got the opportunity to do something different rather than just play the piano and keep going with that, because she was after the next challenge. We moved back here a few years ago; just picking up on what you said earlier — ‘Why Red Cliffs?’ When we moved back to the Mildura area we chose a place out here so the kids could be involved in and exposed to the music program. It is quite an important thing for us. We have two more who are still going to come through and do the same program.

My daughter has picked up saxophone, just with the basic skills. She just basically had to learn where to put the fingers, and away she went, and had the opportunity in the school band as a younger member of the team, I guess. Also out of that what is important is, from my perspective, the people behind the music program, not just the music program. Obviously Donald Mayne is involved in a lot of outside activities, which my daughter is attracted to as well — theatre groups and things like that — and to have the opportunity to use those skills with a constant presence certainly enhances the experience.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Adrian. We will quickly go around. Is there any family background in music? For you, Adrian?

Mr ADAMS — It skipped a generation with me, but my mother is a music teacher.

Ms BROWNE — No.

The CHAIR — Nothing? Gerry?

Mr COLLINS — I play the guitar, badly, but my brother is very musical — pretty much.

The CHAIR — Patricia?

Ms HILL — I play the guitar and sing and my husband did play euphonium, and there was some other instrument which I cannot remember at the moment. But yes, there is music.

Ms TIERNEY — The committee has heard repeatedly that instrumental music tuition, classes or lessons can be quite expensive for parents. Is that reflected in your experience? And what types of costs are parents up for?

Ms HILL — Up-front we did have to pay X amount of money, but compared to if my child was doing out-of-school, I would say he would not do it because it would have been too expensive, because he has been doing it for six years now. In the big picture or big scheme of things, no, it is very cheap, doing it through the school.

Mr COLLINS — I have no idea what the cost is privately, but as I said before, $75 for a whole year to learn an instrument, compared to whatever — I would say you would be paying — —
Ms BROWNE — I was paying $25 for half an hour for each of my children to do one instrument per week, so there was $50 straight out there. They both wanted to do a second instrument, which would not have been possible. Once I got those big lesson fees I soon found out there was an exam fee, which also resulted in — what is the person called who accompanies them? — an accompanist fee. They just sort of keep growing. Then, of course, there is the music and the instrument itself: One of the great things about being at the school is they can try an instrument for a short time, and if they do not like it, they can swap and choose something else, without having to go out and purchase an instrument. They are very costly.

Mr ADAMS — The cost factor definitely makes it affordable, especially with multiple children, and the exposure, I guess. I have a young family. Having cheaper music tuition through the high school as part of the curriculum has enabled me to put the younger one up to the next level.

Mr COLLINS — Just adding to that, the quality of teaching and the rapport the teachers have with the kids to get them engaged is second to none. I mean, you know that from the way they come home and the way they verbalise their time with their teachers. It is pretty amazing. It is fantastic, and it is a total credit to the dedication of those teaching staff as well as the kids.

Ms BROWNE — And there is the willingness to do it at lunchtime and after school and go out into the community to perform when their friends are out at parties or doing other things as well.

Mr COLLINS — Yes, he goes out of the class to do it so he makes up for that time that he misses in that subject. But the benefits are there, there is no doubt about it; he catches up easily.

Mr ADAMS — Can I also add to that? In my situation without the subsidised music program throughout the school, my third child would not be doing music lessons today.

The CHAIR — Right. Thank you.

Mr CRISP — Looking at musical opportunities in rural Victoria, do you think there are enough opportunities for young people in the Mildura region to be actively involved in music and attend musical performances, and if not what opportunities would you like to see available?

Ms BROWNE — My children are quite involved. My daughter recently joined Mildura orchestra as part of Fling, which is a string and flute ensemble, so she has those opportunities. We have the eisteddfods, we have Red Hot Jazz, which was a school-based thing here last year. So there are opportunities there, but I do not think for a performer there are ever enough.

Ms HILL — No.

Mr COLLINS — There are community events like Lunafest and the show where kids can perform. There is the Mildura Brass Band, which is another opportunity.

Ms BROWNE — That is another one.

Mr COLLINS — The Beat is another one, and there is the gang show that they do; that is an opportunity for kids. There are quite a few. I suppose beyond that, at a professional level, I guess there is not a real lot, is there, in the way of — —

Ms BROWNE — Not that I am aware of.

Mr COLLINS — Not that I am aware of, no.

Ms MILLER — The committee has heard that parents play an important role in supporting music programs in schools — for example, transporting children to extracurricular music activities and fundraising. My question is: could you provide the committee with an overview of what is involved for you as parents in supporting your child’s interest in music?
Ms BROWNE — Funding, lots of money, lots of transport. They have their set work that they do with their teachers and their different groups and things. But my daughter is fascinated with *Glee*, so it is going out and getting her some music from *Glee* that she can perform as well. There is also the run to music camps. We travel long distances. My daughter attended a Geelong music camp last Christmas. They had no idea that we were coming from $6\frac{1}{2}$ hours away just to attend the event. So being available to do that — my husband drove her down and had to spend a night at accommodation at one end and at the other end when he was picking her up — just being available to do that. It is also going along, watching them, just supporting them and cheering them on.

Ms HILL — For me music is just so important. If you are singing or playing an instrument, you get so much out of it, but you also give many other people so much pleasure. My third son was going to stop playing the saxophone in Year 10, and if anything it was me saying, ‘No, come on. You’re doing really well out of it, and you get some enjoyment’ and all that sort of thing. He kept on going, so that is good. But I suppose, yes, I keep on giving him that — —

Ms BROWNE — Encouragement.

Ms HILL — Yes, encouragement. But I think music does so much for people — for everybody. It’s important.

The CHAIR — Just a final one, is there anything you think we could be doing — and everyone says money and more money — but leaving that aside for a moment, is there anything specific that government or schools could be doing better to ensure that kids have more access to programs? And at what level might that be? Secondary? Primary?

Ms BROWNE — I am a primary teacher; I am not trained in anything musical. If I had the basics through college — I do not know whether you can do a unit of work or that sort of thing — I could start with the basics and get a love for music happening so that by the time they get to high school age they have that willingness and eagerness to do it. David found it himself, but some kids do not, and if they are not exposed to music at a younger age, it just does not happen.

The CHAIR — Great.

Mr COLLINS — I do not know if it is relevant, but kids who are doing an instrument at school now go out as an elective. So they are going out of class for it as an elective and then have to catch up. That may work for some but some may struggle. I am not sure what the figures are there, but I guess in the way of funding, if you are talking money, instead of it being an elective, it should be a subject.

Ms HILL — Yes.

Ms BROWNE — A core subject.

Mr COLLINS — A core subject.

Ms HILL — Yes, I think some kids do not do music because they then think, ‘Well, if I’m out of class, I’m going to have to catch up with all these other things’, and maybe they feel they would not be able to do that. So then they say, ‘No, I won’t do music’.

Mr ADAMS — But it is also an option. I am not disagreeing with your thoughts, but music is an option that a lot of parents do not push on to the kids but encourage. It is no different to a sporting group or something else; it comes back to the parents’ interests. If you could encourage the kids through the system at a younger age — I do not know how — to get them involved, by the time they get to high school, specifically at Red Cliffs, they would then have the opportunity for that one-on-one lesson. They have the basics so that they can step into a band as junior members instead of coming along and being, in some cases, six years behind the kid who stands next to them.
Ms MILLER — Cheryl, you mentioned that you were a primary school teacher. If you had to put a number or a grade on when to introduce an instrument to a student, what age would you say?

Ms BROWNE — An instrument?

Ms MILLER — Yes.

Ms BROWNE — I do not know about an instrument, just music lessons. Drums I suppose — try drumming, and just the basics, get the beat; and singing.

Ms MILLER — What age?

Ms BROWNE — Prep.

Ms MILLER — Prep.

Ms BROWNE — Yes, I would start at that age. We still sing to the kids. Fortunately at that age they do not comment.

Mr COLLINS — In preschool they are quite active with songs and music.

Ms BROWNE — Definitely.

Mr COLLINS — Not so much as an instrument but as a fun activity.

Ms BROWNE — Just develop a love of music generally — in primary.

Mr COLLINS — I would just like to make the point I made before, and that is to say that I really think the benefits of music are not just in the music — it is there for sure — but it is how it extends into other areas of their lives and their learning.

Ms BROWNE — Their self-confidence across the board.

Mr COLLINS — Their self-confidence and their creativity. You think of the adults who are going to become creative adults. That is what the world needs. We do not need robots, people who pass exams and robots that can do the job; we need people to be creative and to come up with ideas. That is how our nation is going to strive ahead. Music can do that; it brings out the creative side of us. That is how important it is.

The CHAIR — That is a great place to finish up. I want to thank you very much for coming along today and sharing with us.

Mr COLLINS — Pleasure.

The CHAIR — Good luck in terms of where your kids go and what they do in particular. From what we have seen here today you seem to have chosen well in terms of the school they are at. Well done on that decision.

Mr COLLINS — Thank you for listening to us.

Witnesses withdrew.