EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne — 9 April 2013

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Mr J. Mullaly, Deputy President, Australian Education Union (Victoria Branch).
The CHAIR — Welcome, Justin. We will get straight into it. There are a couple of things to point out. Firstly, Hansard will record the hearing today and you will have the opportunity to review the transcript and correct any errors.

Secondly, I need to make you aware of the fact that the evidence you give today is covered by parliamentary privilege, which is the same privilege afforded to members of Parliament. That applies to the hearing itself and not to anything that is said outside the hearing.

We will give you the opportunity for a brief opening statement and then get straight into some questions that we have for you. Over to you.

Mr MULLALY — Can I start by acknowledging the work that the committee has done so far. The AEU certainly welcomes the opportunity to make a written submission and to follow that up by presenting to the committee today.

It goes without saying that from the union’s point of view music provision in all its forms — and I think we need to recognise that those forms are many and varied — we see as a critical part of the provision of an overall curriculum, a curriculum that educates the whole child, that does not seek to narrow the provision of that education.

To that extent I think that overall and when we reflect on the history of music provision in public education, that provision has been patchy. I think there have been some high-water marks. Those, I would suggest, have been in the too-distant past, and to that extent the work that you are seeking to do through this process is important perhaps to regain some of that momentum. But I think, and I happened to come in just as my colleagues from Deakin were presenting and one of them did make the point, that that goes for the Arts generally in many ways.

I guess in terms of the submission that we made and some of the key points that we identified, they go to the pointy-end issues: those of funding, those of supply. To that extent we see that any improvement to music provision would address those sorts of issues.

I think, critically as well, that in public education, in public schools, provision differs from primary to secondary, and that whilst there is a greater amount of funding available and therefore delivery of programs at the secondary level, you would probably get not too much disagreement with the statement that says it is critically important that there is a provision at the primary level which enables students to continue that music education into the secondary level.

I am happy, if the committee has questions, to perhaps tease some of those matters out in that fashion.

The CHAIR — Excellent, thank you. Your submission talks about schools often struggling to cope with music education within a crowded curriculum and some of the competing needs, if you like. Can you suggest how schools could balance music education in amongst that crowded curriculum?

Mr MULLALY — In some ways, and this is the point that we reiterated a number of times in our submission, there was a more recent phenomenon that has exacerbated the space available for music programs and provision, and that is arising out of the standardised testing processes that occur in schools. I think, in a broad sense, to address your question, that music is best placed, as with many other subject areas, as a way that supports what we might otherwise see as key skills and attainment levels that students need to get, and in the form of literacy and numeracy we can characterise them otherwise. What is critical is that music is seen as something that has its place in and of itself. It certainly has its place in supporting what we might otherwise see as the key needs that students have in their education. In that sense music has its place, but broadly it needs to be recognised as a means to support other things, notwithstanding the fact of course that it has its own need that needs to be recognised appropriately.

The CHAIR — Further to that, we have heard about the diminishing focus of music since, say, the 1980s in Victoria, and evidence that we have had already suggests that some of that may have been the fact that music has been encompassed within the Arts and not its own entity, with allowance for its own unit of
teaching. What would your views be about that in terms of where it actually sits? Should it be effectively refocused into its own unit of teaching? And that is linking back to the earlier question about that crowded curriculum.

Further to that, often when we are given the crowded curriculum, we can call it an excuse for not being potentially able to do some of this specific-type programming. If you refer to some of the private sector that has had some real success in music and managed to do that, are there lessons that we in the public sector could learn from the private sector?

Mr Mullaly — I think that, in part, a further overlay to your question is the fact that we do have a largely devolved public education system in Victoria, and in that sense, individual principals, with staff at the school, devise programs and determine the curriculum and its scope. Whilst we can look at the non-government sector in terms of how music provision is resourced and made available, we can equally look at some of the high watermarks in public schools. There are any number of public schools, particularly at the secondary level, that have highly sophisticated music programs. I notice that a number of schools that I would think fit that category made submissions to the committee and in that sense they have articulated the scope of that.

What sets them apart is a couple of things. The first is that there is a very strong view amongst the parent community that music education is critically important in and of itself, but also as a benefit in the overall education of the child. Therein lies an expectation with those parents that that type of education is made available. The way in which the funding arrangements currently stand, they have been able to draw that funding to reflect the size and the scope of those programs. That has not necessarily been available to other schools, particularly schools that may seek to establish programs.

The other overlay around this — and this goes back to the point I made in terms of schools determining their curriculum in the programs that they offer — is if principals find it difficult to actually get the right, qualified staff, then the decision is almost made for them. The further you get out of metropolitan Melbourne, of course, the greater the challenge is in that regard. In that sense a school may desire to offer a fully fledged music program. only to find that they cannot adequately staff it; therefore they are not able to offer it. In that sense, I think there is a complex number of reasons that make it more difficult. Part of it relates to your question about whether music sits as a stand-alone or as part of the Arts.

The Chair — Particularly at the primary level, as some people were reflecting earlier.

Mr Mullaly — In some ways that is best determined by the school because of what they think is best for the students of that school. Having said that, I do not think we necessarily need cleave off music as the only way in which you can then ensure music provision. It can be encompassed as part of a broader arts offering. It is just a question of the way in which you do that in that broader offering. I think you then immediately start coming back to those fundamental questions of funding and supply.

The Chair — If you look at some of our schools that start at ground zero, so there is absolutely no music whatsoever in those schools, and we have a starting preference where we would like to see every child have the ability to learn music as part of their program, and added to that is the research that is showing a literacy and numeracy benefit in having a music program as such, what would your suggestion be about encompassing that into schools? Obviously resourcing and what you just said is important in that regard, but how would you go about doing that?

Mr Mullaly — At the moment, when you reflect about how schools are funded in terms of primary music provision, in essence the money that is available comes through the student resource package. So that is, to put colloquially, the bucket of money, and then schools make a local decision about how to use that money in terms of the programs that are offered. Certainly there is a tendency — and it has been the case for the last little bit — to say to schools, ‘You have got that bucket; you determine’. What we see though, where programs need to be or are being established, is that having line funding provides the school with greater clarity around the way in which they might resource the establishment of those programs. That is critically important in a number of areas, including music provision.
When we look at secondary, especially instrumental music programs, there is, in effect, line funding that is managed out of the regions. In that sense that money is dedicated to those programs, and because it is dedicated to those programs, albeit augmented by other aspects of the SRP and indeed parental contribution, you actually then see those stand-alone programs being provided to students.

Ms TIERNEY — The AEU’s submission — and you have also reinforced this today — is that many schools just simply cannot run music programs because of shortages of specialist music teachers, or qualified staff. What strategies need to be put in place to make sure that we do have them, and what are the other enticements or other ideas for having specialist music teachers going out to rural and regional areas?

Mr MULLALY — In some ways there is a tendency to often focus on pre-service education. Pre-service education is essential, particularly at the primary level, to ensure that our student teachers are being offered the kind of experience that will enable them to provide music in the classroom at that level. But what I think is critical is the capacity for teachers to go back, during the course of their careers, particularly early in their careers, and get access to courses that would provide them with greater skills in order to have that generalist music experience in their classroom.

To that extent, I think it is a question of professional development, and it is a question really about making that available in a wholesome way, which at the moment it simply is not. It is only where a school has a predisposition to encourage staff to take up that kind of professional development that it occurs. There is an opportunity there in pre-service for there to be broader things. The fundamental challenge of pre-service is the fundamental challenge in schools — that they are crowded, too, and there are other priorities. That is why I think we can overemphasise pre-service and we can look at the opportunities that teachers have once they are actually in the classroom to develop their skills.

In terms of the last part of your question, regional and rural, there is no doubt in my mind that we need to provide overt incentives to teachers, particularly at the secondary level and particularly with regard to instrumental music programs, to encourage people to get out of the metro area.

There are a couple of ways in which we can do that that do not necessarily need additional funding per se. As our submission points out, instrumental music teachers and instrumental musical instructors are probably the most precariously employed people in our schools, save for education support staff. They often work across multiple locations. They often do not get access to ongoing employment, which is the standard mode of employment in our schools, and to that extent the attractiveness of working in government schools is simply not there, perhaps compared to non-government schools where there is a greater capacity to offer security in employment, often in the one school.

The other side of that, in terms of the security of employment and those sorts of arrangements, and it goes to the question of supply, is that the AEU sees very clearly that it is appropriate for teachers to be properly registered with the Victorian Institute of Teaching.

Part of the supply issue is that there are simply not enough people with qualifications. Schools then make the decision that they will employ somebody who does not have the diploma of education qualification. Often those people are highly experienced instructors and are very capable, but in terms of having quality assurance, there is a need for us to encourage people to get that qualification. I do not think that is simply a matter of regulation, saying that these people should just get it. There must be inducements to get it. That would significantly improve the attractiveness of deciding to work in the Victorian government school system.

When you reflect on that, what the AEU wants, and what its members want is for Victorian government schools to be the system of choice. We want the best graduates because they are getting the best conditions for themselves, but perhaps as importantly, the best opportunity to provide high-quality music programs to their students.

Ms TIERNEY — That answer was very interesting, because obviously you would expect us to have received quite a few submissions and oral presentations in terms of the registration of instrument teachers and I suppose, given the shortage, but also given the fact that we have had evidence from people who have
been classically trained, have performed overseas, have lived overseas — you have heard it all before, I am sure, Justin — therefore their skills are not considered to be at a level that is internationally accepted in certain realms.

Where are we up to in that discussion in the debate about RPL? It may be a bit of RPL and a particular course that is not necessarily the full four years, and how do they manage to do that while they are also trying to feed their families?

**Mr Mullaly** — Absolutely, and I think that last point is critical because they are feeding their families, performing and ensuring that they are the expert musicians that they are, which is indeed the kind of person that you want providing specific music instruction to students. It is an important point.

I think it is fair to say that we have been frustrated that we have not been able to have the recognition of prior learning as an aspect of making instrumental music teaching or instruction attractive in our schools, and there is a mechanism that is available along those lines that we should look at.

I think critically, though, for us that whilst the subject area does bear quite a specific skill set, especially in terms of instrumental music provision and in teaching, that is not done in a vacuum. It is done in the context, as you would appreciate, of some very important pedagogical considerations that sit much more broadly. To that extent, when we talk about a qualified teacher we might be talking about a qualified teacher who teaches physics or bassoon or any other number of subjects. They do that in the context of having a full knowledge of pedagogy, the way students learn, the way to engage students and the way to assess students properly, that best suits with a full teacher qualification.

**Ms Miller** — I have two questions. One was, in part of your submission you indicated that a survey of principals was done and 20% of them identified that they could not run a music program. How many schools were part of that survey and were they public and/or private or independent?

**Mr Mullaly** — We conduct a survey on an annual basis with our principal members. We have a principal membership which represents over two-thirds of principals in Victorian government schools, so it is a comprehensive survey. To that extent, given one in five have indicated that they cannot provide for a program, the reasons are probably varied, some of which I will probably traverse today, but I suspect that funding and supply are the key issues. I think what that figure does not speak to is the proportion of schools that do not provide a program in the way they would like to be able to provide a program to students.

**Ms Miller** — Is that primary and secondary?

**Mr Mullaly** — Primary and secondary.

**Ms Miller** — Great. My next question is, could you elaborate on the current arrangements in instrumental music teaching and explain how the Western Australian model could help overcome these issues?

**Mr Mullaly** — The Western Australia model is interesting. It is in response to a situation that is not dissimilar to the one that we currently find ourselves in. I said before, when people are employed as an instrumental music teacher they often work across multiple locations, which on one level is entirely reasonable given that the provision of particular instruments is unlikely to be concentrated enough in one school to require that employment in that school.

What they did in WA was to look at a model which, in effect, saw the funding and the allocation of staffing in a central way, which also then enabled them to have quite sophisticated means to provide professional development to those teachers because you had one single base employer, for want of a better way of phrasing it.
They were also, because they had that concentration, if you like, able to develop with individual schools — and I believe it is a service that they offer the schools — curriculum development. I think that that is particularly important at the primary level where you have that classroom-based music program.

One of the challenges that we face here is around the employment of people. To explain, the basic model is that an instrumental music teacher is employed by a single school, that they then would have time for actions at other schools, but the management of their employment, including performance and development processes and access to PD, is managed by that base school. They may only be in that base school one day a week and indeed, typically, they are in classrooms with kids for that entire day. They are then at these other locations.

What often happens is that the capacity for those individual teachers to get access to professional development, to get access to performance and development processes that enrich and improve their teaching, is simply not there in many cases. There are some outstanding examples where it is, but I would not characterise that as being widespread. The WA model provides a much more wholesome way to approach those two things in terms of teacher development.

Mr ELASMAR — Justin, are you happy with how the funding for the instrumental music program is currently allocated to schools? Are there any changes you would like to see made to the current funding model?

Mr MULLALY — In terms of the primary level, given that it is a general allocation through the SRP I think that if we are genuinely serious about having enhanced music provision, then we must be prepared to directly fund that. Schools will always — as I know a number of submissions to this committee have identified — augment that with additional funding, but if we are serious about encouraging schools to have fully fledged programs, then there needs to be dedicated funding to enable that to happen.

I think at the secondary level the current funding arrangement, which is easier to describe on one level, is that regions are allocated a bucket. Schools then approach the region and say, ‘We offer a program to students of X, Y or Z type’, and then those moneys are allocated. That works well where schools have well-established programs, and they have in many cases drawn student enrolments based on those sorts of programs; it does not necessarily advantage those schools that are seeking to establish programs or indeed those schools that do not have them.

One of the things that we would be very wary of is a move away from that to a more broadband application of that funding, because what you will only do is withdraw the critical resources from those very sophisticated programs and probably not provide enough resources across the board for rich programs to operate anywhere. So I think in some ways a fully-fledged instrumental music program at the secondary level could only be achieved by expanding the funding available to schools. Indeed it is not uncommon. We saw this in a completely unrelated field when the government established VCAL, and money was available for schools to establish that program. I think there is a logic to doing that in order to encourage schools to get going.

The CHAIR — We have concluded our questions. Thank you for coming to present today and for your submission to the committee as well. Good luck with the rest of your work.

Mr MULLALY — Indeed. There is plenty of it at the moment.

The CHAIR — Thank you.

Mr MULLALY — Thank you.

Witness withdrew.