

Parliament of Victoria

Inquiry into the Extent, Benefits and Potential of Music Education in Victorian Schools

Submission from Justin Lamond and Helen Fraser

Background to Submission

We are the parents of a gifted young musician (aged 13 – Year 8 in 2013) who plays the French Horn. Our son is a student at Blackburn High School – the high quality of the music program and commitment to musical excellence were the motivating factors in our son attending this school. We are very fortunate that such a high quality musical education option exists in our local neighbourhood. Whilst still in primary school he was able to take part and be made welcome in the Blackburn High School music ensemble programs. This experience confirmed our view that we had made the right choice for our son as we could see the benefits to the school's music students of the motivation and the maturity that involvement in the program gave them.

Terms of Reference to be addressed

We are choosing to address the following terms of reference:

- (7) the extent and quality of music education provision in Victorian schools:
- (9) optimum use of targeted funding.

(7) Extent and quality of music education provision in Victorian schools

Our son started learning his instrument whilst he was in primary school – this education and his motivation occurred completely outside the school environment – the music education in his systemic Catholic primary school was completely deficient in any sort of serious encouragement to pursue the subject further.

The pursuit of an excellent music education was a key factor in the choice of a secondary school for our son. We looked for a school where he would be able to seriously pursue his musical passion and be motivated by being immersed in a high quality musical environment. Private school education (except through a musical scholarship) was not a financial option for our family, and though these schools make much of their music programs we were very much aware that in most of these schools, music was at the margin of their interests and not taken as seriously as their publicity material would have many parents believe – in fact we were warned by a music teacher at an APS school that “if your son is serious about his music don't send him here”. This same school makes much of their music program in their marketing material.

We considered systemic Catholic boys and co-educational schools for our son's secondary school education. Investigation and attendance at events such as concerts and musical performances confirmed our suspicions that the quality of musical education at these schools was mediocre.

The high quality musical education that our son receives at Blackburn High School is only able to occur because of the concentration of musical resources that are available. The school has a range of musical ensembles (seven wind bands; symphony orchestra; three string ensembles; choirs; rock bands; and various instrument-specific and chamber ensembles) which can only occur and excel because the school is able to employ a large number of teachers who are specialists in their particular instrument. The result is a depth of musical experience that attracts music teachers to the school and attracts students from far outside the local area.

This musical excellence can only occur because there is a long-standing musical focus at the school which has been sustained through specific funding of the music program – only this specific funding can ensure the continuance of this depth and breadth. The depth of music program has been built up over many years and would be near impossible to replicate should it be broken down or broken up. This concentration of musical resources allows students at an early age to know what musical excellence is – they can see, they can hear, they can aspire, and they know that it is within their reach as they have the most stimulating environment for their talents to reach fruition. Many of these high-achieving musical students learn and play several musical instruments from a range of disparate musical types – strings and brass, percussion and woodwind – because they know they have access to the best teachers across a range of musical genres.

The contrast can be seen in musical performance – at a school that can provide the musical education depth such as Blackburn High, concerts are a highlight – there is great excitement from students, teachers and parents at the quality of performance they can achieve and the pride of all (especially the students and their music teachers) is manifest for all to see.

Summary

There is a role for 'centres of excellence' in music education such as Blackburn High School within the Victorian High School system. Only through providing adequate resources to maintain and develop the depth and breadth of music education will excellence and high quality education occur. Schools such as these will attract students who are highly motivated to excel in music. The alternative is a system where music education resources are thinly spread and there is no opportunity for music education to be nurtured and reach its full potential. This will lead inevitably to a mediocrity in music education and performance that will lead to both teachers and students becoming dispirited and music education withering. Students will be denied the opportunity to learn about and be exposed to fine music.

(7) Optimum use of targeted funding

The music education benefits of concentrating a broad range of high quality musical resources in specified high schools has been outlined under the response to Term of Reference (7) above. High quality music education is dependent on there being a critical mass of music teaching resources in a single location. Only with this critical mass available will there be the opportunities to form a range of musical ensembles – bands, orchestras, etc – that are dependent on a broad range of instruments. These instruments need to be taught and our experience through an exposure to a high quality

music education program is that students are willing to learn more obscure instruments if they have the opportunity and the teaching resources provided. Schools that provide such a specialised educational niche do not only draw from their immediate area but from a wider geographic area. The students who come to these specialist schools from afar are to be congratulated for being motivated to grasp the opportunity to learn.

High quality and depth of music teaching can only occur if there is targeted funding that provides for this concentration of specialisation. We believe that it is vitally important that 'centres of excellence' such as Blackburn High School be given continued targeted funding that can maintain specialist teaching. This approach requires continued encouragement from the highest levels of government and the Education Department. There is a place for music education in all schools but the alternative to the richness and depth offered through the Blackburn High School music program is for the resource allocation, teaching and student talent to be spread very thinly to the point where none are sufficiently stimulated and none achieve excellence – twenty specialist music teachers spread across twenty schools will not be able to achieve high standards of musical outcomes compared to the same twenty specialists concentrated in one location and maintained by a targeted funding stream that is outside general school funding.

Summary

Optimum musical education outcomes can only be achieved through targeted funding that allows for a range and depth of musical education to be provided in specialist music education programs such as that provided at Blackburn High School. Programs such as this exist at several schools, it is important that they be maintained as once lost through funding reduction they will be extremely difficult or impossible to reconstruct.