

# **Submission to the Inquiry into the extent, benefits and potential of music education in Victorian Schools**

## ***Wangaratta West Primary School***

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**Principal:** Joan Sibley

The music program at Wangaratta West Primary School is highly regarded and valued by students, staff, parents and the wider community. The program is fully supported by the school's leadership and attracts significant enrolments to the school each year. Music holds an elevated status in the school and this status represents the value the school places on quality music education for all students. Music at our school crosses social and cultural barriers. It has demonstrated the positive effects of music on connectedness and engagement. Students at Wangaratta West enjoy learning music because it instils within them a sense of belonging, cooperation and confidence as they make music together.

### **What does the program look like?**

- Each grade receives an hour music lesson each week. The 7 year program is continuous and sequential, and developed around instilling an understanding of the elements of music, reading, writing and interpreting music notation, developing musicality through singing and instrumental playing, composing (individual and group work), using music technology, listening and appreciation of different styles of music, and exploring the historical and cultural aspects of music. Teaching approaches include Orff and Kodaly but not exclusively. African percussion and keyboard percussion are a priority.
- Choir Program – The School has two choirs; middle school and senior school. There is no audition process for the participation in the school choirs. Any student who wants to sing can join in. Over the 4 years that a student may remain in the choir program they will develop their pitch accuracy, tone, and unison and part singing (extending beyond rounds to 2 and 3 part harmony). Each choir practises for between 40mins to 1 hour each week during class time. Smaller vocal groups are formed out of the senior choir and practise for shorter periods of time often after the designated choir practise session.
- Senior Percussion Group – This group is made up of grade 5-6 students who have demonstrated proficiency in basic music reading and instrumental technique in the class music program. At its largest the group will cater for 20 students. The group practises for an hour each week during class time. Students play keyboard percussion, auxiliary percussion, novelty percussion and drums (mainly djembe) with a particular focus on world rhythms.
- African Drumming Program – The school runs an extensive African drumming program with junior, intermediate and senior groups. All students participate in drum circles and learn basic drumming techniques as part of the class music program. The junior and intermediate drumming groups are a developmental program to feed students into the senior group. The students who participate in

these groups are selected through an audition process. The senior drum group, known as West Beat, performs and runs drum circle workshops for local community organisations and events. The junior group practises during class time for 30 mins, and the intermediate and senior groups practise at lunchtime once a week.

- Partnerships with community - In 2010 West Beat formed a partnership with the Northeast Neuro Support Group to assist adult clients in their rehabilitation for brain injury. Students are partnered with an adult client; assisting them to participate in rhythm activities and helping them learn traditional African drumming pieces. The partnership is hugely successful, benefitting both clients and students. Recently we performed at the 7<sup>th</sup> World Congress for Neuro-rehabilitation. The program is known as 'Heartbeat' and runs for six weeks each term of the school year.
- Given the priority that our school places on music education we do not want to make students choose between their playtime and extra music activities. This is why all performance groups practise, with the exception of the senior and intermediate drum groups, during class time. Participating in music performance groups is seen as a benefit not a disadvantage. These practise times occur in the afternoon of each day when targeted literacy and numeracy lessons are not being taught. Some of the students in the senior drum group who often also participate in the senior choir and percussion group can receive up to 4 ½ hours of contact music time during school each week.
- Performance opportunities – All students perform throughout the year. We hold a biannual school production which is heavily based in music and involves all students. All performance groups perform regularly at school assemblies and functions, and in the wider community. Each year a recital is held to showcase solo instrumentalists and our percussion and drum groups. The senior drum group also hosts family drumming nights, and performs extensively in our local community and beyond.
- The entire music program is coordinated and taught by the school's specialist music teacher who received a National award for excellence in School Music Education in 2010. A piano and violin teacher provides private lessons for interested students. Some of these lessons occur during class time. Classroom teachers are involved in music professional development sessions a few times throughout the year. Classroom teachers have begun to use some of these activities in their classes. Classroom teachers support the program by releasing students to participate in the extra performance groups and opportunities that the music program provides.

**Factors affecting the quality of music education at Wangaratta West:**

- An experienced and passionate music teacher, who looks for new opportunities, develops new initiatives, continues to learn and has high expectations.
- A clear music vision of what we want to achieve and how we will go about it.
- A school leadership who strongly supports the music program and strongly advocates the benefits that quality music education has for all students.
- A school community that values music education and their children's participation in it.

- Seeking funding through grants and developing a selection of high quality resources, particularly high quality instruments.
- Creating effective partnerships within the local community.
- Creating opportunities for students to engage directly with professional musicians, singers and performers through quality music workshops.
- The creation of a strong music and performance culture within the school, established over many years.

#### **Facilities and Support:**

- The school has a purpose built music room which is connected to the hall creating a larger performance space.
- Our resources are exceptional, made available through prizes and grants. In 2004 we won a baby grand piano in the ABC Classic FM Grab the Goanna competition and in 2011 received \$100,000.00 as part of the State Government's specialist schools grant program. This money has enabled us to develop our partnership programs, provide workshops with professional musicians and performers, upgrade our audio-visual system and developed an integrated music technology program using 20 iPads. Previous to the injection of this funding the music program was funded through the provision of approximately \$2000 a year through the school budget. Any extra money or resources came through competition prizes and community donations.

#### **Professional Development:**

It is a disadvantage being in the country. Most PD is available in the city or larger regional centres. Access to information about music PD is limited if you are not a member of a professional music body like AMUSE, Orff Association, etc. I find that I have to arrange my own PD, often in the school holidays. I don't find all music PD helpful. I have become very specific about what I want to learn and experience and so I often source my own PD, e.g. one-on-one African Drumming sessions, and one-on-one sessions with a professional percussionist. I have found that making connections with professional musicians and performers is important. Connecting with other music teachers is also difficult in the country. Many country primary schools do not have specialist music teachers. When it is available, I find networking with other like-minded music teachers really useful for sharing ideas and discussing issues.

#### **Participation in external music programs:**

For the past 6 years we have had Oz Opera perform at our school. All students are involved in 5-6 weeks of preparation leading up to this performance. We have participated each year in the Music Count Us In initiative. We have never participated in the Song Room or Musica Viva programs. I would love our school to be involved in the MSO outreach program and the Victorian Opera Education Program but these programs cannot be accessed in rural areas. Visiting performers and musicians often cost us more because we have to pay for travel and accommodation, and likewise if we want to see shows in Melbourne we have the added cost of the bus. Musica Viva interests me, but often the group I would like to have at our school is not touring our area. It is a challenge to access quality, cost effective music experiences that are external to our school. I fully support accessing such programs and believe that they are crucial to complimenting a quality school music program, but funding and our rural demographic are an issue.

**Current funding arrangements for music education in Victorian schools:**

Funding for music education is an issue. A school's budget is managed according to individual school priorities and the essential need to employ classroom teachers first. Once class teachers are put in place, dependent upon student enrolments, specialist teachers can be negotiated. How a school chooses what specialist classes to run will depend on what the school values, expertise that is available and staffing dollars. The provision of music education is subject to such decision making. As far as I am aware there is no separate or targeted funding specifically for music education. It is simply that a school makes a choice to include it or not, and its status, quality, frequency and effectiveness can be questionable. The grant money that our school received (\$100,000.00 to be spent over 2011-2012) was a one-in-a-lifetime opportunity. 12 schools in Victoria received this funding based on applications made for any specialist area (it was not specifically for music). We made our application on the basis of our extensive existing music program. There have been numerous resources, opportunities and experiences that we have been able to access as a result of this funding, which otherwise would have been pie-in-the-sky dreams.

**Current extent and quality of music education in Victorian schools:**

I think that government primary schools, particularly in rural areas, suffer the most for the lack of quality music education programs. I have taught music at Wangaratta West for 11 years and during this time have been the director of the Wangaratta and District Schools Music Festival; an annual, non-competitive event inclusive of both primary and secondary schools in the region. The quality of performances from primary schools has, over the years, been low and clearly indicated the lack of a teacher or teachers with musical expertise. The most common performances from schools without a music teacher have been to sing along to a CD recording that is not even a backing track. Wangaratta West's performances have always been a stand out mainly because our students play instruments and play them well. The Festival has since folded due to venue issues and a lack of interest from regional schools.

The extent of music education in Victorian schools has to do with perception of value and the understanding of the importance of music education in a child's formative years. Without the recognition of the intrinsic good that music brings to education schools are not likely to place significant value on its inclusion in their curriculum. Funding is the other issue affecting the extent to which music education is available in Victorian schools.

The quality of music education is also an issue. Most classroom teachers lack experience in music and have the perception that they are not capable of teaching it. This shows up a glaring lack in pre-service training. Music specialists themselves can also lack training and expertise. Just because you play an instrument, e.g. guitar doesn't make you a great music teacher or capable of delivering a quality music program. There are resources available providing teachers with whole school, sequential music programs which are often written for teachers with little music experience. While the resources may be useful and well written, in the hands of a teacher with little or no experience they may be rendered ineffective.

A number of years ago I interviewed ten principals from schools in and around Wangaratta for a paper I wrote on “Music Education in the Wangaratta Region” as part of my Masters of School Leadership. All schools claimed, at the time, to run music programs even though most schools did not have a music teacher. All principals agreed that music education was important. They acknowledged the value it added to students of all ages and abilities, and believed that it could compliment the broader goals of education in their schools. Value, however, did not equal quality or even provision. The principals acknowledged that music was not taught well by classroom teachers. Even schools that claimed to include music as part of their school curriculum could not guarantee a consistency in quality from one classroom to the next. In fact, in many classrooms, music was not being taught at all. The principals identified six threats to their school’s music programs:

1. Global budget – staffing dollars and inability to fund specialist programs.
2. Government and department directives, conformance to system expectations.
3. Availability of good music teachers and a lack of expertise among classroom teachers.
4. Declining enrolments leading to a decline in resources.
5. Overcrowded curriculum.
6. Professional development in music is problematic. Relevant and local professional development opportunities are few.

They also identified four major factors that protected their school’s music program:

1. Valued highly by the school community and well supported by parents.
2. Expertise of the specialist teacher, their personality and creativity, and a flexible pedagogical approach.
3. Industrial agreements for approved planning time (APT).
4. Music must always be taught because it is a part of the Arts Key Learning Area and therefore schools must direct teaching toward it (this is questionable).

#### **Current status of music education in Victorian schools:**

*“Quality and status are interconnected. As quality is enhanced, status is raised”* (Seares, M 2005 – National Review of Schools Music Education: Augmenting the Diminished). While advocacy kits and extensive research is available to promote the benefits of music education unless perspective is changed the status of music education in Victorian schools will not be raised. We need to change our thinking about music, to redefine the cultural stereotype about what is considered to be ‘academic’. We need to consider the ‘good’ music brings to the educational experience; the ‘good’ it brings that no other learning experience can. This change of perspective needs to happen at a system level.

Music education is not just about the ‘show’ it can produce to promote a school or an education department. Nor is it about isolated ‘events’ that pitch it into the limelight every now and again. Music education is rich in its benefits for all students, cognitively and emotionally. *“I would teach children music, physics and philosophy; but more importantly music, for in the patterns of music and all the arts, are the keys to learning”* (Plato). Music enhances our cooperative learning skills. It helps to encourage group unity and social inclusion. Music helps children learn to listen. Passive listeners are not active thinkers.

When we are taught to listen for something we activate our brains to think in more complex ways. Effective listening increases our capacity to learn. Music is multi-sensory. Music appeals to our visual, auditory and kinaesthetic senses, thereby recognising that children learn in different ways. Music connects learning experiences to the real world. Music develops learning through multiple intelligences and extends children beyond the mainstream focus on logical-mathematical intelligences. When music education is viewed as 'essential curriculum' and a lifelong learning tool then significant change may take place in the provision of music education in government schools resulting in an elevated status in our schools.

**Recommendations for future consideration:**

1. Development of a targeted funding model that raises the profile of music education giving schools the capacity to employ specialist music teachers, access professional musicians and purchase quality resources.
2. Development of a music curriculum which outlines clear guidelines for what quality music education looks like and how it could be assessed.
3. Adequate pre-service training in music education for generalist teachers with the provision of ongoing professional development.
4. Access to quality professional development opportunities, particularly in the country areas.
5. Provide opportunities for students and teachers to engage with professional musicians in music making projects in schools, with increased access to country areas.
6. Access to live music experiences in metropolitan and country areas.
7. Improves access to small group and private instrumental tuition in primary schools.
8. Create learning and curriculum support networks with community organisations and local schools to develop resources, facilities, knowledge and policies.
9. Establish community partnerships for enrichment and access to resources.
10. Provision of suitable music facilities and resources.

**Comments:**

In 2009 Wangaratta West was chosen to participate in a research project which was led by the Melbourne School of Graduate Education, called *Primary Music Education in Victoria*. The aim of the project was to identify best practice in music education in Victorian Government Primary Schools and was funded by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. A number of music lessons were observed by the research team and I was interviewed about my teaching philosophy, practice and the development of our music resources. The research focussed on issues such as funding, professional development, and pedagogy. As far as I am aware this report was finalised and handed to the relevant governing bodies. To my knowledge nothing came of it. It may be worth enquiring about given that its terms of reference seem similar, in some respects, to this current inquiry.