

CORRECTED VERSION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

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

Blackburn High School — Thursday, 16 May 2013

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Witnesses

Mr Ross Irwin
Mr Andrew Woods
Mr Henrik Beasy, and
Ms Bethany Nette, former students, Blackburn High School

Ms MILLER — Good morning everyone. Thank you for coming and participating in our Education and Training Committee inquiry. Essentially what will be happening is we will be asking you some questions and you will be giving us some answers. That will be recorded in Hansard. Anything that you say will be subject to parliamentary privilege, so you can say whatever you like and it won't go any further. But, if you were to repeat that outside this environment then that would be a different scenario.

So, Hansard is recording everything that you say. The Principal will have a look at the version of Hansard and when the transcripts are presented, if there are any discrepancies there is an opportunity to right the wrong, if that were the case.

I would encourage you all, when we ask you a question, you can sort of jump in at any time. If you wouldn't mind stating your first name, so that we can have that recorded on Hansard. Is that all straightforward? Beautiful.

All right so my first question to the floor will be could you provide an overview of your experience learning music at Blackburn High School.

Mr IRWIN — I attended Blackburn for six years from Year 7. I came here for the music program as, you know, a young kid who was from a musical family and an environment where that was valued. I finished in 2000.

Look, basically, right from the word go — from the junior program right up to the senior program I felt here, being a school that's always had a good reputation for its music program, that's not over-estimated — I don't think, anyway. I think it's probably underestimated in some ways.

From the band program to the individual program to individual lessons, there's top-quality teachers here, there's a top-quality instrumental program. I really felt that there was an excellence here that even after leaving school I haven't seen in some ways in other environments that I've been in. I have to say, you know, it was a bit of a disappointment getting out there into the wider world after being here. But, I do think what I learnt here, and the standard that is expected and nurtured here in a positive way was something that was really important to me and really positive, you know. There's a great level — we all played in the ensembles and went out to eisteddfods and competitions and went in tours. It was as much about the teambuilding thing and the finding your own voice within that team as it was about reading the notes and reading the dots. So I felt like it was very comprehensive and it was consuming for me in a really wonderful way, educationally and personally.

Ms NETTE — I started at the school in Year 7. I went to the music expo that they hold here each year for the new Year 7s and I decided to pick up the trumpet. And, the journey that I had in this school was just amazing. Just being in the immersive specialist music environment allowed me to just grow personally and musically and then allowed me to pursue tertiary education at an international level.

I started as a regular student as in any school in Victoria with a music program. But being in a specialist school in the higher years, and being immersed in the rich musical culture, allowed me to grow much faster, and in the senior years I was able to develop into a tertiary level still at high school, and this prepared me and my peers for a great future ahead of us and gave me personally the confidence to not only audition in Victoria and like to get tertiary placement, but internationally as well.

So, the opportunities that have been available, not only at a general level but at a specialist level, allowed me to take my passion to that next high.

Mr WOODS — I came to Blackburn High School because it was a local school. I came from a

fairly musical primary school, Blackburn. Although I came to Blackburn just as a normal student, I was straight away put into the concert band. It was really good, the support that I got both from the teachers and from the other students. I made a lot of friends in different year levels, higher and lower, throughout my time. It was nice to be able to go through the year levels having that communication between other people, both in regards to academic help and musical help.

The teachers allow you to pursue individual music as well as group music so the ensembles you can do each week, and it's really nice to get there in an environment where you can in a way relax from all the academic studies, and it's a completely different thing that you're doing, which is fantastic, and I really enjoyed every part of that. I had Mr Hardie every single year for the band.

But, we can also go quite far in the individual music playing. So, I had my individually music teachers who put me through exams, and that was really good for my own personal achievement, feeling that I can start something and follow straight to finishing it. It was really, really good.

Mr BEASY — I started here in 2001, in Year 7. Just like Ross, I came from a really musical family. All of the men in my family play trumpet and so I started that from the age of eight or something. So, I came here following the music as well. And, you know, I wouldn't have been anywhere else. Music for me is a passion, and I do it every day of the week — even now.

I think the biggest thing I noticed that was in the music department here was the cross age mentoring and nurturing and that culture between the students. And, we have great staff here; no one can dispute that. But, the fact that you can have Year 12s and Year 7s mixing so comfortably, and the Year 12s nurturing those youngsters from the moment they arrive I found quite amazing. And, it was very rewarding, once you got to those older ages to have the chance to go to the younger ensembles and nurture those kids as well. And, you know, that makes a huge difference to your life personally and in other areas as well.

There is a high level of expectation here, and the skills that you learn, you know, they do expect a lot from you, but through that you learnt discipline and time management and all that kind of stuff. And, the music students here were very, very busy. I was often at school late every afternoon and three mornings a week before school. I used to rehearse every lunchtime, but I wouldn't have had it any other way. For me, it was a way of life and it made high school, you know, so much more enjoyable because for me the classroom wasn't, you know, wasn't the thing.

So, I loved coming to high school, and I would be here at seven and I'd be until six and sometimes we even bugged the teachers to stay to 8 pm before competitions and stuff.

Ms MILLER — Extraordinary.

Mr WOODS — Yeah, it really was. You know, for us it was a way of life and we loved it. For so many of us it's turned into our profession and we've continued it in our life after high school as well.

Mr ELASMAR — Already some of you mentioned what role music plays in your life after you finish school. But, do you think that all students should be required to learn music at school, and what years should it be taught, and what are the main reasons in favour of teaching it in schools?

Mr IRWIN — Henrik touched on it just a little bit before. Like any subject, and especially when you think about group subjects such as sport and music and things like that, I think it's really important — it's more of a character building thing, music. There is an academic side to music. There's notes and there's theory and there's a language that goes with it, and it is like learning a language as well, I find. You know, I've always thought about it that way in my mind; that's the way it's worked. But, also it's about expression and individual sort of development as a person. I think that, for me, that is something that is really very important, especially at a younger age, because in reality I do a lot of workshops and clinics at high schools and colleges and universities. I see, as a general rule,

a little bit of fear in most kids, in most high school age kids. I think it's becoming more common. I don't remember it being quite the same. Maybe that was just me; maybe I was a bit of a bull with it and too stupid to know the difference. But, I definitely feel like there's a general overlying feeling of fear with younger students. I think music is one of those things that allows them to find their voice and allows them to make big mistakes and allows mistakes and know that that's okay, and also find that group dynamic.

Music, I mean, the overriding thing, it's expressive and it's creative. That's not something you often get in a lot of other endeavours, especially at a young age. It teaches kids at a young age to be creative and to have a voice and to have decision-making skills towards something that's emotional. And then, if you can apply that sort of individual creativity and individual expression into a group dynamic when you're in the ensembles or in the music classroom I think that's something which is a really beautiful experience. For even a kid who has no desire to go on with music, that appreciation and that sort of personal development is something pretty specific. It has a sporting element to it, having your own sort of position I guess in a sporting team, but it goes deeper than the expression and creativity.

And, as for years, I would think until you get into the specialist years of school where you're picking your subjects I think — up through Year 7 to Year 9 or maybe to Year 10 or something.

Mr WOODS — I think that for the same reason that we teach art and technology and sport, it's a way of getting students to find out what they like, to give them a sample or a taste of what they would be like to do this subject as possibly a career, a nice subject to be able to do, a nice skill to talk to people about and become cultured in.

As Ross mentioned, music is like learning a new language. It's a whole new culture that you get immersed in. It's the history of music that you learn about, the history of other cultures that you'll learn about. You can do lots of stuff with music. You can go on. I'm doing it at university just as a subject because I find it fun, it's a nice way to meet a whole new different group of people. You can get along with them through your mutual like, I suppose, of music and your passion towards that.

We teach art and sport and technology, and while not every student goes on to be an artist, a poet, a builder, through technology, we do learn skills that are valuable towards that. Well, I didn't quite so much enjoy art. I wasn't very good at it. I thrived in music because I thought it made a lot more sense to me and was a lot more fun and what I was passionate about, and I was able to continue that in a really supportive environment.

I think students at least in Years 7 and 8 should be exposed to the musical aspect of it in the same way that they are exposed to art and sport and technology. So, that level of exposure, definitely.

Ms NETTE — I think that the instrumental program, as Ross and Andrew mentioned, is extremely important in both the general and specialised area. But, for classroom music I think it should be in every school, but to allow for emotional awareness, it has to be taught well in a classroom, and being taught well is from my experience of learning in Singapore — they have a feedback system of students. So, I've realised that the students need a voice, not only in their music education but in all of the education.

I think that would be an effective procedure to go through to help see what the students love about these music programmes and about what could be approved, because not only do the students have to be assessed by the teachers but the students should have a voice and to assess the teachers and the curriculum. And, from my experience, the students are given a survey at the end of every semester where the students assess the teachers and the students assess the curriculum, and the students assess the teachers in relation to the curriculum, and this is taken seriously. And then, it allows for an effective system and a culture that is always striving together as a community to try and better not only the music education but the education as a whole.

So, I think that it's not only the individual lessons, but the classroom music and the culture that will make the core of the importance of the music programme.

Mr BEASY — I definitely think that all students at some stage should be exposed to music. I guess the question is whether that's instrumental or classroom and how that works. The opportunity should be given to all students to have a go at music to see whether that avenue is something they would enjoy.

But, also I think it's pretty well researched the benefits of music kind of affect other areas of your mental learning as well. Like, for example when we're learning rhythms and stuff we're doing some form of mathematics and stuff in our head as we're doing that. When we're pulling this information from the scores off the page where it's very similar to English and you are reading and pulling some sort of expressions and emotions out of that and turning it into something else. So, I think music is important not only just for music but it also does affect the way — that you can apply it to other areas of your learning as well.

Ms MILLER — Just following on from that, what recommendations would you make to the Victorian Government to improve music education in schools across Victoria?

Mr WOODS — I think that it should definitely begin with classroom music generating the interest and sort of the exploration of music through the younger students.

So, if we get at the primary school level people doing classroom music, people getting interested in that before we start to teach the instrumental music.

Instrumental music is, as you guys would agree, a lot of work. You have to be passionate about it to be able to practice it, to be able to enjoy it. If you don't practice it you won't be able to enjoy it as much. If you don't enjoy it you will not have any reason to practice it. So, you've got to have that self motivated interest in music that's generated from a young age.

So, at the primary school that I went to, it was well generated. There was a lot of classroom music. We went through a couple of different teachers. We had recorder ensemble. We had a choir. It was very sort of fun to dip into that pool of music and then when you come to a higher level you could explore what instrument you do.

Ms MILLER — So what age? If you had to put an age in your primary school what would you be saying?

Mr WOODS — I would be saying probably as low as Year 1 or prep. Getting that initial interest in, hey, music's fun. It's not just something that we can do, you know, singing in the shower. We can do it outside and express ourselves in a way that's not necessarily drawing something down if you're not good at drawing.

Ms MILLER — Ross, what do you think?

Ms IRWIN — Yes, I agree. I think it's something that needs to be sort of cultivated from a young age and just generate that awareness.

My thing that I always harp on about is I see that especially in high school aged students. I see that fear kicks in, you know that hormonal fear, you know, of looking like a fool. I think if there is a love and a culture that comes from a younger age then that's really going to create really creative people who are comfortable with their voice and comfortable with their own identities and developing that.

Exactly what Henrik said, you know, it's not just about music, it's about what music gives you personally. I mean, all of us come from different sort of social and personality backgrounds. I'm just

talking from personal experience. Music is what gave me my confidence and to be able to, you know, to stand up in front of a room of people and talk and play, and also feel comfortable with my own sort of creative voice.

Like you said, with a classroom environment like that, these kids are being expressive but they're also learning how to do that in a group dynamic. I think you'd want that in any profession. We don't want drones out there in any profession. You want thinkers, but also thinkers and creative people who then can apply that to a group dynamic. Like, if you're working in an office, if you're working a hospital or whatever, I think that would be a beautiful thing, you know.

My three-year-old nephew does music, you know. He goes there and bangs xylophones, and does it. He loves it. I would say, yes, as early as prep or Year 1 there's an element of that that would be really important, I think.

Mr BEASY — I think we all know that as little kids they soak in so much from everywhere. So, it would be great to expose them to all different sorts of education, and music I would think has to be one of them as well.

Ms NETTE — I think the key thing for cultivating this environment from a young age, is again the student feedback to allow quality control of the teachers and the curriculum. I think students should have the power to do it.

Ms MILLER — So what age group, though, if you had your choice, what grade?

Ms NETTE — For the start of music?

Ms MILLER — Yes.

Ms NETTE — I think it should started as a very young age, just to get them enthusiastic about it, about music.

Ms MILLER — One more question. Blackburn High School is renowned for its music program. What are the benefits going to a school that has such a strong focus on music? Ross?

Ms IRWIN — The benefits of me going here? I've gone on to become, you know, a professional musician. I tour six months of the year with a band called The Cat Empire which has been a successful band over the years in Australia, and then the rest of the time I spend in education, not in any one school. I go out and do clinics and workshops with all sorts of ensembles and all sorts of ages, groups of kids.

I think the high level and high skill and high expectation that was expected here is something — I always felt it was a positive thing. I never felt like we were under the whip or anything. It was a beautiful, nurturing experience as well. I think that's given me the ability to go out now and then go into a college, you know, or a high school in a rural area and work with the kids and sort of pass on hopefully where I think it should be at, and how exciting it can be and what a high level it can get to.

I think being a school that has a high level of program, like my understanding of different styles of music and of different ensembles and what a good teacher should — you know, like Steve or any of the teachers here, the way they would deliver information. I picked up things from all of them and so now every time I do a workshop at a university, or a college or a motivational talk, there's little bits of them pouring out of me.

I think that I would always, when I go out to any school, whether primary schools kids in a rural area or university students in a capital city, it's always that excellence and that love and that kind of personal sort of development I've got, and I think I got that here.

Mr WOODS — I didn't go on with music — not professionally at least. I do it for fun, and through high school I definitely did it for fun and being so committed to it, again, I didn't feel like I was under pressure to being committed. It was enjoyable to be committed.

Going from primary school I found that a supportive music programme really allowed students to continue with music without being sort of embarrassed or scared about doing music, whereas other schools, people, went, oh, that's music; it's not very cool. I know 'cool' isn't the perception everyone needs to have about it, but, coming from such a supportive environment where people are going, 'You're in music; that's awesome.'

Ms MILLER — Great. I just want to take to acknowledge the entry of Dee Ryall, the Local Member for Mitcham. Welcome. Bethany?

Ms NETTE — I think the environment at this school, because I graduated two years ago in 2011. The preparation that this school has given me and the high expectations gave me the confidence to audition internationally. I happened to be successful and got into the University of Singapore. The specialisation of this school in the senior years from Year 9 to Year 12, it gives an experience that is unique to this school and is not found — is hardly found anywhere throughout the state. That's what makes this special, that they're already doing tertiary repertoire. They're taught in a professional way, so the students already know how to act and what to play, and they're already at that ability level to go on to tertiary education, which will allow an easy transition into the workforce, either in education or in music.

Mr BEASY — For me, like Ross and Beth, it's been my pathway into my profession. I'm now a trumpet teacher, and coordinating the brass program at St Kevin's College, but also I do gigs on the weekends and other freelance gigs that come up as well.

But, even more importantly than that, the thing that I loved about the music program here was the relationships that I made, not only with the students, but with the staff as well.

I still have friendships with Steve and with my trumpet teacher who still works here. I pop around to her place and she'll lend me music and CDs, which I then use for my teaching and for my career.

And then, with the students, excellence was expected of us, but we were driven enough and we were nurtured enough to want to do it as well. So, you know, it wasn't like it was forced upon us. Often, like I said before, we were asking staff for more time because we loved it. It was a relationship thing.

Ms MILLER — That concludes our discussions today. It's a very passionate topic. I can see there's so much more that you've got to share, but I wanted to take this opportunity to thank you for sharing your experiences with us. We wish you all the best for the future.

Witnesses withdrew.

