

[REDACTED]

12th February, 2013

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

Dear Sirs/Mesdames,

I have been a private music teacher of piano, theory, voice and violin for 30 years. This has included Private Instrumental teaching in several private secondary schools over the course of 15 years. During my performing career, I sang in the UK, Europe, and the USA and recorded 4 albums.

I have now changed my role to be the full time mother of 3 primary aged children who attend Parkhill Primary School. I have become involved there as the director of two choirs, school accompanist for assemblies, concerts and special events, and rehearsal and performance pianist for school musical productions - an enormous one of which took place last October, 2012, broadcast on Channel 31.

I am now in my 5th year of involvement and that, in combination with my previous experience, allows me to be able to provide a balanced account of the music education at schools in general and Parkhill in particular.

Parkhill (PPS) is one of Victoria's top performing primary schools and from a musical standpoint, it would be representative, or in fact slightly better, than most schools. i.e.: The reality for most schools would be somewhat worse than what you read here.

The school is uniquely blessed in the calibre of parents and has done an excellent job of engaging them (myself included) to great advantage. Although the school has enlisted the services of a true classroom music teacher 2 half-days per week, this unfortunately is countered by the following:

1. The Department of Education has mandated that 'Performing Arts' has become the replacement name for Music Classes in Victorian schools. This change seems to have permitted a dilution of the music component. Many other worthy, but not as educationally valuable pursuits appear to be able to qualify as Performing Arts classes.

The educational value of a class taught by a teacher who plays an instrument and can read music is simply not replaceable by anything else. Similarly (and I defer to Richard Gill OAM on this one), drama, dance and video production (to name a couple) can not replace music tuition. A lack of properly qualified music teachers is no excuse.

The educational value of proper music tuition is well established and we are doing our children (both personally and societally) a disservice to have replaced it with any substitute.

I would advocate that the curriculum be substantially revised with a specific music component (there is not one currently) and that these changes be written and supervised by professionals who know how to read music, play instruments and teach and engage children in these disciplines. If the curriculum is written by a musician, then only a musician can teach it. Similarly, there should be a requirement for schools to actually teach music; as I understand it there currently is none!

2. Private Instrumental Music Lessons within the school are offered and overseen by an instrumental teacher who volunteers their time to schedule lessons and allocate teachers/rooms/studios. I am unaware whether these teachers are qualified. I realise that they may be reliable for the school and pleasant with the students, but there appears to be no guidelines under which they are employed. e.g.: I have a neighbour who teaches violin at a primary school in the east of Melbourne, but he doesn't hold any qualifications, hasn't sat any advanced exams (certainly no higher than grade 6 AMEB), and doesn't have any training in theory. In my opinion, he shouldn't be permitted to teach violin, one of the most difficult instruments to play.

I would advocate that the curriculum also outline a minimum standard for Private Instrumental Music Teachers. For example, Grade 8 in performance, or equivalent. I would also recommend that the Private Instrumental Music Teaching Programme within the school be overseen by one of these teachers, or in conjunction with the appointed classroom music teacher (I'm referring to a classroom teacher who teaches music, reads music and plays at least one instrument competently). It appears that in most schools, the Private Teaching program is on 'auto pilot' with little or no musical supervision, as there is no-one in the school suitably qualified to do so...

3. In some schools, Music Classes (or Performing Arts Classes) are offered for only one semester per year.

I would advocate that the curriculum be amended to increase the amount of contact hours for each class to enable every student weekly (at least!) contact throughout the year with a qualified teacher.

4. Choirs in schools are disappearing. The North American model of music education strongly reinforces playing in a school band and/or singing in the school choir. This is probably why most Americans can sing in tune. (It may also explain why American musicians so dominate worldwide). Australians are not so fortunate. I offer a lunchtime choir rehearsal at Parkhill every week, with regular performances at assemblies, special concerts and events. Some days I have 4 children attend, yesterday I had 31. I can't make them come, and they give up a lunchtime play to come and sing with me.

During our musical production rehearsals last year, I discovered many students within our school who could really sing, but had never come to choir. What a tragedy. If only they were encouraged to attend regularly, they would feel more confident in their ability to sing and perform. Singing is not only a musical pursuit, it can help with public speaking, and of course, building self esteem.

I would strongly recommend that singing in a choir is made compulsory for one term per year, staggered to involve all year levels. When I went to Blackburn High School in the 1980's, every student who was learning an instrument had to be involved in either the band, orchestra or choir (or in my case, I was in 2 of the 3).

In summary, as I have no aspirations to teach classroom music, nor do I wish to be a Private Instrumental teacher in a school setting, I have no vested interest (apart from the proper education of my children!) in writing what I write.

One full-time, qualified classroom music teacher per school could provide all the above recommendations (to teach music to each class once a week, to oversee the Instrumental Music Programme and to run choir rehearsals one day per week).

Measurable benefits to each school's culture will come when music education is given the appropriate priority.

Yours Sincerely,

Rosemary Sutton

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