



Executive Officer

Education and Training Committee

Parliament House

Spring Street

East Melbourne

**Letter to the Inquiry into Music Education**

**1/2/13**

Dear Committee of Inquiry,

My name is John Smith and I work in a small East Gippsland secondary school, teaching both classroom and instrumental music. I did not become aware of your enquiry until the start of this school year so would like to apologize for the brevity of my submission in advance. However, as I'm sure you will realize, this is a very busy time for anyone involved in schools. Your first term of reference has been addressed by many communities around the world, usually in the context of hard economic times, when the government imperative has been to cut costs and redirect funds to vocational areas in the belief that national productivity will eventually pick up as a result. This is fallacious reasoning. Please, if you have the time, investigate the Simon Bolivar music program in Venezuela.

This third world country, concerned about the toxic disillusionment of its youth with schooling, decided to make instrumental music compulsory for every student. It made music the fulcrum upon which its primary and secondary education system turned, improving attendance and retention rates dramatically in the process. Venezuela's school system as a whole has improved to a remarkable degree because of this visionary measure and this small country now has a symphony orchestra to rival the best in Europe or the USA. In fact in Harlem, New York, the Bolivar program is now being implemented in a number of its troubled schools. It is an amazing success story and one which deserves very wide publicity.

The general benefits to students of a music education are fairly obvious at a local level. As co-ordinator of a large regional music program based at Bairnsdale Secondary College, and now as a music teacher at Orbost, I have seen many academic 'battlers' stay on at school because of the sheer buzz they received from performing. And on the other side I have seen how popular instrumental music programs are with top academic students, the so-called high flyers, who are probably there because they need nurture for the 'other' side of the brain. I think you will find that in most state schools there is a very high priority placed on instrumental music because of its appeal to such a diverse range of students: it is tremendously gratifying to see students from such a wide range of backgrounds working together as equally important parts of a team.

In Orbost, the music program plays a crucial role in the life of the town. From the school population of 280 students, 70 are involved in the band program and another 15 students participate in the school choir. These students perform regularly in the community in a wide variety of events from Mothers' Day to Anzac Day and the local community depends upon their availability to make community events viable. At the risk of generalizing, I know from my travels, there are many country

towns around Victoria equally dependent upon what goes on in their schools' music departments for performances and for membership of community brass bands and other ensembles. Schools' music programs are regarded as a cultural asset for these small towns and it is extremely important that these communities are not adversely affected by cuts to music education funding. They have done it tough in recent times.

In conclusion, it is worth saying that when the senior band from Orbost travels interstate each year, some very large schools are amazed by what they hear from our school ensemble and are generally inspired to put more resources into their own programs. I sincerely hope, then, that the spirit of this inquiry is not to provide a rationale for cutting funds to some schools so that savings at one point might be directed elsewhere- a 'robbing Peter to pay Paul' strategy. This would be devastating for many programs. The answer surely is to investigate what happened in Venezuela.

Yours sincerely,



John Smith – Victorian Secondary Teacher of the Year, 2000

