

# **IMPROVING THE CONDITION OF SCHOOL MUSIC EDUCATION ACROSS AUSTRALIA**

## **A Submission to the National Review of School Music Education**

**By**

**The Australian Council of State School  
Organisations (ACSSO)**

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*“All art aspires towards the condition of music”  
– Walter Pater*

*“We are morally and emotionally enfeebled if we live our lives without artistic  
nourishment. Our sense of life is diminished. In music we sense most directly the inner  
flow which sustains the psyche, or the soul”  
– Sir Michael Tippett CBE*

*“The anthropologist Levi-Strauss is scarcely alone among scientists in claiming that if  
we can explain music, we may find the key for all human thought – or in implying that  
failure to take music seriously weakens any account of the human condition”  
Howard Gardner ‘Frames of Mind’*

*“Isn’t it ironic, that music is all around us; pop music, classical, students with earphones  
walking in the street, yet we touch music only sporadically in our schools? What does it  
say in a microcosm about the capacity of our school systems to incorporate the defining  
cultural activities of our society?  
ACSSO representative.*

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## 1. Introduction and Key Issues

ACSSO represents the parents, families and school communities in 7000 public schools across all parts of Australia. We are therefore uniquely placed to provide input which reflects the views, needs and expectations of the parents and families of those 2.2 million students.

Central to our submission is the proposition that all children should have access to an appropriate range of musical experiences and participation from their earliest years, continuing progressively through the formal years of schooling.

Parents are the first and continuing educators of their children, and as with other fundamentally important aspects of learning and development, musical awareness and access should be provided in the home and family environment from the earliest times. It is important that parents and families are encouraged to provide these opportunities for their very young children.

It is important that, from the beginning of formal schooling, parent and family contribution should be complemented and enhanced by the provision of structured musical opportunities as part of the education process. This is particularly important in relation to families which may not be in position to provide or access such opportunities through their own resources, or in communities where external opportunities are limited.

As with other important aspects of a child's learning and development, this is an area which can be enhanced by effective and innovative family-school and community partnerships.

**ACSSO is therefore very pleased to note that through our work with the Australian Government, an additional amount of \$700 million in capital funding has been made available to government schools over four years commencing in 2005. This can support the acquisition of musical instruments and other equipment to enhance music education in schools.** ACSSO and our State and Territory affiliate organisations are involved in the process of distribution of these funds in response to submissions from schools, and we are actively encouraging schools to apply for funding to meet this and other areas of need.

At least as important as instruments and equipment, is the access to trained and skilled teachers and quality structured teaching time within the school day backed by complementary extra-curricular activities. The following conclusion of the "Stevens Report" of July 2003 (referred to in section 3 below) raises issues of major relevant and potentially of deep concern to all parents and families:

*"From a cognitive-development perspective, there is considerable evidence to suggest that music learning should take place from the early childhood education levels if children are to receive and effective education in music. The current situation in Australia from the perspective of generalist primary teacher preparation is that, with such limited allocations for music curriculum studies being presumably uniform across all Australian primary teacher education*

*courses, there is little chance that primary teachers will be capable of implementing music curriculum in their classrooms” (p.14)*

Given that importance of music learning from early childhood, ACSSO notes with concern, as we have in previous submissions in relation to early childhood education in Australia, both the lack of consistency of approach in relation to early childhood programs; and the lack of comprehensive research and development in this area. We echo the concerns of Dr Alison Elliott, Research Director of ACER’s Early Childhood Education Research Programme in her article “Where To Now For Early Childhood Education and Care?” Research Developments (the Journal of the Australian Council for Educational Research) No. 12 Summer 2004 :-

*“Australia’s early childhood sector caters for well over half a million 0-5 year-olds in a myriad of services that are legislated and funded by a complex network of agencies and organisations, and operated and administered by a range of government, community and private for-profit operators. About three-quarters of children aged 3-4 years used some type of formal child care in 2002. Yet little is known how children fare. There are no agreed standards and learning programs across services, no agreed positions on staffing and staff qualifications, and no strategies for mapping, tracking or comparing children’s experiences and outcomes. In short, there is little monitoring of children’s progress and little investment in research and development.”*

## **2. ACSSO Recommendations**

- While recognising the issues around the “crowded curriculum”, there is a need for the Review to;
  - Promote the identification of cost-effective models of good practice in school music education evident in schools and communities in Australia and overseas
  - Encourage agreement by all State and Territory authorities to look for and adopt replicable models
  - Support the establishment of uniform cost-effective models of reporting against agreed performance indicators and outcome measures
  - Support the development of indicative models of good curriculum design which underpin effective music education and its interaction with other elements of an effective curriculum.
- There should be funding of research into key aspects of early childhood education, which would include a specific focus on:
  - The identification of cost-effective models of good practice in school music education evident in schools and communities in Australia and applicable overseas examples, to be agreed by all State and Territory authorities as replicable models to be encouraged, resourced and supported for adoption in respect of all elements of early childhood education and care

- Identification, adoption and establishment of agreed standards of competencies, experience and training – and assessment - for educators in early childhood education
- The establishment and operation of appropriate recognised training and development programmes for educators in early childhood education
- The establishment of competencies, training and development for educators in early childhood education should apply to all teachers as part of an enhanced approach to teacher training, consistently across all States and Territories.
- There should be active research or a national audit of the position of music in the school environment throughout Australia, concentrating on basic inventory questions such as who teaches music, where is music offered, which cohort of pupils practise and enjoy music as part of school related activities and how central to each school's mission is music itself.

### 3. Context

Two major previous review activities establish the context and framework for the present Nation Review of School Music Education, and emphasise the importance of establishing nationally agreed models of good practice and standards of provision which reflect family and community needs and expectations:

#### **“Australians’ Attitudes to Music” research for the Australian Music Association 2001.**

Key findings relevant to setting the context for this review include in particular

- 87% of respondents agreed that “music education should be mandated by the States to ensure every child has an opportunity to study music in school”, and 91% considered it should be a specific element of the formal curriculum
- 86% agreed that music education help’s a child’s overall intellectual development. The majority of these respondents felt music education often corresponds with better grades and that it helps students to better in other subjects.
- 86% agreed that music education assists in the development of self-discipline and personal resilience: 95% noted its contribution to a sense of achievement, confidence and creativity.
- 95% felt it contributes (e.g. via ensembles, school bands) to building effective teamwork and interactive skills.
- 85% felt strongly that “music provides an important part of life and 91% saw it as an essential part of a well-rounded education

These are views which ACSSO's national membership networks strongly endorse as matters of fundamental importance in any planning for the future needs of musical education across all parts of Australia.

**“National Report on Trends in School Music Education Provision in Australia” (“Stevens Report”) July 2003.**

- The basic finding from the research was the lack of uniform policies and practices in relation to the collection of statistical data about musical education in each State and Territory. The failure of relevant authorities to collect or to release statistical information in respect of either curriculum-linked or extra-curricular musical activities, made it practically impossible to identify trends at state or national levels in most instances. This also made it impossible to identify the extent to which the recommendations of the preceding “Bartle Report” of 1968 and its objectives including the more consistent development of instrumental training at the primary school level could support the further development of the subject at secondary schools. This shortcoming underlined the essential need for a comprehensive national survey of music education in Australia (which this present 2005 review is seeking to address).
- A particular problem identified is “the unrealistic expectation, particularly of government primary schools, that classroom music will be taught by generalist primary school teachers. Contributory factors identified include in particular:
  - Decline in the amount of musical curriculum studies in the course of generalist primary school education, resulting from an increasingly crowded primary school curriculum and a consequent decrease in the time allocation for musical curriculum studies. With the result that: “generalist primary teaching graduates, unless they have undertaken elective music and/or music education units within their courses, are unlikely to be sufficiently competent or confident to teach music effectively in their classes”
  - Lack of teacher professional development opportunities, particularly for primary music teachers, with many states adopting the policy of leaving provision of in-service education to teacher professional associations
  - While the preparation of secondary music teachers is more thorough and the results in secondary schools more promising, there is a risk of a shift to music being solely taught at the secondary level and a limited extra-curricular offering in primary schools.

There is an obvious concern that this last point would tend increasingly to exclude and disadvantage students whose families were unable to access private tuition or other opportunities in the crucially important early years.

#### **4. Parent and Family Input Comments on Review Focus Questions**

In response to key questions asked by the Review, this section provides a representative synopsis of comments received from our affiliate organisations and member networks across the country

##### **What is the importance of music education and musical experience and participation in the learning and development of young people?**

- Children learn best about the world by listening, thinking, acting and integrating new experiences - experiential learning is the format in which we own our own learning whether we are a child or an adult. Music education and musical experiences assist in young children's early language development, kinesthetic intelligence, mathematical intelligence (experiencing patterning, measuring, rhythm, repetition etc. through another medium), development of individual and group dynamics in creating and participating in performance, (social development) etc.
- Additionally, participation in musical experiences is a non measurable but highly valuable creative and aesthetic process, one which in this current climate of political correctness, measurement and analysis, the emphasis on literacy and numeracy at the expense of many other facets of human learning and development, and the standardising of academic performance against mediocre and often irrelevant benchmarks for economic rationalist purposes, music education (as one aspect of the arts) facilitates the development of the human soul against this horribly mundane learning environment we are currently fostering.
- Music breaks through unimaginative processes and can bring communities together through the sharing of sentiment, sensation, beliefs, aesthetics, culture and history.

##### **What are the key benefits and the main things we want to enable children to get from music education and musical experiences?**

Music education and musical experiences foster many skills within the individual and group - some of these being:

- Acquisition and extension of language development
- Extension of musical intelligence, which extends the individual's mathematical intelligence (see above note re: patterning etc.)
- Holistic development of aesthetic and kinesthetic skills, whole body utilisation, knowledge and awareness
- Holistic development of social skills through a non threatening and specific framework of band practice, choir, orchestra etc.
- Development of appreciation of cultures via different forms of musical experiences
- Self esteem increases through the discipline required to 'make' music not merely being a passive spectator, via performance and collaboration to achieve end results
- Project work which incorporates musical performance and other forms of performance enhance the individual and groups ability to communicate and express it's intrinsic values

The commitment to learning at a slow and steady pace which is a benefit of learning music, can be transferred from the musical experience into the whole of life.

**In terms of these desired outcomes, what do you think about the quality of school music opportunities presently provided in schools?**

**What are the factors you see as positively supporting good quality school music?**

In several schools with recognised highly successful music programs the following factors contribute to good quality school music programs :

1. Qualified specialist teacher using proven developmental music pedagogies and applying them creatively
2. Lessons for all classes in the school regularly - once a week
3. Early instrumental instruction (recorder and percussion) embedded into the classroom
4. Extension music in the form of choral and instrumental ensembles built into the timetable
5. Focus on aural competency, singing and music literacy
6. Dedicated music space
7. Respect for music as a legitimate and important part of the curriculum
8. Whole school excitement and enjoyment of music and associated activities
9. More than adequate resourcing of programs
10. An understanding that the discipline of music is as equally demanding as the discipline of science and mathematics
11. Incorporation of musical experiences across the curriculum framework

**What are the factors you see as preventing good quality music learning in schools?**

1. That there is generally not academic and philosophical support of arts education, in particular music and musical experiences in jurisdictions such as the Northern Territory.
2. That some curriculum frameworks do not specifically mandate arts education (inc. music and musical experience)
3. That there is a critical lack of qualified and experienced music teachers in a number of jurisdictions
4. That there are no applications or creations of cross cultural links in music and musical experiences in schools as a general rule. Wherever there is a highly diverse cultural make up this could be one of our most vital assets in arts education.
5. The lack of pre-service training in the facilitation of music and musical experience
6. Lack of specific and practical, teacher friendly music curriculum and teaching materials
7. Pressure on learners to meet literacy and numeracy benchmarks, and the subsequent bureaucratic push to have these standards implemented to the detriment of focusing on the development of all learning in the individual

### **What do you think about the status of school music?**

Regrettably this is generally seen as extremely low in contrast with its real importance.

### **Factors required to positively support the status of school music?**

1. Requires: a high level of support and resourcing from the bureaucracy and particularly the curriculum services area
2. Requires: support and acceptance of the value of music and musical experiences from the community - as a highly valued skill
3. Teaching staff who go out of their way to develop their own ability to teach music and musical experiences to their classes - often with little or no support from schools and/or the department!

### **What factors do you think negatively affect the status of school music?**

1. Wherever courses offered are patchy, unstructured, unco-ordinated and discontinuous
2. Lack of monitoring and assessment of program quality.
3. Lack of continuity across stages of schooling.
4. Lack of scaffolding experiences over a dedicated time frame.
5. Lack of Affirmative Arts Education policy
6. A focus on music and musical experience as entertainment and recreation rather than profiling its value for life long learning
7. A perception amongst students of a wide disparity between 'real' (commercial?) music and 'school' (unreal?) music

### **List or outline examples of really effective practice in school music that you are aware of – why do you feel this is a notable example**

ACSSO agrees with the Stevens Report which lamented the lack of documented best practice around the country. This is an area for future research work.

### **Do you have any specific comments to make, based on your experiences and observations, in respect of these specific issues:**

- **Teacher education and standards**
  - - there should be specialised pre-service training which promotes confidence and competencies in effective pedagogy with an arts wide vision
- **Curriculum: do documents and policies actively support and achieve effective music education in schools**
  - – No, not at a system wide level.
- **Needs of Students – does it provide sufficient opportunities and access for all students, including: gifted and talented; special needs students; at risk students.**
  - No, not at a system wide level

### Links with Music in the Community:

- **Do you consider that music in the community and music in schools are sufficiently linked? No**
- **How could this situation be improved? In what ways could school music education be enhanced by what sorts of linking mechanisms to any or all facets of music making in the wider community?**
  1. There is a lack of political will at the top levels to support continuous music education. Uninformed school communities, who do not understand the value of music education in the development of the child result in unsupported music education programs in Australian Schools. This lack of support filters through to the children in schools. There is also an insufficient critical mass of adult Australians with quality musical education experience.
  2. Music teachers are often unsupported, disengaged and often marginalised by the other teachers, and finally there is a lack of profiling of music and related learning and employment opportunities.