

Submission  
No 88

**INQUIRY INTO ARTS AND MUSIC EDUCATION AND  
TRAINING IN NEW SOUTH WALES**

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# Submission to the Joint Select Committee on Arts and Music Education and Training in New South Wales

Last week, I went out to dinner with a friend. At the table next to us, sat a large family group. They burst into Happy Birthday at one point: or more correctly, they burst into the lyrics of Happy Birthday, sang too slowly to have the requisite waltz feel, in cluster chords with no sense of tonal centre, some on a monotone and others with a microtonal melody that barely moved beyond a perfect fourth, let alone reaching the octave leap in the third phrase.

The state of music education in New South Wales is dire. If a group of people out to dinner celebrating a family birthday cannot sing Happy Birthday in a way that even comes close to replicating the melodic shape of the song, then the education system has failed them.

Music is part of our lives. It makes us human. It connects us. In all facets of our lives music is there: at all ceremonies, milestones, community events, in our entertainment and games, when we shop or eat, when we exercise, at celebrations and commemorations. It cannot be denied that music is integral to us. If music is integral, then surely it should be integral to our New South Wales education system, with all children having access to music education and being engaged in activities that pass on the joy of making and experiencing music together.

This is not the case.

I grew up in Bundaberg, Queensland and went to Bundaberg West Primary school - a small public school with around two classes of students per year group. Some of my earliest memories at school are of my twice-weekly classroom music lessons with a dedicated primary classroom music specialist who was Kodály<sup>1</sup> trained. Her name was Mrs Huskins. We sang, played percussion instruments, engaged in musical games and had a lot of fun while building skills and exploring creativity. This was part of the school curriculum and funded by the Department of Education. Mrs Huskins was shared between two schools in order to make up a full-time position with the Department. We had a weekly junior school assembly where she played piano and led the singing of songs from the ABC Sing books. We learnt our (new at the time) National Anthem, the Beatles' "Yellow Submarine" and many more songs, and it was absolutely normal for me that the hundred or so children sitting on the carpet in that old hall were able to sing mostly in tune and with free sounding voices. She also ran the choir, often accompanying it herself, or sometimes with another teacher on piano and Mrs Huskins conducting. I loved singing as part of our school choir throughout primary school.

Later into primary school, all students had the opportunity to join the instrumental music program. I took up violin and had a weekly group lesson with a qualified string specialist teacher who was employed full-time by the Department of Education in the Instrumental Music Program. My teacher visited our school once a week and had one high school and several primary schools to cover as part of her job. When I was advanced enough, I was invited to join the school orchestra, which was run by the brass specialist, another Department employee. Apart from a small instrumental hire fee, there was no charge for being part of the program. It was fully funded by the Department.

When I reached high school, I continued to be part of weekly tutor groups on violin, and then also oboe when I took that up in Year 11. I was able to play in as many of the school ensembles as I wished, as long as I could make it to before-school or lunchtime rehearsals. In Year 12, I performed with the school choir, the school string ensemble, the school concert band, the school orchestra and the school stage band. While I was taking private violin, piano and voice lessons outside of school, my school music experiences were all funded by the Department of Education and at no cost to me or my parents.

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<sup>1</sup> Kodály Music Education Institute of Australia Incorporated, "The Kodály Concept", Kodály Australia, last accessed 24 July 2024. <https://kodaly.org.au/kodaly-concept/>

I grew up in a system which valued music education and gave access to high quality music education to all students. This system was equitable and provided students with opportunities to excel regardless of their socio-economic status.

This system produced an incredible number of world-class musicians. In my circle of friends and classmates alone, we have Tommy Trash (international DJ), Jane Young (cellist on Coldplay's Viva La Vida amongst other gigs), and Sarah McLellan (toured internationally with Led Zeppelin, a Led Zeppelin tribute band), as well as me (multi-award winning music educator and singer-songwriter), and a great deal of others who became music teachers, some of who returned to Bundaberg to be part of the system.

I consider my Queensland experience to be the gold standard.

Now I have one child still in the public school system in New South Wales and one who has recently graduated. The comparison between my experience and theirs is stark.

They grew up in Blacktown and went to Lynwood Park Public School. Lynwood Park Public School is a small school with no specialist music teachers, music is taught by their classroom teachers, and until recently students had no access to any instrumental music programs at all. Despite music being in the curriculum, music in the classroom was barely touched upon, and when it was, it was often done as a filler activity where the teacher put on a recorded song and asked the children to sing along with it. The teacher often did not sing. There was no modelling of musicianship, no guidance as to how to sing, no correction if technique or intonation was poor and definitely no sequencing of age appropriate learning materials. This was not music education.

The school did have a choir and a recorder group which were run by an enthusiastic member of staff who happened to have a brass background, but numbers were limited and this was not available to all students. The students sang or played recorder to backing tracks, and on a regular basis, tracks which had the vocals in them. There was no piano at the school in a playable condition, nor were there any teachers with the necessary skills or training to play one even if such a piano was available.

When my eldest son was ten years old, his Year 5 teacher admitted to me that she refused to teach any music in their class, in large part because as a child who had been learning percussion outside of school for several years, he was more qualified to teach classroom music than she was. A quick survey of my primary school teacher friends informed me that the music component of a teaching degree could range from as much as a half-semester long course to as little as a one hour lecture. It is no wonder that these teachers feel their music skills are inadequate, especially if they grew up without any specialist music education themselves.

For a limited number of occasions, the school engaged an outside company to run an 8-week music program. Participation in this program hinged on the families contributing financially, just as if it had been a school incursion. This is in an area of Western Sydney that has a lower socio-economic base, and disposable family income is at a premium. When my youngest son was in Year 2, the school engaged a third party company to start a band program. This was a user-pays system. At no point during their primary schooling have they had access to a Department-funded music specialist teacher.

Without a Department-funded specialist music teacher in every primary school, the system is inequitable. Schools in higher socio-economic areas can fund a music program. Those in most need will miss out.

While my family's lived experience of music within the New South Wales education system has many negatives, there are without doubt some things that the Department of Education and Training does well. The Arts Unit gives students fabulous opportunities to play in ensembles and go to camps and workshops with wonderful and engaging experienced tutors and conductors. I have sent my own children to the State Music Camps and my eldest participated in the State Wind Band and Pulse Alive Stage Band as a percussionist.

There is no doubt that the experiences the Arts Unit provides are fantastic. However, even these positive experiences have downsides. The Arts Unit ensembles, camps and workshops are generally paid for by the parents, and accessible by application or audition only. They are extension activities for the elite students, most of whom are already engaged in private music lessons.

What opportunities are available to the children in New South Wales who do not have the means for private tuition?

Furthermore, the Arts Unit is based in Lewisham in the Inner West of Sydney. Despite repeated suggestions and encouragement from his instructors and tutors at the Arts Unit, my eldest was unable to participate in the regular school term-based activities of the Arts Unit. This was not just for financial reasons but also because it was too difficult for us to get him to and from the Inner West from our home in Greater Western Sydney.

If the challenges are too great to access quality music education and extension for children living in the same city, what hope is there for our State's children living in regional and rural New South Wales?

In sport, there is much discussion about grassroots clubs being the most important part of building a sporting culture. It is from those grassroots clubs that the future elite players are identified and emerge. The New South Wales government has traditionally done a very good job of encouraging the growth of grassroots sport. Both my sons have benefited directly from programs such as Active Kids, but also have seen grassroots sports continue to thrive in their local area thanks to grant programs such as the Office of Sport Local Sports Grants. However, there appears to be a greater emphasis on promoting grassroots sports than there is promoting community engagement with the creative arts. While there was a Creative Kids program, this was only after an Active Kids program was introduced first.

Much like the motivation behind funding in sports, the focus in music is in export, sending our elite into the world at large. In order to have musicians at a level appropriate for international stages, we need the grassroots training. Funding quality music education in public schools will enable a more diverse range of children with talent to be identified.

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