

**Submission
No 90**

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

Organisation: Monkey Baa

Date Received: 25 July 2024

monkey baa

25 July 2024

Ms Julia Finn
Chair
Joint Select Committee on Arts and Music Education and Training in New South Wales
New South Wales Legislative Assembly
Parliament of New South Wales

Dear Ms Finn,

I am writing to you as Chair of Monkey Baa Theatre Company in response to the invitation for submissions to the arts and education inquiry. Please find our submission included, which outlines both our experience and recommendations for the role and importance of arts learning in NSW.

We have been operating as a theatre company for young people in NSW for over 27 years and understand the crucial role of the arts in our schools and on the outcomes and wellbeing for young people.

The Monkey Baa team will be very happy to provide any further information or consultation to you or any of the committee members.

Warm regards,

Professor Judith Mclean
Chair, Monkey Baa Theatre Company

Monkey Baa Theatre Company's Submission to the NSW Government Inquiry into Arts and Music Education and Training

Date: 25 July 2024

Introduction

Monkey Baa Theatre Company, a not-for-profit organisation based in Sydney, has been dedicated to creating and presenting theatre for young people for over 27 years. Under the leadership of Eva Di Cesare (Artistic Director) and Kevin du Preez (Executive Director), Monkey Baa has engaged over 1.6 million young Australians through innovative and impactful creative experiences.

We have toured extensively across Australia, including to regional and remote communities, and internationally, demonstrating our commitment to making arts accessible to all young people, regardless of their location or background.

Our mission is to empower young people to navigate and shape their lives through inspirational theatre and creative experiences.

We envision a future where all young people are emboldened by creativity, building our capacity to reach a wider and more diverse audience across Australia.

Overview of Monkey Baa's work

Monkey Baa operates with a unique and innovative creative process, involving young people in the creation and development of our works. Each year, we engage over 80 talented artists, creatives, technical crew, and other professionals to bring our productions to life.

Our Learning Program¹ is a key aspect of our work, encompassing school shows, incursion programs, regional teaching artist tours, workshops, work experience opportunities, and teacher professional development.

We reach approximately 10,000 students annually and employ 10 teaching artists. Notably, we receive no government support for this specific learning program.

¹ <https://www.monkeybaa.com.au/learning>

Access to quality arts learning in NSW

To improve access to quality arts learning in NSW, it is crucial to ensure equitable access for all students, regardless of their background or location. This includes addressing cost barriers and providing free and accessible arts learning to students from diverse backgrounds, such as economic diversity, CALD students, and students with disability. Greater partnerships with arts organisations and schools are essential.

These arts can deliver experiences and skills across multiple schools and communities, as they have the mobility and expertise to be responsive to community needs. By creating more pathways for training through specialised organisations, we can ensure that students receive high-quality arts learning.

Targeted support should be provided to schools with fewer resources to overcome structural challenges and funding issues. Reducing the upfront cost of arts learning and increasing promotion and awareness will also help to reach a broader audience and ensure that all students can engage in arts learning.

“By making sure every student has access to quality arts education, regardless of who they are or where they live... Ideally, this embedded learning needs to be free and accessible, so that students from diverse backgrounds have equitable access, which is not the case currently.”

– Monkey Baa Learning Panel Member

“Reducing the upfront cost of arts education would be so beneficial to so many people. There have been quite a few opportunities that I have missed out on due to cost, location, etc.”

– Youth Advisory Council Student

Engagement of arts organisations in schools

Arts organisations can be better engaged in school settings through several key approaches:

- **In-class workshops and presentations:** Connecting with schools through in-class workshops and presentations is highly beneficial. Organisations like Monkey Baa can provide hands-on experiences and direct interaction with arts professionals, programs like Monkey Baa’s Incursion Program.
- **Mobility and responsiveness:** Arts organisations have the unique ability to work across different systems, places, and people. With proper funding, they can deliver tailored programs that meet the specific needs of various communities, making the arts visible and accessible in all schools, not just well-funded ones.
- **Government support and funding:** Increased government backing for arts organisations is essential to facilitate their engagement with schools. Funding support can enable these organisations to design and implement programs that cater to the unique needs and interests of regional communities.
- **Expertise and tools:** Arts organisations, especially those like Monkey Baa, already possess the expertise and tools to deliver impactful arts learning. What they need is the structural and financial support to bring these programs to life across more schools and communities.

"Connecting with schools through in-class workshops and presentations is highly beneficial. Our work at Monkey Baa provides hands-on experiences that allow students to engage deeply with the arts, fostering creativity and a love for learning."
- Alex Andrews, Learning Manager

Improving access to arts learning in regional areas

To improve access to arts learning in regional areas, several strategies should be implemented, focusing on sustainable and community-driven approaches:

- **Regionally based Teaching Artists:** Supporting regionally based teaching artists through partnerships with companies can ensure that students in regional areas have access to high-quality arts learning. These artists can provide in-school arts performances and workshops tailored to the needs of regional students.
- **Regional in-school arts performances and workshops:** Organising regular in-school arts performances and workshops in regional areas can provide students with direct exposure to the arts. This approach ensures that students can engage with professional artists and learn from their expertise without the need to travel to urban centres.
- **Long-term partnerships:** Establishing long-term partnerships between arts producers and regional venues can create sustained and focused outcomes for students. These partnerships can facilitate ongoing arts programs that are responsive to the specific needs and interests of regional communities.
- **Regional branches:** Developing regional branches of organisations like Monkey Baa can provide on-the-ground support and coordination for arts learning in regional areas. These branches can serve as hubs for local artists, educators, and students, fostering a vibrant arts community.
- **Slow touring and community embedding:** Adopting the concept of slow touring, where artists and arts organisations embed themselves in communities for extended periods, can enhance creativity and cultural exchange. This approach allows for deeper engagement and more meaningful artistic experiences for regional students.
- **Collaborative projects:** Collaborative projects, such as the "To My Future Self" project where Monkey Baa partners with Headspace in Port Macquarie, demonstrate the impact of targeted arts programs. This project works with regional LGBTQIA+ students to explore their imagined future through art, providing a supportive and creative outlet for self-expression.

"By embedding ourselves in regional communities, we can create long-lasting relationships and provide meaningful artistic experiences that resonate with local students and their unique contexts."
- Eva Di Cesare, Artistic Director

Support for teachers and principals

Teachers and principals should receive more support to deliver arts and drama learning in schools. Proper support and funding for arts educators are essential to overcome structural challenges and teacher shortages. By addressing these issues and reducing administrative burdens, educators can focus on providing high-quality instruction and mentorship to students.

The standard response from schools as to why they are not engaging with arts experiences is the lack of teachers, time and budget. All other barriers seem minimal to this resounding response. We hear this from teachers daily.

“Supporting teachers and principals in their efforts to deliver arts education is crucial. With the right resources and structural backing, educators can inspire and nurture the next generation of creative minds.”
– Alex Andrews, Learning Manager

Job-readiness for the Arts and Creative Industries

To be job-ready for the arts and creative industries, students need a combination of technical skills and personal qualities. According to feedback from our Youth Advisory Council (YAC) and industry professionals, the following skills are essential:

- **Personal skills:** Teamwork and communication skills are particularly important. As one student put it, *“You may be the best performer, director, technician but if you're a pain to work with no one will want to work with you again. Teamwork and communication skills are particularly important.”*
- **Technical proficiency:** While personal skills are crucial, technical proficiency in their chosen field—be it performing, directing, or technical work—is also necessary. Students need to be well-versed in their art form and continuously develop their craft.
- **Creativity and innovation:** The ability to think creatively and innovate is vital in the arts. Students should be encouraged to explore new ideas and push the boundaries of their art forms.
- **Resilience and adaptability:** The arts industry can be challenging, and students need to develop resilience and adaptability to navigate its ups and downs. Being able to handle rejection and setbacks while continuing to pursue their goals is crucial.
- **Professionalism and work ethic:** A strong work ethic and a professional attitude are essential for success in the arts. This includes being punctual, reliable, and dedicated to their work.

However, it is equally important to address the broader issue of the industry's sustainability. For students to have a viable career in the arts, we must ensure that arts organisations are better funded and able to offer stable employment and fair working conditions.

By advocating for proper funding and support for the arts sector, we can create an environment where students can not only survive but thrive in their chosen careers.

“It's not fair to say ‘we need our students to develop creativity, collaboration and resilience for the industry’ if we are preparing them for a landscape of unsustainable work, low pay and burnout.”
– Industry colleague

Adopting best practices from other jurisdictions

There are several best practices in arts learning from other jurisdictions that NSW could consider adopting:

- **South Australian model²:** The Department of Education in South Australia funds arts organisations to provide free tickets to students and employs teachers within these organisations, enhancing arts learning accessibility and quality.
- **European collaborative models:** European countries emphasise collaboration among schools, arts organisations, and cultural institutions to enhance arts learning. This includes integrating arts learning within the curriculum and providing extra-curricular activities that involve professional artists.

By adopting these approaches, NSW can create a more inclusive and robust arts learning system that provides greater opportunities for students to engage in the arts.

Student well-being and engaging with the arts

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and amidst the ongoing cost of living crisis, the mental and overall well-being of students has become a critical issue. Many organisations, including the Department of Education and Monkey Baa, recognise the significant role that the arts can play in supporting and enhancing student well-being. Engaging with the arts offers young people not only an outlet for creative expression but also a means to improve their mental health and overall quality of life.

Monkey Baa leverages the NEST framework³, developed by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY), to understand and articulate how the arts can positively impact the lives of students. The NEST framework outlines six domains that are essential for the well-being of young people:

1. **Being loved and safe:** Arts programs create a safe and inclusive environment where young people feel valued and accepted, which is crucial for their emotional security.
2. **Having material basics:** While directly impacting material basics might be limited, arts programs can provide opportunities for young people to access resources and support that they might otherwise lack.
3. **Being healthy:** Participation in the arts has been shown to improve mental health, reduce stress, and promote emotional well-being.
4. **Learning:** The arts contribute to cognitive development, critical thinking, and creativity, complementing traditional educational approaches and enhancing overall learning outcomes.
5. **Participating:** Arts programs encourage active engagement and participation, fostering a sense of community and belonging among young people.
6. **Having a positive sense of identity and culture:** Through creative expression, young people can explore and affirm their identities and cultural backgrounds, contributing to a strong sense of self and belonging.

Kevin du Preez, Executive Director of Monkey Baa, has previously written about the connection between ARACY's NEST framework and the arts. In his article, Kevin

² <https://outreacheducation.sa.edu.au/>

³ <https://www.aracy.org.au/the-nest-in-action/the-nest-overview>

highlighted how theatre and other forms of artistic engagement can address each of these six domains, providing holistic benefits that go beyond the traditional educational system.

Excerpt from Kevin's Article: *"The arts play a pivotal role in fostering well-being among young people by addressing key domains outlined in the NEST framework. Through theatre, we create environments where students feel loved and safe, promote mental and emotional health, and enhance learning and participation. Our programs encourage young people to explore their identities and cultures, contributing to a positive sense of self and community."* - Kevin du Preez

Potential impact and future directions: By integrating the principles of the NEST framework into our arts programs, Monkey Baa aims to create a holistic approach to student well-being that extends beyond the limitations of the traditional education system. This approach not only supports the mental and emotional health of young people but also enriches their overall learning and development.

The arts offer a vital tool for enhancing the well-being of young people, addressing multiple aspects of their lives in a comprehensive and impactful manner. By continuing to prioritise and support arts engagement, we can foster a healthier, happier, and more resilient generation of young Australians.

Why Monkey Baa uses the term "learning" instead of "education"

At Monkey Baa, we intentionally use the term "learning" rather than "education" to reflect a broader, more inclusive, and engaging approach to fostering creativity and growth among young people. This approach aligns with the Anna Cutler model⁴ at Tate Modern, which emphasises the importance of learning as a dynamic, participatory process rather than a top-down delivery of knowledge.

Anna Cutler, previous Director of Learning at Tate, advocates for learning that is exploratory, self-directed, and responsive to the needs and interests of individuals. Her model promotes a shift from traditional educational paradigms to more fluid and interactive forms of engagement that inspire curiosity, critical thinking, and personal development. By focusing on "learning," we highlight our commitment to creating environments where young people actively participate in their own learning journeys, driven by their passions and creativity.

This approach resonates with our mission at Monkey Baa to empower young people through inspirational theatre and creative experiences. It allows us to offer a diverse range of programs, including workshops, performances, and interactive sessions, that are tailored to the unique needs and interests of our participants. By fostering a culture of learning, we encourage young people to explore, experiment, and express themselves, ultimately leading to a deeper and more meaningful engagement with the arts.

⁴ <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/tate-papers/13/what-is-to-be-done-sandra-learning-in-cultural-institutions-of-the-twenty-first-century>

Final thoughts...

A significant challenge for arts organisations like Monkey Baa is gaining access to the Department of Education in NSW. The partnership opportunities are limited and often favour larger companies, which diminishes opportunities for students to engage with innovative arts learning provided by smaller enterprises. Despite our strong track record in delivering school workshops and employing Teaching Artists, we receive no specific funding or support for this work.

Monkey Baa has a long history of delivering high-quality arts learning to young people. We have conducted numerous workshops and employed Teaching Artists to work directly with students, fostering creativity and engagement. However, the lack of financial support limits our ability to expand these programs. To create a sustainable model for arts learning, it is essential that funding and support are extended to include innovative smaller enterprises like Monkey Baa, which are at the forefront of developing new and effective educational approaches.

Without this support, the rich potential for arts education in NSW remains untapped, and students miss out on valuable opportunities to engage with the arts in meaningful ways. By addressing these issues and providing more equitable support for all arts organisations, we can ensure that every student in NSW has access to the transformative power of arts learning.

Case studies

Theatre Access Program

Monkey Baa's Theatre Access Program⁵ is designed to provide students from under-resourced schools with the opportunity to experience high-quality theatre productions. By partnering with philanthropic foundations, Monkey Baa ensures that students who may not have the means to attend theatre performances can still benefit from these enriching experiences.

Philanthropic support: Key partnerships with philanthropic organisations provide crucial funding that subsidises ticket costs, making performances free or significantly reduced in price for students from targeted schools.

Accessibility: The program has successfully reached over 5,000 students annually, many of whom are attending a live theatre performance for the first time.

Educational enrichment: Alongside performances, the program includes pre-show workshops and post-show discussions, enhancing students' understanding and appreciation of the arts.

Lack of government support in NSW: Unlike in South Australia, where the Department of Education funds similar initiatives, the Theatre Access Program in NSW does not currently receive government support. This limits the program's potential reach and sustainability.

Monkey Baa's Theatre Access Program demonstrates the potential of strategic partnerships in making the arts accessible to all students. By expanding and coordinating these efforts, a statewide theatre access program could significantly enhance the cultural and educational landscape for young people in NSW.

⁵ <https://www.monkeybaa.com.au/learning/theatre-access-program>

Monkey Baa's shift to incursions

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted the traditional practice of school excursions. Prior to the pandemic, excursions were a prominent feature in school programs, particularly in Sydney, allowing students to experience art and creativity firsthand. Monkey Baa had strong relationships with schools, facilitating these excursions to enrich students' educational experiences.

However, post-COVID, very few schools have returned fully to the practice of excursions. The challenges contributing to this shift include a lack of teacher resources, compounded by the administrative burden of risk assessments and other logistics, and funding constraints, particularly in outer Western Sydney. Equity issues also arose, with excursions predominantly occurring in private schools or inner-city locations, leaving students in less affluent areas with fewer opportunities.

Pivot to incursion programs: In response to these challenges, Monkey Baa pivoted to developing a robust incursion program. This initiative involves sending teaching artists directly into schools to deliver workshops. Key features and benefits of the incursion program include reduced burden on teachers, as incursions are logistically simpler and require less supervision and administrative effort.

Accessibility is improved by bringing the arts directly to schools, ensuring more students can benefit from creative experiences without the need to travel. Monkey Baa's history of delivering workshops attached to shows across the country, including regional New South Wales, provided a strong foundation for scaling up incursions.

Positive outcomes: The incursion programs have been well-received by schools, demonstrating several positive outcomes. There has been a noticeable increase in the uptake of incursion programs among schools, highlighting their preference for this format. Students benefit from high-quality, interactive arts education within their own school environment.

To enhance the impact and accessibility of the incursion program, Monkey Baa is exploring the following strategies: securing additional funding from philanthropic and government sources to expand the program's reach and sustainability, partnering with other arts organisations to create a coordinated, statewide theatre access initiative, and investing in infrastructure, such as a dedicated vehicle, to facilitate the transportation of teaching artists to remote and under-resourced schools.

To My Future Self

The "To My Future Self" project is a collaborative initiative developed through the Department of Community and Justice Youth Program. Monkey Baa recently received support to create a co-designed work led by youth, exploring themes of identity, self, and their envisioned future selves.

This project leverages the safety and creativity of arts environments to allow young people to explore these themes through various artistic practices.

Partnership and implementation: Monkey Baa partnered with Headspace in Port Macquarie to work with a group of LGBTQIA+ and queer-exploring youth. The project is specifically designed to support these regionally based young people by exposing them to professional artists and exploring creativity in the context of theatre production.

The initiative is co-led by the young participants, with significant input and advice provided through an advisory council, ensuring that the youth's voices and perspectives are at the forefront of the project.

Youth-led co-creation: The project emphasises collaboration and co-creation, with young people leading the exploration of their identities and future selves through artistic expression. This approach ensures that the work resonates deeply with the participants and reflects their unique experiences and perspectives.

Professional artistic exposure: By partnering with professional artists, the youth gain valuable insights and skills in various art forms, enhancing their creative capabilities and providing them with new avenues for self-expression.

Support for diverse young people: The project specifically targets LGBTQIA+ youth in regional areas, addressing the intersectional challenges faced by queer young people in remote locations. This focus provides much-needed support and visibility for a marginalised group, fostering a sense of community and belonging.

The project has just begun, but the potential outcomes are highly promising. By partnering with departments like the Department of Community and Justice and community groups like Headspace, Monkey Baa amplifies the impact of its work with young people. This case study highlights the importance of such partnerships in creating meaningful, supportive environments for diverse youth to explore and express their identities.