

New report finds big gaps in provision of music education

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Evidence suggests policymakers need to see music as a vital tool in improving student outcomes. *Photo: Kitty Hill*

Last week the Victorian Parliament's education and training committee tabled its report, *Inquiry into the extent, benefits and potential of music education in Victorian schools*. The cross-party committee found there was a "compelling case" for all students to have access to a quality music program.

Music education for children is important for many reasons. Jason Ziino, the music director at Macleod College, told the committee: "It is a unique art form that speaks to our souls and crosses cultural, ethnic and political borders. Whether it exists as an accompaniment to or the focus of our lives, it is omnipresent."

All well and good, some might say, but what about the push to improve literacy and numeracy results? Would an increased focus on music result in less attention in these areas? What would happen to NAPLAN results if extra resources were directed towards music?

The evidence suggests that rather than viewing music education as a distraction from these "core" learning areas, policymakers need to see it as a vital tool in improving student outcomes in a range of areas, including literacy and numeracy. Music is a catalyst for better performance in many aspects of education.

Researchers have concluded that music has a big impact on improving student wellbeing and engagement in their schooling. The Song Room, a not-for-profit organisation that provides music programs in schools in disadvantaged areas, commissioned Professor Brian Caldwell and Dr Tanya Vaughan to measure the effect of its program. Their findings included a 65 per cent drop in absenteeism, higher grades in subjects such as English, mathematics and science, and improvements to students' social skills, resilience and confidence.

Unfortunately, in Victoria we don't know details such as how many students receive meaningful music education, or how many instrumental music teachers are in our schools.

The lack of data collection by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, straining under the burden of budget cuts, means the committee was unable to properly assess the current provision of music in our schools. Relying on the submissions and evidence from 244 organisations and individuals, along with visits to schools, it was clear to the committee that although there are examples of excellent music education being provided, the benefits of music education are not available to all – with students in disadvantaged and rural areas most likely to miss out. Schools in these areas were less likely to have a specialist music teacher, and families struggled to fund extra tuition and instrument costs.

Organisations such as the Song Room and Musica Viva aim to bridge the gap by providing music programs in those areas, but the fundamental inequity remains: if you live in a poor or remote area, you're less likely to experience the value of music in education.

More fundamentally, that not-for-profit organisations are needed to meet the music needs of disadvantaged schools is an indication of the failure of the education system to provide access to this important part of the curriculum. The government has six months to respond to the committee's recommendations.

For a copy of the report, go to www.parliament.vic.gov.au/etc/inquiries/article/1965

Colin Brooks is Labor MP for Bundoora and deputy chairman of the education and training committee.

Read more: <http://www.smh.com.au/national/education/new-report-finds-big-gaps-in-provision-of-music-education-20131115-2xksy.html#ixzz2l4J0AvhB>