



**THE TONY
FOUNDATION**

**NSRA: REVIEW TO INFORM A BETTER
AND FAIRER EDUCATION SYSTEM**

**Submission from Music Education: Right from the Start
2 August 2023**

[Music Education: Right from the Start](#) is a collaborative national initiative led by Alberts | The Tony Foundation. This is a broad-based, and growing, collaboration across education, research, the music industry and philanthropy.

We welcome this opportunity to respond to several of the questions raised in the Expert Panel's discussion paper. In doing so, we are conscious of the volume of material with which the Panel is dealing, and we have consequently erred here on the side of brevity. We provide several links to a selection of papers and research. We remain very willing to elaborate on any of the matters covered in this submission. We can provide relevant research citations if that would be helpful – though a number are listed in *Music Education: A Sound Investment* report noted below.

General Observations

- We support the twin goals set out in the Mparntwe Education Declaration
- We appreciate the Panel's recognition that Australian schooling falls well short in delivering on the Declaration's aspirations of a world-class education system and that 'excellence in education should enable *all students* [emphasis added] to achieve their ambitions and realise their potential'.
- Music Education: Right from the Start embodies these efforts through its straightforward objective that all Australian primary school children need, and have a right to, a quality, sequential and ongoing music education.
- Notwithstanding the Australian curriculum, jurisdictional curricula and syllabi, extensive reviews (including a comprehensive national review in 2005) for music education, there is no dispute that the needs, and the established expectations, of a significant (but unknown) number of school students are not being met.
- **We would urge the Panel to consider two directly related questions which would likely shine light on the broader education shortcomings highlighted in the Consultation Paper:**
 - How is it possible for the established expectations of a quality music education to be so easily disregarded?
 - What is the opportunity cost for students in terms of failing to deliver the proven benefits (student cognitive development, educational attainment, student engagement, wellbeing, personal and social development) of a quality, sequential and ongoing music education?

We would suggest that a quality music education has a positive and substantial contribution to make in addressing many of the key issues identified in the Consultation Paper, and recent reports, including the NSRA review by the Productivity Commission [2022]. We should be looking for broader solutions involving the interplay of education offerings across literacy and numeracy, equity and student wellbeing.

Music education offers an exemplary opportunity to unpack the challenges, and to open the door significantly wider to the stated desire for (and expectation of) a holistic education.



1. Meeting the needs of all students and shaping the nation's future

We appreciate the Panel's emphasis on 'implementing evidence-based practice consistently'. However, we would argue that the evidence base should be linked knowledge and practice if it is to optimise the agreed outcomes. There is a high risk in decoupling knowledge and practice.

There is a very substantial body of research – both in the neurosciences and social sciences - on the impact of music education covering the key areas identified in the Consultation Paper: cognitive, emotional, social development, educational participation and engagement. A succinct overview can be found in [Music Education: A Sound Investment](#), by Dr Anita Collins, Dr Rachael Dwyer and Aden Date.

With respect to the evidence-base for practice, there are a number of reports and assessments available on programs and classroom practice. However, the more telling issue is that evidence on quality practice is limited by the fact that quality music education is itself limited in its reach across Australian primary schools.

This reality is directly relevant to the Panel's concerns regarding inequity in the delivery of excellence in education.

Any proposal from the Panel that does not lift access and excellence for primary school students in such a core curriculum area would be inadequate. It is imperative, we would suggest, that the Panel's proposed roadmap for reform that requires a 'focus attention and investment on priority areas' should not be so narrow that it risks becoming self-limiting.

We would urge the panel to test the breadth of its proposals to Ministers by asking: would our recommendations expand access to quality, sequential and ongoing music education?

2. Improving student outcomes – including for students most at risk of falling behind

We support the Panel's affirmation that 'equity and excellence are interconnected'. Indeed, this view underscores our own work. We confine our comments here to the following questions in chapter 2:

1. What are the most important student outcomes for Australian school students that should be measured in the next NSRA? Should these go beyond academic performance (for example, attendance and engagement)?
 - We would suggest that academic performance alone is inadequate. Measures should capture attendance and engagement (including across the curriculum).
 - Evidence of outcomes should be based on both quantitative and appropriate qualitative research, including with students, across the priority cohorts (such as rural, disadvantage and other groups identified in the Consultation Paper).
 - NSRA should provide for all data to be publicly available as the default with provision for restrictions on privacy and security grounds when appropriate.

We have adopted two measures for the provision of music education in primary schools:

- a. The number (%) of primary students who have access to music education;
- b. The number of primary schools delivering music education which meets the agreed quality benchmarks.

With respect to an appropriate standard or benchmark, working with our collaborators, we sought to establish a common understanding of what constitutes a 'quality' music education. This has been published as [An Understanding of Quality Music Education](#).

The Panel may not be surprised to hear that the more fundamental issue is the near-total absence of relevant baseline data. This is recognised by education department officials. We are working to fill this gap constructively, collaborating with departments wherever possible. This is the case, for example, in South Australia (and soon in NSW) where we are partnering to conduct a survey of primary school teachers which has been designed and is being implemented by ACER.

NSRA needs to be clear on what baseline data is required, responsibility for its acquisition, timeliness, periodic repetition to establish changes over time, and agreement on public access to the data and findings.

3. Improving student health and wellbeing

We welcome the proposed priority being given to mental health and wellbeing in the NSRA.

A genuine effort to improve student health and wellbeing is dependent on more than identification and targeted interventions.

We would urge the Panel to give further consideration to the potential for prevention of ill mental health, improving wellbeing and better equipping all students to manage the inevitable pressures that accompany growth and development. This requires explicit investment and support in programs and activities, teacher preparation and school culture alongside investment targeting those young people whose mental health and wellbeing are either at high risk or already affected.

Music education is proven to be one important means for achieving these ambitions.

4. Our current and future teachers

Directly relevant to the Panel's consideration of this question is new research we have recently released on the provision of music education in primary teaching degrees in Australia. *Fading Notes: Music Education for the Next Generation of Primary Teachers* makes for sobering reading. The [summary report](#) includes the key findings and a number of suggestions for addressing the situation. The [Full Report](#) provides more detail on the data and findings.

We are fully aware of the multiple workforce issues plaguing education at this time. We would expect that the NSRA will be bold in getting ahead of the game by investing in teacher training, professional development and alternative pathways.

This is already under discussion in looking to the future of music education. In Queensland, for example, we understand that the Department is actively discussing options for upskilling or specific training (such as micro-credentials) to deliver suitably qualified music educators in the light of the commitment in that state to one hour of music education each week for every primary school student delivered by a trained music educator.

NSRA should be clear on expectations regarding initial teacher preparation both for generalist classroom teachers in jurisdictions where they will be expected to deliver music education as well as for specialist music educators.

5. Collecting data to inform decision-making and boost student outcomes

Refer to our feedback on section 2 above.

We would make several additional observations:

- The current performance measures draw on extensive existing sources (such as NAPLAN, National Schools Statistics Collection, PISA, TIMSS) with considerable overlap in focus, and consequently ignore significant gaps in this existing data collection;
- The suggestion of the two modest high-level measures on music education is consistent with the stated intentions detailed in the current Measurement Framework for Schooling in Australia;
- This is highly likely to be 'relevant and of interest to the public'; and
- This addition provides a fuller sense of the breadth of education, consistent with the Mparntwe Declaration's ambitions.

The Panel makes the very important point that 'schools, systems and jurisdictions ...collect a significant amount of data, but this data is not regularly shared'. The emphasis appears to be on improved data sharing between education authorities.

We would suggest that NSRA should be more ambitious in this regard by establishing an expectation that all data (with necessary exemptions) should be widely available, including to the public. An immediate goal should be for each jurisdiction to make publicly available a compendium of what data is collected and procedures for accessing it with an explicit objective of optimising its value. This would almost immediately increase use of the data by researchers and research institutions who could be expected to mine it for analysis with the evident potential for new insights and improved evidence for policy-making, evaluation, transparency and accountability, consistent with the Panel's central recommendation.

Recommendations:

1. Further consideration should be given to articulating how the broader educational ambitions and expectations, such as music education, are within the terms of the next NSRA, what measures are required and how the data is to be captured.
2. An immediate goal should be for each jurisdiction to make publicly available a compendium of what data is collected and procedures for accessing it with an explicit objective of optimising its value.
3. Evidence of outcomes should be based on both quantitative and appropriate qualitative research, including with students, across the priority cohorts (such as rural, disadvantage and other groups identified in the Consultation Paper).
4. NSRA should provide for all data to be publicly available as the default with provision for restrictions on privacy and security grounds when appropriate.
5. NSRA should adopt two measures for the provision of music education in primary schools:
 - i. The number (%) of primary students who have access to music education;
 - ii. The number of primary schools delivering music education which meets the agreed quality benchmarks.
6. It is necessary to establish a common understanding of what constitutes a 'quality' music education such as that articulated through Music Education: Right from the Start; this has been published as An Understanding of Quality Music Education.
7. Further consideration to the potential for the prevention of ill mental health, improving wellbeing and better equipping all students to manage the inevitable pressures that accompany growth and development. Underpinned by explicit investment and support in programs and activities, teacher preparation and school culture alongside investment

targeting those young people whose mental health and wellbeing are either at high risk or already affected.

In Conclusion

Australian education confronts a strange paradox: at the same time as our educational leaders, national declarations and curricula emphasise the importance of a holistic education that embraces the student's personal and social development, well-being and appreciation of Australian society, schools and teachers are under substantial pressure to devote their attention to a small number of the Key Learning Areas (KLAs): literacy, numeracy and the STEM disciplines.

This single-minded focus inevitably narrows the educational spectrum while at the same time dominating the school day. The 'residual' time becomes something of a battleground as the remaining learning areas compete for attention. The more thinly time is spread the greater the risk of superficial learning with all that means for students.

While our focus is specifically on music, we have chosen to do so conscious that the research evidence is strongest here and that recognition of the benefits of quality music education offers the potential to open the space for the Arts more generally.

If we can assist the Panel further, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Emily Albert
Executive Director
Alberts | The Tony Foundation

ATTACHMENTS:

- A. Music Education: A Sound Investment**
- B. An Understanding of Quality Music Education**
- C. Fading Notes: Summary Report**