

Alex Masso

17<sup>th</sup> September 2020

To Whom It May Concern,

I have developed a proposal for the NSW Government to respond to the various challenges facing school music ensembles in 2020. This was motivated by recent changes to health guidelines in NSW (restricting the use of wind instruments and singing) and there is work being done to address those guidelines.

My view is that a managed return to musical activities is a good idea but given the challenges we have faced this year, more needs to be done. My experience is working 'on the ground' in music education as a tutor and conductor, and talking to colleagues about the challenges and responses. I see consultation and health guidelines as just one of four necessary responses to this year's challenges.

The key proposal here is Part 3, a stimulus payment for school music ensembles.

I have spoken to at least a dozen music educators and advocates about this proposal since new guidelines were introduced a month ago, and adjusted my initial ideas substantially based on those discussions. I welcome any opportunity to discuss this further.

Regards,

Alex Masso

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## **Summary**

This proposal is a concept for making school music ensembles resilient in the face of various challenges in 2020.

There are four pillars, three of which ought to involve the NSW government and two requiring financial support.

These initiatives are particularly targeted towards the kinds of co-curricular programs that involve casual and contract professional educators (conductors, tutors) and have strong parental involvement. This has been a challenging enough year for everyone and the various restrictions on gatherings, musical activities and school-based activities have made this an extraordinarily challenging year for music education.

### **Four Pillars:**

#### 1. Consultation (NSW Health)

- Working group for the intersection of music education, musical activities and health advice
- This is a major focus of the coalition of music organisations, the Roundtable of Instrumental, Vocal and Music Education Organisations (RIVMEO).
- Timeframe: commenced in September 2020

#### 2. Sector Initiatives

- Commenced in Term 1 2020 ongoing
- Professional Development
- Innovation and fast adaptation in the delivery of music programs

#### 3. Support Existing Music Programs in Schools

- Subsidise musical activities / programs already operating in schools.
- Any music program in public schools, within or outside the classroom, where there is a cost to parents.
- Timeframe: as soon as possible.

#### 4. Special resilience & rebuilding support (funding and advice) for school-based music activities (Department of Education)

- Funding, on application, for school music programs
- Specialist support from within the Department of Education and/or experts working in the field
- Timeframe: Two years, starting immediately with funding in time for the 2021 and 2022 school years, with a view to extending the initiative

## Background

On 23<sup>rd</sup> March, major changes were announced for NSW public schools including a drastic but temporary reduction in the number of student attending school and restrictions on in-school and inter-school activities.

The result was to effectively prohibit face-to-face music tuition and ensembles (rehearsals & performances) in public schools for some time. Independent and Catholic schools had their own policies but followed a similar model. Bands and orchestras were either suspended or moved to an online format.

A common scenario in NSW public schools is to have an ensemble (or several ensembles) run by some combination of school staff, specialist instrumental tutors and conductors (working on a contract or casual basis), an external provider, and/or the P & C. There are many models of operation but a common theme is the external music educators coming to the school, having one or more bands or ensembles (strings, concert band, percussion, jazz, etc) and a program that is effectively funded by the parents. There is a discrepancy in the provision of these programs since they are not funded by government, this is a problem that is not addressed in this proposal but certainly should be considered.

Many of these programs responded by moving to online sessions, individual learning of the same music, some compiled audio and video performances of students playing at home, and so on. Many instrumental tutors work in schools to complement the ensemble program, and these lessons typically moved online.

There were many challenges during this period, including pedagogical and technological challenges, funding, student retention, a higher workload for those casual and contract conductors and tutors that pivoted to the new format, and particular challenges for students that found this format more challenging to engage with.

Anecdotally, there are some school ensemble programs that have survived well, others have had a drop in numbers, some have discontinued altogether, and many are dealing with motivational challenges caused by that period away from face-to-face playing (which was longer than the period away from regular school), lack of performance opportunities, and the various challenges faced by parents, students and teachers during the pandemic.

On 17<sup>th</sup> August a major change to the guidelines effectively closed down face-to-face rehearsals for many of these ensembles. The major factor is the restriction on wind instruments (woodwind and brass, according to the NSW Department of Education guidelines), and there are other issues around combining student cohorts, year groups, bringing in external providers and so on. The result appears to be that ensembles are now either suspended (for a short time, or for the rest of 2020), in extreme cases discontinued altogether, moving to a face-to-face session without playing, or back to online delivery of the program.

Of course everybody is better prepared now than they were in March/April and there has been a major effort to adapt and upskill music educators to keep these programs running and keep students involved. There are several issues with this second shutdown that weren't present with the first:

1. Innovation fatigue. Conductors / educators have to very quickly pivot to another (unspecified) period of change, having done so under different circumstances very recently.
2. Uncertainty. You could say that there was uncertainty with the first shutdown in March, and there was, but that was based on a community-wide effort to reduce community transmission with an understanding that things would open up when that was under control.

The August situation is not triggered by anything (a case involving music programs, or new and conclusive research, or high levels of community transmission), other than perhaps a crescendo of concern about wind instruments that seems to have been initiated by NSW Health.

3. Low community transmission. Unlike the time when the wider community generally understood that we would be in the lockdown together, in August parents and students are wondering why this is necessary.
4. Very soon after recommencing. Although some school music programs recommenced as early as mid-term 2, many did not return to face-to-face lessons and rehearsals until the start of term 3 (if they returned at all). In those cases, there were only four weeks of 'normal' rehearsals before the new changes.

This kind of activity is quite precarious and cannot be taken for granted. Right now, school music ensembles are facing a range of challenges and some may not recover.

Music ensembles are often a key part of a school's identity, a cherished co-curricular activity for students to participate in, and a rich learning environment for music within a school.

The effects of school music programs, including in primary schools, are felt throughout the music sector for years beyond the time students are involved in these programs. Feedback from colleagues has indicated there is a reduction in student participation this year and those reduced numbers may follow this cohort of students through their time at school.

Students playing music in primary school go on to study music at high school, they are a substantial part of the elective (Band 5) and HSC Music (Band 6) cohort. The ranks of professional musicians across a wide range of genres and ensembles including Australia's professional orchestras include musicians that began playing in a school ensemble, as are community ensembles. Students that have had a rich experience in music, whether or not they pursue playing later in life, go on to be audience members and consumers of music.

Furthermore, school-based music programs employ professional musicians with portfolio careers, balancing teaching, live performance and other work. This kind of work forms an important part of the careers and livelihoods of professional musicians.

The circumstances of 2020 have challenged the resilience of these music programs in schools and an intervention is needed to boost morale and resources at a difficult time.

This proposal gives a number of suggestions for NSW Government actions. They should be taken together as a response to these challenges, as they address different issues.

## **Part 1. Consultation**

### NSW Health

- Working group for the intersection of music education, musical activities and health advice
- Timeframe: immediately

There needs to be a working group or committee involving working music educators and representatives from NSW Health, including or in close consultation with the Department of Education. This ought to address:

- A roadmap to reopening musical activities. What would trigger an easing of restrictions, how can risks be managed, and so on.
- Emerging research on covid transmission in music education settings. The areas of concern are wind instruments and group singing, and some important research is not yet complete.
- Avoiding the situation that has occurred in Term 3 this year. A fast consultation mechanism with the sector to address issues could do this.
- The consistency of messaging and guidelines, including for community-based, professional and school-based music.

## **Part 2. Sector initiatives**

This is presented here as one of the pillars of the response to the Covid restrictions on school music ensembles. This activity is largely devised, produced, and delivered by NSW music educators.

- Individual innovation in delivery of music education
- Professional development, provided (often free) by music organisations
- Resources produced by The Arts Unit and others
- Timeframe: commenced in Term 1 2020, ongoing

Music educators are responding to the current situation, as they have been all year, to keep children engaged with their musical development as best they can. For many schools this has included transitioning to online rehearsals, using Smart Music software to continue providing resources to students, preparing online video performances, recordings and online concerts, and other creative responses to this situation.

More recently, with the August guidelines allowing groups to meet but not allowing wind instruments to play, some have returned to the model they used in Term 2 while others are using games, group percussion playing, and other initiatives.

The Australian Band and Orchestra Directors Association (ABODA), Australian Society for Music Education (ASME) and others have responded quickly with online professional development, in both phases of restrictions (late term 1, then mid-term 3). This has been a fast, efficient and valuable part of the resilience of school music programs in NSW. The Arts Unit also quickly responded to provide online resources, including for classroom and ensemble music programs.

Recently there has been a proposal to the NSW Police Band to support conductors with resources. Typically in Term 4, school bands will provide an information session to prospective students (typically in year 2), and give them a chance to try different instruments. With restrictions on this kind of activity, the Police Band has been asked to provide instrument demonstrations that would be fit for purpose and available to music educators.

### **Part 3. Support Existing Music Programs in Schools**

#### Stimulus Payment for School Music Ensembles

##### Department of Education

- Flat or average payment of \$5000 per school that has an established music ensemble program
- Subsidy provided via schools and/or P & Cs
- Timeframe: as soon as possible

One of the major issues with the current situation is that professionals working in schools but outside of permanent employment, ie. casual staff, conductors and tutors, external providers of music programs within or outside school hours, are having their work affected. Many musicians earn their living through a combination of professional performance work, which is now severely reduced or non-existent, and teaching in schools. This work is typically not funded by government and has none of the security of salaried DET staff.

The proposal is to support that work and those professionals, and to maintain the music education activities already operating in schools, simply to get to the end of 2020 with a program still running and students still involved.

The Creative Kids initiative is estimated to cost approximately \$50 million per annum, this is a good initiative and one way to provide support would be a second Creative Kids voucher (to bring the program in line with Active Kids, which has two vouchers). This proposal is much more targeted and would cost considerably less than doubling the Creative Kids budget.

The proposal is that this payment would be:

- Available to at least all government schools in NSW;
- Potentially sector blind, if the NSW government chooses to support non-government schools and community-based ensembles, for example;
- Based on demonstrating that a music ensemble is established;
- Flexible, to allow schools in different situations to respond to their needs. For example, one might subsidise the cost of participation, another might use financial support to fill the gap left by fundraising activities that are not currently available, another might subsidise the cost of running the ensemble while there is a reduction in student participation;
- Based on evidence of a music ensemble that meets the criteria, not the proposed activity. More 'job keeper' than 'arts grant'.

It would not be:

- Based on a project;
- To start an ensemble or musical activity where there is not already one at the school;
- Competitive.

#### **Part 4. Special resilience & rebuilding support (funding and advice/mentoring) for school-based music activities**

Department of Education

- Funding, on application, for school music programs
- Specialist support from within the Department of Education and/or experts working in the field
- Timeframe: Two years, with funding and support in time for the 2021 and 2022 school years, with a view to extending the initiative

This is not so much for programs that have handled 2020 relatively well, but for situations where the program does not have established resilience, is new and not well established, faced more challenging circumstances, or was simply less prepared to cope with the covid-19 restrictions. For schools in this position 2020 may not be the time to initiate a program, so this ought to be provided when there is more certainty around guidelines of what is permitted in schools. Hence, at least a two year timeframe.

There are cases where a school's music ensemble program has simply ceased to exist, is low in numbers, or has faced particular challenges with this year's disruptions. Currently there is no specific funding or support for establishing or building up a music program at a school, under whatever model the school desires (choirs and singing-based programs, Orff or Kodaly-based classroom music, musical theatre productions, bands and orchestras, songwriting programs, or other initiatives).

The proposal is to establish ongoing funding for a period of several years for school-based music programs that are becoming established (in the first five years of operation), recovering from a major challenge (those programs that were severely affected by restrictions this year), or expanding an existing program. This should be supported by experts within the Department of Education and/or working in the field.