

**Submission  
No 11**

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

**Organisation:** The Song Room

**Date Received:** 22 July 2024

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## **Submission to the Joint Select Committee on Arts and Music Education and Training in New South Wales. July 2024.**

The Song Room is the only Australian not for profit education organisation delivering multi-year, multi-artform, in-school arts learning programs with student and teacher outcomes.

Our mission is that all Australian children can participate in the arts to enhance their education, personal development and community involvement regardless of geographical, financial or social disadvantage. This is achieved by embedding arts learning programs in primary schools and their communities, tailored to their unique strengths and needs.

In 2024 we celebrate our 25th anniversary. In that time more than 500,000 Australian students and teachers have directly participated in our sequential arts education programs, and over 36,000 teachers have subscribed to our digital arts education portal, ARTS:LIVE.

The Song Room is currently operating in around 130 schools in five states and territories across Australia. It employs over 100 people, including 60-80 qualified and experienced contract Teaching Artists (ranging from qualified specialist teachers to arts therapists and artists with classroom experience) representing all curriculum artforms and relevant cross curricular priorities. We have been operating in NSW for over 20 years, currently in 12 schools in the Bankstown and Mt Druitt area of Sydney. These programs focus on First Nations led arts and cultural activities and the development of social emotional learning skills through the arts.

**The Song Room recognises that all primary school students need, and have the right to a quality, sequential and ongoing arts education.**

The Song Room has developed a rigorous program logic underpinned by its expertise and evidence base. It delivers an integrated approach to arts education which includes curriculum aligned, sequential classroom and hybrid learning, professional learning for generalist primary school teachers in the arts and creative pedagogies, access to online Australian arts education resources via ARTS:LIVE, and community-driven engagement projects in the arts. The combination of these elements is designed to support the development of strong school cultures centred on the arts, academic achievement, engagement and wellbeing outcomes.



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The seminal research study *Bridging the Gap in School Achievement Through the Arts* (see attached) published in 2011, fortified The Song Room's reputation as a leading contributor to Australia's education ecosystem and a critical advocate for the arts in schools. The research provided evidence on the impact of a quality arts education for numeracy and literacy acquisition, school attendance and engagement, and social and emotional wellbeing through participation in weekly classes. To our knowledge a study of its size and quality has not been achieved since.

It is essential that equal opportunities are provided for all students to participate in, and to learn about the diverse ways that artists create art and audiences respond to it. Currently around 80% of The Song Room's programs annually are delivered in regional and remote locations where possible by local Teaching Artists.

The need to address social and educational inequities, and the wellbeing of young Australians, is essential if we intend to live in a truly prosperous society. The arts provide a powerful way to uplift, enrich and transform our communities. Arts education helps develop the full range of cognitive, emotional and social skills essential for young people to thrive. Arts learning is a critical aspect of a quality education: it promotes learning, it can increase academic performance in other subjects, it can improve school attendance, it teaches students about other cultures and their own, and stimulates creativity and critical thinking.

All students benefit from an education that explores diversity, nurtures inclusivity, provides positive representations of culture and identity, promotes equality and equity, and increases understanding, value and recognition of cultures, histories, knowledge and differing perspectives. The arts can do all these things.

With rising costs of living and an increasing gap between those that have opportunities to access the arts and those that do not, schools are increasingly becoming the only place where young people can be introduced to the arts. Coupled with a severe teacher shortage and the lack of ITE provision for arts specialists in Australian universities it is indeed time to act. The case for the collective positive impact of a quality arts education on young people and society has been heard and confirmed many, many times over. It's time to invest heavily in primary school arts education in NSW.

### **1(a) The quality and effectiveness of arts and creative industries education:**

#### **PROGRESS**

The Song Room supports The Tony Foundation | Music Education Right From the Start's position that quality music education requires one hour each week of classroom time



taught by qualified music educators. It also supports the targets for 50% of public primary schools to be delivering a quality music education by 2027.

TSR provides a critical service to the education ecosystem through the design and delivery of educational programs aligned to arts curricula and across other learning areas. It also serves to develop quality teaching practice in the arts and creative pedagogical approaches which are urgently required to build the confidence and capability of generalist primary school teachers, and the capacity of the teaching profession.

The Song Room is able to scale significantly to meet the demands of systems nationally including NSW to support the planned, sequenced, assessed and measured delivery of music and arts education in Australian primary schools. In Victoria, it delivers the Department of Education's *Music In Schools* project in 80 regional and metro schools each year and has done so for seven years (totalling around 550 schools to date). In 2022, we scaled to deliver arts and wellbeing programs in an additional 100 Victorian schools in recovery efforts related to the Pandemic (for programs totally 220 schools that year). Our best practice approach to music and arts learning is tried and tested, impactful, ready to scale and cost effective.

### **CURRICULUM**

While the NSW Curriculum in Creative Arts K-6, including NESA's recent review, offers a good balance of specificity and scope for individual teacher practice, it is unrealistic to expect teachers to cover all curriculum areas in the arts in the time allocated and with the teacher skills evident in primary schools.

While NESA aims to provide support in the syllabus ("*This syllabus enables schools to meet this requirement and to broaden students' learning experiences in Creative Arts through Drama and Dance*") in The Song Room's experience in NSW schools this is rarely a reality.

TSR would argue that adequate teaching of the Creative Arts is hampered due to the:

- Limited confidence and capability of generalist teachers to teach the arts and music
- A lack of Specialist Arts teachers
- Limited value placed on the arts at school leadership level
- Limited time to include arts lessons in a busy school day

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Through experiences in visual arts, music, dance, drama or media arts, young people can increase their understanding of artistic values, practices, processes and techniques. They develop their creative and expressive capacities by making and responding to art.

Students participating in Song Room programs build their connections to friends, their learning environment and their school community. Through collaborative art-making projects, they develop increased feelings of school belonging and pride as valued members of the school community. Students are provided with opportunities to lead community arts projects which can build their confidence and motivation as learners, providing opportunities for them to experience success at school. At The Song Room, every effort is made to ensure that young people can be active agents in their learning through the arts, able to imagine new possibilities, reframe life stories and enact the change they want to see, rather than be passive recipients of learning pre-determined by others.

Participation in sequential arts education explicitly teaches the core competencies of social and emotional learning. This includes the intrapersonal competencies of self-awareness, self-management and responsible decision making as well as the interpersonal competencies of social awareness and relationship skills. The Song Room provides schools with a place-based, evidence-informed and curriculum-aligned sequential arts program that focuses on the explicit teaching of social and emotional skills to positively impact student learning and wellbeing and to nurture inclusive, connected and positive school communities.

In 2021, the National Mental Health Commission developed the first National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy due to increasing rates of poor mental health in Australia. The following statistics from the strategy evidence the need for increased wellbeing supports in schools for primary aged children:

- Half of all adult mental health challenges in Australia emerge before the age of 14
- More than 50% of children experiencing mental health challenges in Australia are not receiving any professional help.
- Anxiety, depressive disorders and conduct disorders account for 3 of the 5 leading causes of disease burden for children aged 5 – 14 years.
- 7 out of 10 of the most common presentations to paediatricians are for mental health.
- Children who experience disadvantage are at increased risk of experiencing mental ill health

The role of the arts in supporting wellbeing has been understood throughout history and across cultures, resulting in the emergence of an interdisciplinary field of 'arts for



health and well-being' in the last 60 years.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, “there is growing evidence that active participation in the arts can enhance social connectedness, confidence, self-esteem, mood, concentration, emotional development and mental health and wellbeing.”<sup>2</sup> The Song Room has actively contributed to this research base.

Independent research conducted into the impact of The Song Room’s programs showed that through participation in sequential arts learning students experienced:

- Improved social-emotional well-being outcomes - reduced depression and anxiety, enhanced self-esteem, and improved school engagement
- Higher school attendance rates - reduced absenteeism by over 65%<sup>3</sup>

Limited opportunities to participate in the arts, either as creators or audience members, negatively impacts skills development and opportunities to become life-long lovers of the arts. A tough economic outlook means that families are struggling to provide for extra-curricular arts lessons, making participation at school a rare and important opportunity. If not addressed at school, the quality of artistic product, and the health of the creative economy through the development of future audiences is at risk.

### **1(b) The quality and effectiveness of music education and training:**

Initial Teacher Education (ITE) provides limited exposure to the arts, resulting in early career teachers who lack the confidence and capability to teach and assess the arts. Music Education Right from the Start’s report, *Fading Notes: The state of music education for the next generation of primary school teachers* illustrates the current situation with stark clarity. In addition, The Song Room’s experience in schools is that teachers are often willing but lack the specialist training in arts education and creative pedagogical approaches to lead the arts in their school. This results in a watering down of the teaching and learning that constitutes quality arts education, and compromises the skills developed by young people.

Generalist teachers who are given the opportunity to participate in 10 weeks of in-class professional learning and mentoring with The Song Room in music education make quick and considerable gains in their confidence and skills. These programs are

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Government 2021, Australian Early Development Census (AEDC). Retrieved from: <https://www.aedc.gov.au/resources/detail/2021-aedc-national-report>

<sup>2</sup> Parliament of Victoria. Education and Training Committee. *Inquiry into the extent, benefits and potential of music education in Victorian schools*. 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Caldwell, B. and Vaughan, T. 2011, *Bridging the Gap in School Achievement Through the Arts*. Retrieved from: <https://www.songroom.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Bridging-the-Gap-in-School-Achievement-through-the-Arts.pdf>

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scalable and could significantly increase the capacity of the profession. The Song Room currently operates in 80 schools in regional and metro Victoria with DUET an in-class professional learning in music and social emotional learning through the arts.

Teachers need more time to teach<sup>4</sup> and this includes the arts curriculum. Alternatively, schools should be able to rely on a learning ecosystem which provides access to expert organisations like The Song Room to deliver quality arts education for students and develop the skills of teachers within classroom settings.

Music is the dominant art form in education. While the benefits of music for cognitive gain are clearly evidenced, we must not forget that visual arts, drama and dance are equally represented in the NSW Curriculum.

School leaders need increased awareness of the value of the arts for its educational and wellbeing benefits, and ability to support strong school cultures centred on the arts. There is increased acknowledgement of the arts as a universal intervention to help create a positive, inclusive and supporting school climate, building the preconditions for optimal student learning, development and wellbeing. But most Principals are swayed only when they have the opportunity to witness the direct influence of an arts program like The Song Room's on their students' behaviour, learning acquisition and contribution to the school community.

Australian students benefit from learning resources which reflect their own communities and cultures. Too often digital education resources used by Australian teachers are produced overseas. The Song Room would encourage continued investment in the creation of arts learning content which reflects the diversity of Australia's rich artistic practice. There are many arts organisations and institutions producing high quality learning resources. We would suggest that there is a need to house digital arts learning resources together to make them easier for both specialist and generalist teachers to access. ARTS:LIVE, The Song Room digital education portal houses thousands of arts learning lesson plans, resources, activities, and video learning stimulus.

In a fragmented, local digital education market, The Song Room's approach integrates the best in digital education with classroom practice. It demonstrates best practice in arts and creative pedagogies to lift learning. Our approach has the capability to flex across multiple learning environments and provides distinctly Australian content. Over 10 years, we have been able to provide teachers with continuous and elevated support to source and embed digital arts resources into their practice, and we are well-placed to build on this work.

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<sup>4</sup> Sonnemann J., Joiner R. Grattan Institute. Making time for great teaching. 2022.



The Song Room's CEO, Alice Gerlach, and Chair, Anthony McKay OA, offer to meet with the Committee. We also extend an invitation for the Committee to visit a Song Room program in the Bankstown or Mt Druitt area. This includes viewing a Teaching Artist class in action and meeting with school leadership and teachers to learn about their experience of working with The Song Room and overall, of the impact of music and the arts on student learning and teaching practice.

### **SUPPORT MATERIALS**

#### **Research and studies:**

Caldwell, B. and Vaughan, T. 2011, Bridging the Gap in School Achievement Through the Arts. Retrieved from: <https://www.songroom.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Bridging-the-Gap-in-School-Achievement-through-the-Arts.pdf>

Evidence for Learning Teaching and Learning Toolkit. Retrieved from: <https://evidenceforlearning.org.au/education-evidence/teaching-learning-toolkit/arts-participation>

Dr. Collins, A. Music Education Right from the Start. Music Education: A Sound Investment. Retrieved from [https://www.alberts.co/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Alberts\\_Music-Education-Report\\_A4.pdf](https://www.alberts.co/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Alberts_Music-Education-Report_A4.pdf)

#### **Additional Song Room case studies, testimonials and business performance:**

The Song Room's 2023 Year in Review - <https://www.songroom.org.au/wp-content/uploads/flipbook/2023/book.html>



### **CASE STUDY:**

#### **Community connects at Bankstown's Big Day of Learning.**

Weaving Yarns, The Song Room's Big Day of Learning at Bankstown Arts Centre in November 2023, was a joyous example of how the arts creates opportunities for inclusion, learning and the celebration of community.



Students from five schools in Bankstown came together for a day of arts learning to celebrate culture, creativity and collaboration and mark the end of a full year of sequential learning in the creative arts with The Song Room. Led by The Song Room Teaching Artists, with special guest artists and First Nations Elders, students participated in weaving, dancing, music and visual arts workshops, all designed to enhance social and emotional skills and wellbeing. The day ended in a high-energy performance of song and dance that had everyone cheering in celebration.

Every aspect of the day was designed to expose students to the supportive, diverse and creative community that they are a part of in Bankstown. After Darug Elder Aunty Lyn Martin's Welcome to Country, students broke out into three workshop groups designed to enhance their social and emotional learning skills through exposure to the arts and First Nations cultural practices. Each group was given a totem from the local Darug People: buru (kangaroo), guruwin (shark), and binyang (bird).

Aunty Karleen Green (Bundjalung (Munjarlie/Goojinburra) and Butchulla Kigali), one of NSW's most respected master weavers, shared her cultural and creative traditions in the first workshop. Students made their own Yarning stick, used to create space for respectful conversation.

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Teaching Artist, Koreena Leverett (Worimi), led the second workshop teaching students about cultural icons and symbols. They painted their totem's story onto a banner that was used as a backdrop in the final performance.

Students then wrote and choreographed a song and dance to express their totem with Teaching Artist and Community Liaison Officer Colin Watego and Teaching Artists Kelvin Testolin. Writing and rehearsing together set up a learning environment that allowed students to contribute ideas, listen to each other, and to try new things in the energy of the moment.

Finally, students came together in a performance that combined all they had learnt. Supported by The Song Room band – featuring Cesar Marin on bass, Steve Marin on drums and Jeremiah Sampson on keyboard – students performed their new song and dance. The day ended with schoolteachers, workshop artists and supporters joining the students on the dance floor in a dynamic celebration of community and culture.

The Big Day of Learning was a huge success. Students had an opportunity to creatively express their stories and identity and learn new skills in a joyful and inclusive environment.

We are proud to deliver this project in partnership with the incredible team from The Smith Family, Bankstown as part of the Department of Social Services Communities for Children Initiative. And thanks to the generous team from Alpha, The Athlete's Foot for kicking off the community celebration with a special gift of new school shoes for the students. Their partnership with The Song Room is helping to level the learning playing field for students across Australia.



### CASE STUDY:

#### Best practice music education drives demand in South Australia



*“In rural communities’ schools are often isolated. This isn’t just about music. This is about connection. We’re creating capacity and we’re creating culture within these school communities.”* – Scott Maxwell, TLC Teaching Artist Mentor, SA

The Limestone Coast in South Australia is quickly developing into a lighthouse region for quality music education. The benefits of The Song Room’s Transformational Learning Through Creativity program were witnessed by teachers and principals across the region. At the end of the three-year pilot program in 2022, schools in the area were crying out to take part.

The five primary schools that participated in the pilot (2020-2022) in regional South Australia flourished as a result of the program. The Song Room’s Teaching Artist Mentor, Scott Maxwell worked closely with teachers to build their skills and confidence to deliver quality music learning. Students’ engagement and participation at school increased, and school culture bloomed.

Scott says, *“the transformation in the students, the staff, the leadership and the attitudes towards the arts has been monumental. You get the feeling that you’re making a difference in their life. Not just their school life but their life in general.”*

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To build a supportive and thriving community, the program was rolled out beyond single school settings in a cluster approach to delivery. Connecting teachers and principals across the region helped to establish a strong community of practice. Teachers shared their learning and were able to support each other to bring quality music education to their students. Some schools felt so empowered by the program they invited neighbouring schools to attend and participate in classes with Scott.

The program culminated in the ‘TLC Huge Day Out’ where students, teachers and principals from five schools gathered at Millicent Civic and Arts Centre in November 2022 to experience music making on a large scale. The combined music class brought the community together to connect and collaborate, with over 400 attendees singing, stomping and practicing music together.

When the pilot came to an end in 2022, schools from across the region put their hands up to get The Song Room at their school. Demand was driven directly from schools to their regional Director at the SA Department for Education, reflecting the impact of the program in the area. Thanks to support from the South Australian Government, ten schools will participate in 2023 including, for the first time, five early years sites, and in 2024, 12 schools are taking part.

*‘The strength of the program is the sustainability of it. Teachers build the confidence and build the tools to continue with it. It’s broadened the experience of our students,’* says Anne-Marie Fitzgerald, Principal at Mt Burr School.

This Song Room program is helping to establish The Limestone Coast as a regional hub in best practice music education. A region that celebrates the arts across the community.

The Song Room’s work in South Australia is made possible by the South Australian Government’s Music Innovation Fund.