

Submission  
No 66

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

**Organisation:** Gunnedah Conservatorium

**Date Received:** 26 July 2024

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**Submission to the Joint Select Committee on Arts and Music Education and Training in New South Wales: Inquiry into arts and music education in New South Wales**

Organisation: Gunnedah Conservatorium  
144-152 Conadilly Street  
Gunnedah, Gamilaraay Country

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**Introduction**

Gunnedah Conservatorium (formerly Gunnedah Music Centre) has strived to provide affordable, quality music education to Gunnedah residents since 1987.

The organisation was launched following an extremely well attended public meeting at the Convent of Mercy. At the time the Namoi Valley Independent reported that enthused by the success of the Tamworth Regional Music Centre more than 90 people attended the meeting to set up a similar organisation in Gunnedah. With several private piano teachers retiring or relocating the community was focused on establishing an organisation which was not reliant on one person or one teacher and could coordinate local tuition programs.

At the time there was a rich musical tradition in the town – Musical and Dramatic Societies in both Gunnedah and nearby Boggabri were thriving, the Gunnedah Eisteddfod established in 1953 had a high number of local and regional entries and ran over several weeks, music programs in all schools were strong and staffed by music specialist teachers and the town had a strong Shire Band program. Each year the Massed Choirs event brought hundreds of students together from all schools in the district – public and private to perform on the Town Hall stage.

***TOR: (ii) the present level and status of formal music education across all levels, including primary, secondary, and tertiary levels***

Throughout the 1990s music remained strong in local schools and the community, and at that time both Gunnedah High School and St Mary’s College had two music teachers so there were four trained music teachers in our local high schools. This resulted in much community collaboration and the schools presented a Combined High School Musical each year. Many of the “graduates” from this period entered music industry roles, either as performers, music teachers or in other related creative arts fields such as lighting directors. In fact, one of those students is now responsible for creating lighting design for arena spectacular events including the Department of Education’s Schools Spectacular. It all started in Gunnedah High School Hall!

Sadly, the decline in music education across the state is reflected in the Gunnedah numbers - in 2024, there is now only two trained music teachers at high school level, at St Mary’s College and Carinya Christian Middle School (K to year 9). Attempts by Gunnedah High School to fill its vacancy for a music teacher have been unsuccessful.

The Gunnedah Shire Band remains strong and is one of the best junior bands in the country. It is based on a volunteer model and offers free tuition in two local schools.

Music programs in local public schools varies. At the time of this submission Gunnedah Conservatorium works in three local schools in Gunnedah Shire – out of 11 government and non-government schools. These programs vary greatly and there is little consistency. School programs are mainly driven by short-term goals. For example: A choir program will be requested for Terms 1 & 2 inline with the curriculum to prepare for the local Eisteddfod; Gunnedah Conservatorium is asked to run a class-based music program for one term of the year to meet curriculum requirements only.

Access to a quality music education, and in particularly instrumental or vocal tuition is becoming increasingly expensive which means that it is becoming a privileged activity for those who can afford to pay and is viewed as an elite activity. Just like kicking a footy, music education is a right for all children, and it is not fair that the view is taken is that it is for the “gifted” or the “talented” or just those who can pay.

***TOR: (iv) the role of regional conservatoriums and creative professionals in music education***

***(vii) the availability of support for teachers and principals in delivering quality music education and ensuring that an inclusive approach is taken towards resource allocation for regional schools across New South Wales***

***(viii) the most effective approach for the music and the creative industries to co-ordinate with the education system to support the development of creative skills***

Gunnedah Conservatorium plays a key role in supporting music education in our community by partnering with local schools to deliver music education, however, there lacks overarching strategy which means that music education is often delivered to “tick a box” and without reference to the lifelong benefits of an education which includes a strong focus on the arts.

Gunnedah Conservatorium teachers have the expertise to deliver quality music programs which are well-structured and informed. It is unreasonable to expect a generalist primary school teacher to deliver such a program when there is little focus on music education in the current teaching degree.

In relation to NSW public schools, it would be reasonable for the Department of Education to recognise and prioritise Regional Conservatorium as a preferred supplier and to support schools to access their local regional conservatorium to support school and regional music programs. This will require additional funding the regional conservatoriums.

There is a significant body of work that proves the benefits a quality music education has on all student learning and well-being. This information needs to inform the development of school programs by principals and teachers.

School leaders, particularly since COVID19, have moved focus to literacy and numeracy to the disadvantage of other learning areas, and in particular music programs, this needs to be remedied and music education should be prioritised.

***TOR: (ix) factors influencing student decisions to pursue further music education, including but not limited to course choice, course location and the method of study***

The families of students who are performing well in music are increasingly choosing to educate their children outside of Gunnedah for senior schooling. A factor in this choice is being able to access an expansive high school program which includes more music and creative opportunities in both the curriculum and co-curriculum. Seventy-two percent of our individual vocal and instrumental enrolment is made up of primary school students and the drop off between Year 6 and Year 7 is directly a result of students moving to high school in Tamworth, Armidale or further afield. There are two full buses transporting day student to public and non-government schools in Tamworth each day.

***TOR: (x) measures of success in arts education***

The measure of success will be that all students in NSW have the access to the same level music education regardless of their postcode or family pay check. The measure of success will be that a child born in Broken Hill is as likely to be the next June Bronhill as the child born in Double Bay. Or that a student at Marsden High School can follow in the footsteps of Kim Williams AM and become the chair of the national broadcaster, the ABC. The point is, that the measure of success is about creating well-rounded individuals, who have been able to access a quality music education. The measure of success will be that all parents enrolling their child in Kindergarten in NSW will know their child will have access to a comprehensive music and arts education.

**Conclusion**

**What do most people look back and remember from their schooling? It is rarely facts and figures but rather the time they sang in choir, when their footy team beat the posh school down the road, the school play, the art exhibition. It is those standout moments that also teach so much – about team work, resilience, the human condition.**

**This inquiry into arts and music education in New South Wales provides our state with an opportunity to reset music education and put in place a strategy, supported by funding, that will influence generational change and place MUSIC where it should be – at the centre of student learning.**

**Gunnedah Conservatorium hopes that out of the inquiry comes a new strategy for music education, endorsed by both sides of government and sit above “politics” of every day so that we can live out the motto of New South Wales - *Orta recens quam pura nites*: “Newly risen how brightly you shine”.**

**There is no subject that liberates thinking, mental flexibility and creativity in all children, the way music can. This is a chance to unlock the benefits of a universal music education and the result will be long lasting and impact on all areas of our society.**

**Regional Conservatoriums like Gunnedah Conservatorium are well positioned to continue to play our part in this strategy, but we will require investment in people, resources and infrastructure.**