

The First Note: Securing Australia's Creative Economy and Cultural Rights Through Music Education Equity

AUSTRALIAN CHILDREN'S MUSIC FOUNDATION

SUBMISSION

A New National Cultural Policy

1. About the Australian Children's Music Foundation (ACMF)

The ACMF is a national NFP with a 22-year history of delivering long-term, sequential music education to Australia's most disadvantaged children and youth. We specialise in:

- **High-barrier settings:** Including low ICSEA primary schools, Specialist Support Classes (SSP), and Youth Justice Centres (YJC).
- **Vocational Bridge:** Working with industry to encourage and facilitate songwriting and the vocational bridge from early access and participation to a career in the industry.

Our mission is built on the conviction that quality music education is a fundamental right, not a privilege reserved for the wealthy or the "talented" few. As a specialist delivery partner for schools, government, and industry, we bridge the gap between high-level policy and classroom reality, utilising music as a vehicle to inspire creativity, improve student engagement, and support the emotional wellbeing of children and young people. Our 2023 Impact Report confirms that our ongoing, structured programs deliver transformative results:

- **98% improvement in social acceptance and peer-connection,**
- **97% expansion of creativity,**
- **95% increase in resilience when faced with new challenges**
- **85% improved task focus,**
- **77% improved literacy and numeracy, and**
- **74% increased school attendance.**

2. Strategic Industry Alignment: MERS and Partnering for Access

The ACMF is a contributing member and partner of the Music Education Right From The Start (MERS) initiative led by Alberts | The Tony Foundation. We have actively contributed to and fully endorse the MERS submission, aligning our experience and expert findings with a unified national vision for reform.

Our approach to addressing inequity also includes a commitment to partnering with industry to build a robust access pipeline. We recognise that no single sector can repair the "Narrowing Funnel" of the talent pipeline alone. By collaborating with industry peak bodies - such as APRA AMCOS, AMPAL, and the Australian Institute of Music (AIM) - we work to ensure that foundational music education in schools leads directly into vocational pathways and the broader creative economy. This ensures that marginalised youth are not "filtered out" of the generating of national Intellectual Property before they can reach professional opportunities.

3. The Implementation Gap: Why *Revive* Has Not Yet Reached the Classroom

While the first iteration of *Revive* was a landmark success for the professional arts sector, it has not yet achieved measurable inroads into the foundational education system. The policy successfully re-energised the professional sector but left the "front end" of equity of access and the talent pipeline neglected.

- **The Investment Gap:** This is evidenced by the stark investment gap embedded within the National Cultural Policy funding allocations: just \$2.6 million was allocated to in-school Arts initiatives over five years, compared to \$75.6 million invested in STEM education.
- **The Postcode Lottery:** Music education in Australia currently reflects a broken system of failed curricular mandates and investment in the workforce, where a child's access is determined by a 'postcode lottery'.

This failure has created a systemic crisis for the entire ecosystem:

- **For Musicians:** The professional workforce is deprived of stable employment pathways to support their professional music-making within education; data from the landmark economic study *Artists as Workers* (Creative Australia, 2024) confirms that half of the music workforce currently earns less than \$6,000 per year from their talent.
- **For Audiences:** We are failing to cultivate the next generation of culturally literate audiences, threatening the long-term sustainability of the arts.

- **For the Industry:** As the 8th largest market globally, our competitiveness is at risk. Failing to invest in the early years restricts the potential talent pool and effectively throttles our \$16bn creative economy before it can start.

This lack of progress in music education access and equity threatens the viability of the **Five Pillars of the National Cultural Policy:**

- **Threat to Pillar 1 (First Nations First):** Without addressing the 77% gap in specialist music access, the "cultural rights" of First Nations children to express their stories and language through song are being denied at the earliest stage.
- **Threat to Pillar 2 (A Place for Every Story):** Inclusion is impossible as long as music education remains a 'postcode lottery'. Access to music education shouldn't only be for the wealthy and talented few. If youth are 'filtered out' due to a lack of creative foundations laid through K to 6, the "breadth of our stories" will be limited to those with financial means.
- **Threat to Pillar 3 (Centrality of the Artist):** By ignoring the musical skills confidence gap for generalist teachers (where ITE training has halved to 8 - 9 hours), and the lack of recognition and support for musicians within the education sector the government fails to build the 'design thinking' required for a productive creative workforce.
- **Threat to Pillar 4 (Strong Cultural Infrastructure):** The ACMF and MERS alliances are exactly the "existing partnerships" the government claims to value. Without repairing the talent funnel, the "spectrum of institutions" that sustain our arts will lack the local talent necessary to remain resilient and adaptable.
- **Threat to Pillar 5 (Engaging the Audience):** Lifelong "discovery pathways" start in the classroom. If 69% of children are in government schools, and too many of them are not given the cultural literacy to engage with music as children, the government cannot sustain the audiences required to support Australian creativity in the future.

4. The "Skills Cliff": A Crisis in Teacher Musical Competence and Confidence

A "skills cliff" in music education has developed over many years and has reached a crisis point, especially in government primary schools which 69% of Australian children attend.

- **The Confidence Gap:** The *Primary Teachers Survey on Music Education* (Australian Council for Educational Research [ACER], 2025) found that over 73% of primary teachers are not confident in independently delivering music activities, despite 90% recognising music's significant cognitive, social, and emotional benefits.

- **The ITE Crisis:** The *Fading Notes* report (Alberts | The Tony Foundation, 2023) outlines that hours allocated to music in Primary Initial Teacher Education (ITE) have more than halved in the last 13 years, with the current national average sitting at just 8–9 hours over a four-year degree.

5. Emerging State Momentum: A Window for Federal Leadership

We are now at a critical turning point where States are recognizing the "systemic neglect" of past decades. NSW, SA, VIC, and QLD have all acknowledged the music education gap and have either started or committed to initiatives and reviews to address it. The NSW Joint Select Committee (JSC) on Arts and Music Education stands as a blueprint for cross-departmental and multi-party collaboration.

"The committee found that every child in New South Wales deserves the benefits of a high-quality, richly complex creative arts education. However, due to a range of socio-cultural factors, including a focus on STEM subjects and standardised testing such as NAPLAN, arts and music education is undervalued, leading to broader and systemic neglect in investment. In addition, economic, geographic, cultural and social barriers prevent equal access to a quality arts and music education in New South Wales. Further, we heard of the significant disparity in the delivery of creative education, particularly in music, across school systems."

There is now a vital role for the Federal Government to act as the 'connective tissue' that supports this emerging state recognition of the problem, standardises equity through national surveys and frameworks, and convenes a national cross-departmental forum of states and territories to share learnings and inform a unified approach.

6. Structural Recommendations for a Whole-of-Government Approach

To address the critical accountability gap for music education that hindered the first iteration of *Revive*, the ACMF proposes the formal establishment of a **New Creative Arts Education Pillar**. This will look to rebalance education from a decades-long STEM skew to **STEAM** within the National Cultural Policy and ensure explicit cross-portfolio accountability.

- **Mandated Sequential Access:** Adopt a federal mandate for **1 hour per week** of sequential, year-round music education (K–8). This fulfills the **Mparntwe Declaration** commitment to equity and excellence.
- **National ACER Music Education Audit:** Fund a comprehensive survey to identify "**music access deserts**" and inform equitable resource allocation under the **Better and Fairer Schools Agreement (BFSA)**.

- **The "Allied Support" Workforce Model:** Address the teacher skills and confidence gap by partnering with organisations like ACMF and embedding teaching musicians in classrooms to build confidence and skills in generalist teachers in real-time. This provides stable, diversified income for artists while ensuring quality curriculum delivery.
- **Songwriting as a Vocational Bridge:** Formalise partnerships between Government, Industry (APRA AMCOS/SongMakers, AMPAL), and NFPs such as ACMF to build a bridge from foundational access to global market opportunities.

7. Beyond Education: The Multi-Sector Mandate

'Particular cohorts of students who are more likely to encounter systemic barriers within the education system that make them less likely to achieve strong educational outcomes. These are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, students living in regional, rural, and remote locations, students with disability, students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds, and students in the youth justice systems.'
Productivity Commission 2022

The crisis in music education requires a whole-of-government approach prioritising "priority equity cohorts".

- **Justice & Equity:** The annual cost of incarcerating one youth offender is **\$1.21 million**. Music is a "pro-social hook" to keep youth in school and supports youth at risk in building the pro-social skills that reduce recidivism.
- **Fiscal Savings:** According to national data compiled in the *Investing in Children* report (Telethon Kids Institute, 2019), "late intervention" social services cost the Australian economy **\$15.2 billion annually**. Early intervention music programs act as critical anchors for regional stability.
- **Creative Wellbeing:** We recommend the Department of Education formally recognize sequential music and songwriting as primary delivery mechanisms for the **National Student Wellbeing Framework**, allowing schools to invest existing wellbeing budgets into proactive creative programs.

Conclusion

The **2025 Live Music Inquiry** recognised that primary school music education is the essential starting point for a vibrant national music culture. However, the success of the National Cultural Policy - and the resilience of its Five Pillars - depends entirely on the health of the foundational talent pipeline. Without repairing the "Skills Cliff" in primary



education, the government's goals for First Nations leadership, inclusive storytelling, and artist sustainability are built on an unstable foundation.

The ACMF does not just identify these problems; we are a ready and willing alliance partner equipped to deliver on the solutions. As a specialist delivery partner with more than 20 years of experience in high-barrier settings, the ACMF is uniquely positioned to help the government transition from policy intent to classroom reality. We are committed to working alongside Government, industry and sector partners to ensure that:

- **Cultural Rights** are protected by removing the "postcode lottery" of access.
- **The Artist as Worker** is supported through the "Allied Support" workforce model, creating stable, sustainable employment pathways.
- **Prosperity and Innovation** are driven by cultivating "design thinking" and creative literacy in the 69% of children attending government primary schools.

The Federal Government has a historic opportunity to lead a national recovery by ensuring that a child's access to the transformative power of music is a national guarantee. By implementing these recommendations and utilising the ACMF as a strategic implementation partner, the government can repair the "Narrowing Funnel" of our talent pipeline and ensure the success of *Revive* is felt in every classroom in Australia.