

### Submission to the National Cultural Policy

*"The growing recognition of music education's role in driving creativity, innovation and social cohesion is creating momentum for policy reform."*  
Music Australia. More Than Notes on a Page. 2026.

The moment for arts education is now. As technology reshapes the workforce automating routine tasks while elevating the importance of human capabilities, the skills that will matter most are creativity, critical thinking and collaboration. Across the globe, governments and agencies are responding by placing greater emphasis on developing the whole child, recognising that the cognitive, social, emotional and physical development are essential to both personal fulfilment and economic prosperity.

In this context, the future of education demands more than knowledge acquisition; it requires embodied, experiential ways of learning and understanding the world. The arts are uniquely positioned to deliver this kind of authentic engagement. For more than 26 years, The Song Room has been at the forefront of developing innovative, high-quality arts education programs that respond to this need and unlock the potential of every child.

Now is the time to invest heavily in human flourishing.

International research on the value of the arts in a quality education and in human flourishing is well documented and supported expertly by The Song Room and those working in advocacy in arts education, namely the Tony Foundation's Music Education Right from the Start (of which The Song Room has been heavily involved since its inception) and the NAAE. Music Australia's More Than Notes on a Page Report (2026) also provides break-through positioning on the value of the arts in schools and for young people in Australia including its contribution of \$1.5B in GVA annually. For this paper we have chosen to focus on three key areas for policy consideration that build on their work:

1. **IMPACT: Towards human flourishing**
2. **EQUITY: Inclusion and diversity**
3. **WORKFORCE: Development and innovation**



## Focus Areas for Policy Consideration

### 1. IMPACT: Towards human flourishing

Consistent with UN and UNESCO perspectives, education exists to support human flourishing enabling every child to develop their full potential and live a meaningful, connected life. The opportunity to be aware of your world, to appreciate it, to understand it, and to know how you can act in it, are the most important elements of being human. Economic prosperity, social cohesion, individual and collective wellbeing all rely heavily on it along with giving people a sense of capacity, hope and optimism - desperately need in uncertain times.

For The Song Room, nurturing partnerships with schools and nourishing school cultures is embedded in every program. A study by University of South Australia (Murrone, 2025.) found that all Song Room programs provide high quality approaches to social and emotional learning regardless of whether the program's design was intended to.

Research and global education frameworks support this, but 'the Eddies' say it best:

*"Growing up...music was a cohesive thing... like food, actually."* [REDACTED]

*"When I was at school, music gave me purpose... it helped with my mental health... and gave me my career."* [REDACTED].

*"Music teachers clear out all the ludicrous obstructions that seem to pile on top of young people like where people get self-conscious as a teenager. It's about guiding young people and normalising music and creativity at every single turn. It's a very natural part of who we are and how we operate as a species. We make music, we make stories, we share stories, we play, we role-play, we listen and we collaborate."* [REDACTED]

The Song Room supports students to experience arts education through excellent program delivery, practical responses to system-level challenges, and connection to broader human development outcomes. Song Room programs are evidenced to nurture young people by providing inclusive, high-quality, sequential arts learning across the early learning and primary years. This whole child approach recognises that development is cognitive, social, emotional and physical, and it is the integration of these domains that most powerfully supports young people's engagement, wellbeing, and lifelong learning.



### 2. EQUITY: Inclusion and diversity

*"By ignoring the arts in the early years, we risk glossing over a whole bunch of really talented young people who may make a very important contribution to Australian cultural life."* [REDACTED]

Australian educational equity data shows persistent gaps by socioeconomic status, cultural background and remote access, with lower attendance, retention and attainment among disadvantaged students despite overall system improvements (Australian Government Productivity Commission 2026).

Student wellbeing challenges continue to grow. Around one in six Australian children live in poverty, exposing them to higher risks of poorer physical health, mental wellbeing and educational outcomes. Economic insecurity is a well-established driver of inequality in children's wellbeing across multiple domains (The Australian Institute). National data indicates around one in ten children score in the "of concern" range for social and emotional difficulties, with rates increasing as children get older (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare).

These factors present ongoing challenges but also reinforce The Song Room's value in Australia's educational and cultural ecosystems. By working alongside schools, we respond flexibly to support student engagement, wellbeing, and learning outcomes. We can also prioritise locations – over 50% of our programs take place in regional areas.

The Song Room creates meaningful impact in culturally diverse contexts by using the arts to centre students' identities, voices and lived experiences within learning. By embedding culturally responsive and inclusive arts practice, our programs foster a strong sense of belonging and engagement, particularly for students from diverse and underrepresented communities. This approach supports not only creative and academic development, but also social and emotional wellbeing, empathy, and intercultural understanding. Through shared artistic experiences, students build connections across difference, strengthen cultural pride, and develop the skills and confidence to participate fully in their learning and in their community. In doing so, The Song Room contributes to more inclusive, cohesive school environments and supports young people to thrive in a diverse and interconnected society.

### 3. WORKFORCE: Development and innovation

*“Teacher shortages, insecure employment conditions, and limited opportunities for ongoing professional development were reported by stakeholders to be constraining workforce sustainability. With sustained commitment from government, industry and the community, music education in Australia can be strengthened as a universal and inclusive component of the education system, positioning it to meet the creative and economic needs of the future.”* (Music Australia. More Than Notes on a Page. 2026).

There is significant, untapped potential in providing creatives with opportunities to work in schools as a career pathway and to enhance young people’s learning. Artists in schools and Teaching Artists in particular, bring learning to life by connecting students with real-world creative practice and ways of thinking. As practising professionals, they model curiosity, experimentation and resilience, giving students direct insight into the creative process and expanding their understanding of what learning can be. Their presence transforms the classroom into an active, experiential environment where students engage deeply, ask questions, and make meaning through doing rather than passively receiving knowledge.

Educational workforce capacity and capability is experiencing ongoing pressure with teacher shortages and high turnover impacting students’ educational continuity. While there is strong recognition of the value of arts learning, many teachers report limited confidence.

The Song Room takes a proactive approach in response to the most pressing systemic issues. One example is The Bridge, an innovative program supported by Creative Australia. In response to findings from Music Australia’s Bass Line Report 2025 and 2026, which highlighted that musicians earn on average less than \$15,000 annually from their music career, The Bridge provides a 10-week paid placement for music creatives in the classroom. Through in-class mentoring with experienced Song Room Teaching Artists, musicians build teaching skills and pedagogy, and sustainable income pathways within primary education to expand their portfolio careers in the arts. This strengthens both the creative workforce and access to high-quality arts learning in schools within communities experiencing disadvantage and with low access to arts education programs.

South Korea provides a valuable example where sustained investment in creative pathways for teachers and students has provided substantive economic benefits. See below.



### International Context

*"We can't continue to lead on the world stage without a broad base in our schools at home."* [REDACTED]

Building on Music Australia's More Than Notes on a Page Report (2026), the international context provides one additional clear example.

South Korea's recent cultural dominance in international creative industries has not been accidental. Over the past decade, a sustained investment in arts education has been closely linked to South Korea's emergence as a global creative industries powerhouse. It is the result of over 30 years of strategic public investment in arts education. This began in schools and extended through arts-focused institutions and policies, creating a skilled creative workforce and building a pipeline from education to international cultural industries like K-pop, film, and design.

1. Korea's success originated in classrooms, not the market. Universal access to music, performance, and the visual arts in education laid the groundwork for later creative industry growth.
2. Arts education was seen as essential infrastructure. Legislation, funding, and teaching artists in all schools, including rural and disadvantaged areas, ensured creative skills were developed at scale, not just for a select few.
3. Career pathways from arts education to professional work were clearly established, aligning education and industry and avoiding the disconnect seen in other countries.
4. Long-term investment in arts education served as a foundation for international cultural leadership, strengthening Korea's global cultural position and influence over decades, rather than through short-term projects.

In effect, South Korea demonstrates a coherent 'education-to-industry' ecosystem, where early and sustained exposure to arts education underpins both cultural vitality and the global competitiveness of its creative economy. (Ref: United Nations Trade and Development)



### Responding to National Cultural Policy Pillars

The Song Room and arts learning directly advance national cultural priorities:

#### First Nations First

The Song Room has a deep commitment to First Nations cultures and perspectives, embedded through initiatives such as Deadly Arts and community-led programs that partner with First Nations teaching artists, Elders and local organisations. These programs enable young people to learn through authentic cultural knowledge, storytelling and artistic practices, developing respect for Country and an understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, identities and living cultures. A study by Edith Cowan University (Goopy et al. 2026) shows that pre-school aged children can demonstrate sophisticated multimodal wellbeing literacies when given the cultural framework and creative permission to do so in Song Room programs.

#### Centrality of the Artist

The Song Room creates sustainable and meaningful employment pathways for artists and music creators. It recognises artists as workers and responds to growing concerns around financial precarity, workforce instability and long-term career sustainability within the creative industries. By supporting artists to develop portfolio careers including education they remain connected to their creative practice, strengthening workforce retention and contributing to a healthier national creative ecosystem.

#### A Place For Every Story

The Song Room provides equitable access to arts learning and cultural participation for children and young people, particularly in communities where access to specialist arts education remains limited. By embedding contemporary artists directly within schools and local communities, The Song Room increases opportunities for participation, representation and creative engagement while helping young people see their own stories, identities and experiences reflected through the arts.

#### Strong Cultural Infrastructure

The Song Room contributes to stronger national cultural infrastructure by building long-term workforce capability across both the arts and education sectors. Its programs strengthen connections between schools, artists, communities and creative industries while developing practical pathways for artists to expand their professional practice into education and community settings. Over time, this creates more sustainable creative workforce infrastructure capable of supporting future participation, engagement and cultural growth nationally.

#### Reaching Audiences

The Song Room strengthens audience development and cultural participation by connecting contemporary artists directly with children, schools and communities. Early engagement with the arts is critical to building future audiences, creative confidence and long-term cultural



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connection. Through sustained interaction with working artists and creative experiences, The Song Room helps foster greater participation in arts and culture from an early age.

### Future Workforce Development

The Song Room is responding directly to growing national conversations around the future sustainability of Australia's creative workforce and teacher shortages through innovative program design and new pilot programs. Through practical training, mentoring and supported placements, The Song Room creates pathways that strengthen long-term workforce participation and transferable capability development for artists including musicians, music creatives including song writers and producers, performing artists, dancers and visual artists.

The Song Room provides a practical, scalable and nationally aligned response to the future of Australia's cultural and creative industries, while contributing meaningful evidence and insight to national cultural policy development.

## Policy Recommendations

The Song Room presents the Australian Government with the following recommendations:

### **1. Make quality, sequential arts education a core national entitlement (not optional)**

- Guarantee universal access for all children, with a focus on primary years and early intervention
- Define "quality, sequential, ongoing" classroom-based arts learning as the standard

The Song Room calls for the explicit recognition of the importance of quality, sequential and ongoing arts education for all Australian children. Early, continuous exposure across a learning continuum drives long-term cultural and economic outcomes.

**Arts education should be recognised as a foundational component of a quality education, with guaranteed access to sequential, curriculum-aligned learning for every child**



### 2. Invest in system capability: artists, teachers and delivery infrastructure

- Fund teacher capability uplift (pre-service and in-service)
- Support teaching artist workforce development and creatives' careers by providing opportunities for artists to development skills and experience in quality arts education delivery.
- Invest in proven school-based delivery models (like Song Room programs) at scale

There is a critical need for teacher training and improved classroom capability. The system suffers from fragmented funding and the need to move innovative programs beyond pilots to system-strengthening solutions.

**Sustainable arts education requires investment in the workforce, including teachers and teaching artists, and in evidence-based delivery models embedded within schools.**

### 3. Create a coordinated, cross-portfolio national approach (education, culture, wellbeing)

- Align education, cultural, health and social policy settings
- Develop data on educational equity and access in arts education
- Move from fragmented funding to a coordinated national investment framework
- Include a policy position of arts education as contributing to:
  - young people's wellbeing
  - educational equity
  - creative industries pathways and pipeline

Fragmented funding across portfolios is a systemic barrier limiting the opportunity for quality organisations like The Song Room to maximise their impact and contribution to the educational and cultural ecosystem. The Song Room encourages the development of a national cross portfolio pilot with a strong program logic with shared commitments. The Song Room calls for joint policy and investment between state and federal cultural, educational and health ministers to enable system change and ecosystem health, not just program growth.

**A coordinated national approach is required to align education, cultural and wellbeing agendas, ensuring sustained investment and system-level impact.**



### The Song Room

*"The arts offer education for human flourishing. Embodied and supercharged."*  
Alice Gerlach, CEO

#### A trusted national organisation with proven capability.

For 26 years, The Song Room has delivered arts education programs to children and young people experiencing disadvantage, working at the intersection of creativity, education, wellbeing and social connection. Throughout this time, the organisation has developed deep expertise in artist development, school partnerships, arts learning and community engagement, positioning it as one of Australia's leading arts education organisations.

With over 550,000 participants, The Song Room is a leader in Australian arts education. Vibrant and dynamic arts participation should be available to every young person as part of a quality education that is centred on the development of the whole child. This is essential because the arts have intrinsic value in our lives and because they improve outcomes in physical (embodied), cognitive, social and emotional development. We exist because:

- There is severely limited access to arts education for young people in communities experiencing disadvantage
- Teachers are not provided with adequate exposure to the arts in initial teacher education (4-6 hours)
- We can provide exposure to contemporary music and all artforms of the curriculum.

With the best evidence at hand, we design and deliver practical and innovative programs for the highest efficiency and effectiveness possible focusing on:

- Development of the whole child
- Early intervention: primary school and early years development
- Equitable educational experiences

We serve our vision for young people experiencing disadvantage by providing a mix of programs to suit their communities' needs and strengths. Place-based practice allows us to target our impact in priority locations and work closely with others to achieve collective impact.

*"Arts education builds creativity, collaboration, resilience, identity, wellbeing, inclusion, community cohesion and civic and community engagement, and contributes to national prosperity. It underpins student learning, supports wellbeing, and develops the capabilities required for a rapidly changing world. It also plays a vital role in fostering cultural understanding, enabling young people to engage with diverse perspectives and participate meaningfully in Australia's cultural life. Meaningful investment, adequate resourcing and clear policy recognition are essential to ensure that every child, young person and educator can*



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*access the full benefits of arts education. This must include a strong focus on equity, ensuring that students in low socioeconomic, regional and remote communities are not excluded from access, and that those who stand to benefit most from arts education are not the least likely to receive it.” (NAAE National Cultural Policy Submission. 2026)*

The Song Room is a significant employer of artists, music educators and Teaching Artists nationally, contracting approximately 60–80 creative practitioners each year across full-time, part-time, short-term and long-term engagements. This flexible workforce model recognises the realities of creative careers to support artists and arts workers balancing touring schedules, performances, exhibitions, commissions, recordings, creative collaborations and other professional opportunities alongside stable employment.

For more than two decades, The Song Room has employed Teaching Artists nationally in music, drama, dance, visual arts and media arts. This long-standing experience has provided the organisation with deep operational knowledge around artist workforce development, school engagement, child safety, curriculum integration and arts-based wellbeing practice.

Importantly, The Song Room has already demonstrated workforce support and sector leadership required to scale nationally. During COVID-19, when large parts of the live performance sector shut down and artist livelihoods were placed under significant pressure, The Song Room retained 100% of Teaching Artist contracts, protecting both income stability and creative workforce participation during a period of major industry disruption.

Over the past seven years alone, The Song Room has delivered teacher mentoring and music education programs in more than 600 primary schools, building extensive experience in co-teaching, teacher capability development and place-based arts learning delivery. This existing infrastructure, combined with long-standing relationships across schools, artists and communities nationally, provides a strong foundation for the national expansion of its programs.

