

Music can help lift our kids out of the literacy rut, but schools in some states are still missing out

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The 2005 [National Review of School Music Education](#) found many Australian students missed out on music education, with massive

disparities between states. In 2020, [our research for the Tony Foundation](#) found the same issues, despite the fact that the [Australian Curriculum for Music](#) should guarantee some level of consistency.

We now have evidence that we should be concerned about [music education](#) not just for the sake of music itself, but also because of its impacts on [language learning](#) and literacy. Research about how participating in music affects the brain—a field known as neuromusical research—has taught us a lot about how the brain processes language. Significantly, it [processes language in the same way as music](#).

If we want to improve literacy, then, we need to ensure the [cognitive foundations](#) our students need are in place.

In short, we need to view music education as a powerful complementary learning experience, and not a "nice but not essential" part of the curriculum.

So what are states doing?

We have yet to see this knowledge put into practice across Australia.

Before and after the 2005 review, Queensland has had strong music programs in state-funded [primary schools](#) since the 1980s. The state has a classroom music program for the whole school (where a teacher is available), and a low-cost instrumental music program for some students. A [campaign is under way](#) in Queensland to preserve these programs and make sure every student gets a music lesson every week.

The same can't be said for other states. Despite moves to improve music education in some states, there's still inequity.

South Australia established a [Music Education Strategy and Music](#)

[Innovation Fund](#) in 2019. Victoria has developed a [Quality Music Education Framework](#) to guide best practice. Tasmania, Western Australia and the ACT have music specialist teachers in some government primary schools. In New South Wales, general classroom teachers in government schools are responsible for teaching all of the curriculum, including music.

But how much does music really matter?

Music can deliver progress on literacy

While music education has been found to improve a wide range of cognitive functions, let's look at literacy development as an example. If literacy scores are lower than required or expected, it seems obvious the solution is to spend more time on literacy learning to improve those scores. That's the approach taken over the past five years.

Yet we have not seen a significant boost in NAPLAN results. In fact, the dial has moved very little.

So the obvious "more time" approach is not yielding higher literacy achievement. Might we then look to research outside the literacy field for the next steps in improving literacy in our schools?

The answer is yes. A field traditionally a few steps outside of literacy education—music education—has greatly enhanced understanding of how the brain develops understanding and application of language.

Neuromusical research has pinpointed the brain mechanisms and interactions that [decode](#) language sounds to understand and develop the [syntax](#) of language right through to the comprehension and creation of meaning through language. It has led to the enlightening finding that the human brain [processes all language as if it was music](#).

What does this mean for [literacy](#) education and the current measure of its effectiveness, NAPLAN? It means we may well be missing a fundamental underpinning of [language](#) development—the development of the auditory processing network to its highest levels so our students can [effectively interpret language](#) sounds.

Put simply, if a child cannot hear the [language sound](#)—that is, process the sound correctly through their auditory network—they cannot speak it. And if they cannot speak it, they cannot read it.

The costs of inaction are high

[The research](#) on the potential for music education to improve cognitive development is extensive and compelling. It clearly shows that consistent, high-quality music learning enhances students' general learning. So music learning isn't just for those who want to become musicians—it benefits everyone.

The cost of waiting, of not resolving the issues with music education across Australia, is high. This is an issue of equity. If the state a student is schooled in affects their fundamental cognitive development due to the lack of quality [music education](#) for *every* child, then every child is not receiving an equitable and effective education.

The longer we wait to address the inequity, the fewer qualified music educators we will have in Australia. In our report, [Music Education: A Sound Investment](#), we identified that we are on a skills cliff of qualified music educators in this country. In addition to the [existing widespread teacher shortage](#), there are now only a few universities offering a specialization in primary music teaching. Urgent action is needed to make sure there are enough music teachers for all schools, so kids don't miss out.

When it comes to education, politicians and policymakers ignoring the [research](#) evidence is hardly new. But the failure to see the bigger picture of every child's development has lasting impacts.

The focus of education should be to provide the cognitive preparation for a full and productive life. And music is an integral part of providing students with the best possible foundation for their education.

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