

# Setting the tempo

The inside view of music education from South Australia's primary teachers

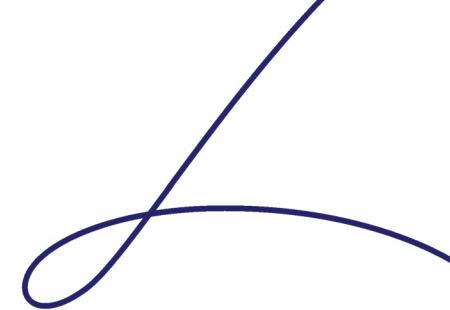
Dr Anita Collins

May 2024



Photo courtesy of ACMF

# Foreword



Welcome to our latest report, *Setting the tempo*. It is the first of an intended series designed to shed light on the state of music education in government primary schools across Australia, and bridge an information gap on the skills, support and resources available to teachers in specific states.



The inside view of music education from South Australia's primary teachers

This report reveals key findings from the *Music Education: Right from the Start – Primary Teachers Survey – South Australia* (ACER, 2024), and observations about their implications from music learning expert and researcher, Dr Anita Collins.

The survey was jointly funded by *Music Education: Right from the Start*, the South Australian Department for Education, and the Day Family Foundation, and conducted by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER).

This is the latest project as part of a continuing vision: “All Australian primary school children need, and have the right to, a quality, sequential and ongoing music education.” It follows previous research that uncovered both the benefits of music education to students and the need to restore music learning as a valuable part of initial teacher education (ITE) degrees.

Despite moving from a national focus to South Australian government schools, many previous findings have been re-affirmed. Almost all surveyed primary teachers not only recognise the positive impact music education has on students’ learning and well-being, but enjoy it themselves.

However, the expertise, resources and facilities vary greatly across schools. While some have dedicated music rooms, budgets and an abundance of instruments, others are lacking. This can impact the equity and quality of music education delivery across the state.

Encouragingly, the SA Music Education Strategy appears to be making a difference in a number of areas. These include strong access to professional development support for teachers and most have instruments in good working order available for use in their classrooms.

The research also shows there is much more to be done. Despite most teachers in the survey having completed their training before ITE degrees reduced the time allocated to music education, most aren’t confident to teach up to the Year 6 curriculum.

For more recent graduates, the situation is likely worse. With less attention given to music in ITE courses, the prospect of the skills cliff gets nearer, as foreshadowed by the *Music Education: A Sound Investment* report released by *Music Education: Right from the Start* in 2020.

What South Australian teachers do have is a sound appreciation for the broad-based benefits of music learning for primary students of all ages and a clear willingness to enhance their skills. While there are still challenges to overcome, this bodes well for teachers, parents and students who agree that quality music learning is integral to educational and developmental outcomes.

In 2023, *Music Education: Right from the Start* commissioned the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) to develop and conduct a survey of primary school teachers. The survey provides the first measurement framework to understand what, when, how, and who is delivering music education across state government education systems – an area where no data currently exists.

The research is expected to be rolled out over time across all Australian states and territories in partnership with their respective education departments. This project strives to provide both a comparative picture between systems and a periodic benchmarking tool to evaluate the impact of government programs and initiatives.

South Australia is the focus of the initial study, with New South Wales to follow. *Music Education: Right from the Start* partnered with the South Australian Department for Education.

The research is based on an online survey of 180 South Australian Government primary school teachers (83%), combined or specialist teachers (10%), early learning educators or government staff (7%). The survey was finalised in August 2023, with respondents representing 115 of the 436 government schools in South Australia (ACARA, 2023).

This summary report contains observations on the findings of ACER's final survey of primary school teachers in SA.

## The research focuses on:



The level of music training and professional learning support among teachers



The delivery of music education and resources available in schools



The impact of high-quality music education on students' learning and well-being



### COMMISSIONED BY

*Music Education: Right from the Start*

### RESEARCH SUPPORTED BY

Department for Education | South Australia  
Day Family Foundation

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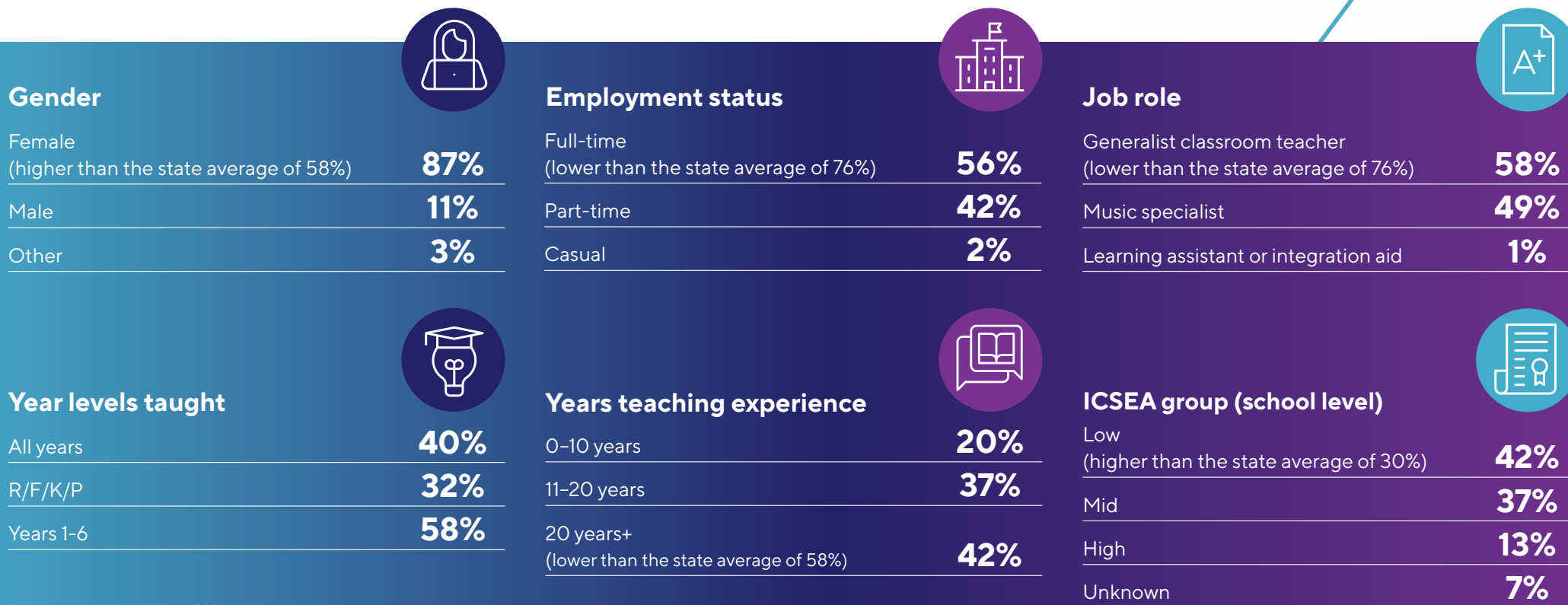


# Respondent profile

Due to the way in which the survey was administered, the respondent sample was not random and representative of the South Australian teaching workforce as initially intended. Some areas where the sample is higher or lower than average among the SA teaching workforce are noted below, with potential implications for interpreting the findings.

However, as noted in the ACER report, the survey respondents were mostly full-time, female, experienced teachers who teach across the primary age range. The majority of survey respondents were generalist classroom teachers. The proportions are similar to the South Australian Department for Education workforce characteristics.

When considering these differences, the sample provided a sound basis for further discussion and exploration of the sector, and the potential influence of the SA Music Education Strategy (2019-2029) on the state of music education in the South Australian government primary school sector.



Figures may total more than 100% due to being able to select multiple responses.

## Training and experience

Based on respondents' years of experience, 42% were likely to have trained between 1990 and early 2000s and 37% in the 2000s and early 2010s. This means many trained during, or before, the introduction of the Australian Curriculum (2009) and NAPLAN testing (2008). This was before shifts in initial teacher education (ITE) that resulted in a 53% reduction in allocation for music education between 2009 and 2023, impacting teachers trained in this period.

To learn more about music learning and support in initial teaching degrees, read: [\*Fading Notes: The state of music education for the next generation of primary teachers\*](#).

## Socioeconomic context

A disproportionate number of responses came from those with a low ICSEA score. This may be influenced by several factors, including the SA Music Education Strategy emphasising equal access to music learning and support from other industry providers and programs. This may mean more low ICSEA schools have access to quality music education with specialist or trained teachers. They may also have a vested interest in the Music Education Strategy and completing the survey.

To learn more about the outsized impact of music learning on students in low socioeconomic status communities, read [\*Music Education: A Sound Investment\*](#).



# Survey findings at a glance



## Widespread recognition of benefits

The overwhelming majority of teachers recognise the significant cognitive, social and emotional benefits of music education, highlighting its indispensable role in holistic development.

**97%**

said music was important or very important to students' educational experience



## Impact on academic achievement

Music education is positively correlated with perceived improvements in reading, numeracy, and overall academic performance, making it a valuable tool in educational strategies.

**94%**

agreed that music education supports reading and numeracy skills



## Well-being benefits

A significant number of teachers observe reductions in stress and anxiety among students engaged in music education, emphasising its role in supporting student well-being.

**94%**

agreed that music education decreases stress and anxiety



## Inadequate teacher training

Most educators report less than 9 hours were dedicated to music education training during their initial teacher preparation, underscoring the need for enhanced teacher education and related policy revisions.

**75%**

said there was not enough time devoted in ITE degrees to teach up to Year 6 curriculum



## Professional development demand

A high demand for professional development in music among teachers signals an opportunity for targeted support and training initiatives.

**76%**

would like to receive further music professional development sessions



## Resource disparity

The marked disparity in music resources across schools demands equitable distribution to ensure all students have access to quality music education.

**53%**

said their school has appropriate musical equipment



### Variations in music education quality

Considerable variation was perceived in the quality, equity and resources of music education across different schools.



### Lack of formal music assessment

A significant number of schools do not include music in their formal assessment programs. This may impact the quality and expectations of music learning in schools.

**34%**

don't teach music on a regular basis

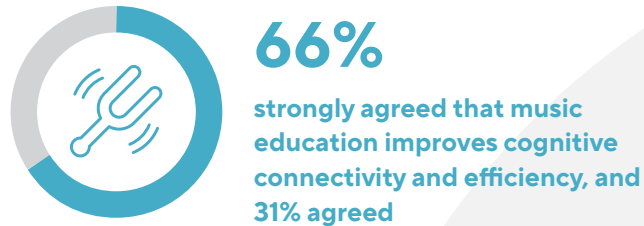
**30%**

don't include music as part of a formal assessment program



# The state of music education in South Australia

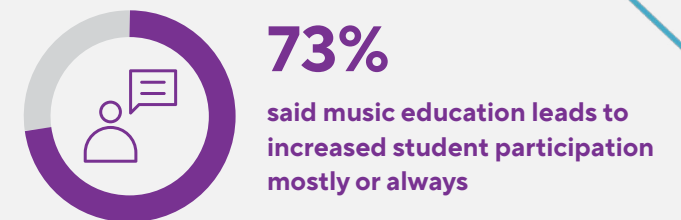
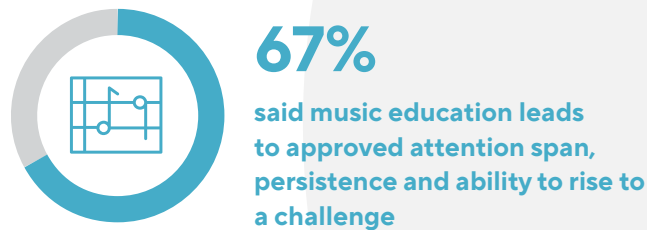
## Recognition of benefits



Among all respondents, 97% agreed that music is important to students' educational experience, and of these, 71% said it was very important. There was also a broad consensus on the benefits it can deliver to students, including approximately 97% who agreed or strongly agreed that music education improves cognitive ability, learning capacity, social skills and personal well-being. Similar responses were seen for literacy and numeracy and decreases in stress and anxiety.

When asked what being musical means to them, there were consistent themes around appreciation and enjoyment, the creative process of making music, the educational experience, inclusivity and collaboration. In addition, most (86%) agree that musical activity makes teaching more enjoyable.

## Value of music education



Respondents also indicated a medium to high level of support for the value of music education among parents and educators. However, responses suggested that students don't value music learning as highly, despite having positive emotional responses to music lessons. This points to the need to further investigate how students can better understand and respond to music learning.

This is particularly true where teachers observe a range of benefits to student responsiveness as a result of music education. The most common include increased student participation, improved attention span, improved behaviour, and increased self-expression and self-esteem.



## Teacher preparedness and training



**61%**

of teachers said less than 9 hours were allocated to music learning in their ITE courses



**75%**

agreed not enough time was devoted to music to teach up to the Year 6 curriculum



**73%**

have completed training beyond their ITE courses

Three in four respondents (75%) had completed their initial teacher education (ITE) at a South Australian institution. According to the survey, while two-fifths said music fundamentals, learning how to teach music and how to integrate music across the curriculum were taught, 61% said there were less than 9 hours allocated across their entire degree, including 17% who said none.

As such, 75% of teachers agreed there was not enough time devoted to music to teach up to the Year 6 curriculum. More content around integrating music and developing resources was requested by 78% and 69%, respectively. 73% said they had completed music training beyond their ITE courses to augment this learning.

## Professional learning and support



**80%**

of teachers have accessed professional learning for music in their careers



**68%**

agreed they have access to high-quality music professional learning



**79%**

accessed learning to improve their own musical skills

The level of professional learning support indicated was higher than might have been expected. This may be in part due to the SA Music Education Strategy, which began in 2019 and focuses on teacher professional learning and capacity building.

Just over two-thirds of respondents agreed or strongly agreed they have access to high-quality music professional learning, although a third disagreed. When seeking support, the top sources were music professional associations (42%), a support network of music educators (41%), and support provided by the system or sector (26%).

The survey reveals that most teachers (80%) have accessed professional learning focused on music during their teaching career. Of these, 79% sought learning to improve their own skills and 69% to enhance their ability to embed music into everyday teaching practices.

## Facilities and resources



**64%**  
of teachers said their musical instruments are in good working order



**61%**  
teach music in an available classroom, and only 23% have purpose-built rooms



**53%**  
said they have appropriate musical equipment to support music education

Pleasingly, 60% of respondents said there was a budget for music at their school, and 64% said instruments were in good working order. This may well be a result of the SA Music Education Strategy.

However, 61% indicated they use an available classroom to teach music in, and a further 13% use the school hall or outside area. Around one in four had purpose-built rooms (23%) to teach music programs and only 7% had purpose-built buildings.

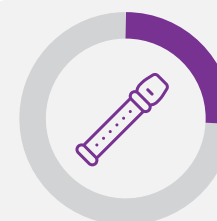
## Delivery of music education



**51%**  
of teachers said they lack brass instruments



**29%**  
said they lack string instruments



**26%**  
said they lack wind instruments

Music education can be delivered via many different formats, from singing and body and classroom percussion to learning an instrument. As outlined in the *Understanding of Quality Music Education* explainer released by *Music Education: Right from the Start*, quality, sequential, and ongoing music education involves all of these formats, using teaching methodologies that are age- and stage-appropriate.

According to the survey, the most used instrument was classroom percussion, with 40% indicating they have 1-10 instruments available. This finding aligns with the first three years of the SA Music Education Strategy which focused on improving K-2 music education when percussion is most often used.

This may indicate that more work needs to be done to ensure positive improvements in earlier years carry through to later years. This is where opportunities to improve learning through instruments such as clarinet, trumpet and drumkit are important.

However, the survey reveals a notable lack of such instruments, particularly in years 3-6 of primary school. This was noted by teachers, with at least one in four saying that they lack string and wind instruments, part of the continued music learning in years 2-6 that has been known to enhance cognitive and musical development.

As the SA Music Education Strategy enters its next phase, focusing on providing extended instrumental learning might be helpful. This forms part of advancing quality school music education and providing learning pathways for students.

# Recommendations

As a result of the survey findings, we recommend the following steps be taken over the next year.



Commence the planning and provision of instruments and trained instrumental teachers across the State to deliver extended music education experiences to all students in South Australian government primary schools.



Commence planning for the upskilling of early career teachers who can confidently deliver music education in years 3-6 to fill the gap as more experienced educators leave the teaching workforce.



Ensure, through data collection, that the Music Education Strategy is positively impacting students from mid and high-SES areas, as well as low-SES areas.



Commence a project to ensure that, whenever possible, dedicated music learning space is available in every South Australian school.





## Music Education: Right from the Start Initiative

*Music Education: Right from the Start* is a collaborative national initiative, led by Alberts | The Tony Foundation, and driven by our collective belief in the power of music to change lives. It focuses on the place and purpose of music within a quality education, and how to ensure access for all Australian primary school children. It has been developed in consultation with, and is supported by, individuals and organisations spanning the music industry, education, research and philanthropy.

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### CITATION

Collins, A. (2024) *Setting the tempo: The inside view of music education from South Australia's primary teachers*. Music Education: Right from the Start.

### THIS RESEARCH WAS SUPPORTED BY



Supported by

**Government of South Australia**

Department for Education

DAY FAMILY  
FOUNDATION