SUBMISSION TO THE NATIONAL CULTURAL POLICY 2026

Music in Me, Australian Youth Orchestra

Introduction

The National Cultural Policy presents an important opportunity to strengthen how arts and culture are experienced by all Australians.

For this vision to be realised, every child must have the opportunity to engage meaningfully with the arts from the earliest years of schooling. This is where participation begins, where confidence is built, and where the foundations of lifelong engagement are established.

The Australian Youth Orchestra (AYO), through its *Music in Me* program, contributes to this foundation.

As one of the eight national arts training organisations comprising the Arts8 collective, AYO has spent nearly 80 years developing Australia's professional musicians and creative workforce. Through *Music in Me*, AYO also supports primary school teachers and schools to deliver quality music education, ensuring for more than ten years now that more young Australians can participate, create and connect through music.

AYO is lodging a separate organisational submission addressing AYO's stewardship of national orchestral training capability and broader questions of cultural infrastructure, system coordination and workforce sustainability. This submission, lodged on behalf of the *Music in Me* program, addresses the foundational layer of that work — the implementation of music education in Australia's primary schools through teacher mentoring. The two submissions are designed to be read together, speaking from the apex and the foundations of the same national pipeline.

This submission focuses on how the next National Cultural Policy can support that work in practice.

“Every child should have the opportunity to learn and create music.”
- Richard Gill AO, founder

Music in Me: building capability in schools

Music in Me is AYO's national music education teacher mentoring program. Founded by the late Richard Gill AO and operating since 2015, the program is now in its eleventh year of national delivery.

The program works directly in classrooms, pairing expert mentors with teachers over a sustained period. Together, they plan, teach and reflect — building the teacher's confidence and capability to deliver music independently.

This approach recognises the realities of the current system.

Most primary schools rely on generalist teachers to deliver the arts. At the same time, opportunities for teachers to specialise in music have declined, and specialist roles are not consistently available across schools and regions. Both are needed to build a robust and quality music education strategy.

Music in Me responds to this by supporting both parts of the workforce:

- Generalist teachers, mentored to build their confidence and competence to teach music as part of their everyday practice
- Novice specialist teachers, supported to develop their skills and confidence through mentoring

In both cases, the goal is the same: to build lasting capability within the school, so that music education continues after the mentor's involvement ends.

The model is grounded in evidence. Independent peer-reviewed research by Monash University (Barrett, Zhukov & Welch, 2019; Barrett & Zhukov, 2021, 2024; Zhukov & Barrett, 2025) demonstrates that *Music in Me* mentoring produces substantial growth in teacher confidence to teach music — from an average 3.5% at program entry to 76.5% at completion — and that 90% of principals report satisfaction with the program’s outcomes. Across eleven years, the program has reached 598 schools and 1,131 teachers in metropolitan, regional and remote Australia, in public, Catholic and independent settings.

These outcomes are consistent with a broader research base. International evidence shows that quality, sequential music education improves cognitive function, literacy, numeracy, attendance, wellbeing and social cohesion (Guhn, Emerson & Gouzouasis, 2020).

Furthermore, the Music in Me program specifically aligns with the key national priorities of the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement 2025–2034: equity and excellence; wellbeing for learning and engagement; and a strong and sustainable workforce, demonstrated across the body of research to date.

The opportunity

Australia has a strong cultural policy framework in place.

Revive articulates a clear ambition: that all Australians should be able to access and participate in arts and culture, and that artists and creative workers are central to national life.

Across the sector, there is broad agreement that arts education is fundamental to achieving this vision. We support and align with the work of our colleagues advocating for stronger recognition of arts and music education within national policy, including *Music Education: Right from the Start* (Alberts | The Tony Foundation, 2026) and the National Advocates for Arts Education (NAAE, 2026).

The challenge, however, is not only one of recognition. The challenge is ensuring that policy ambition is realised consistently in classrooms across Australia.

The evidence on this gap is now well established. Year 12 Arts subject enrolments declined nationally by approximately 21% between 2015 and 2023 (Gattenhof and Saunders, 2026). In primary Initial Teacher Education, average music education training hours have fallen from 17 in 2009 to just eight by 2022 — a more than halving in 13 years (Hocking and Collins, 2023). Recent ACER research in NSW found that 82% of teachers report their initial teacher education in music was inadequate, 55% received fewer than 10 hours of music education during their training, and 69% rank music below eight or more other subjects in their confidence to teach it (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2024). Under *Revive*, the Commonwealth committed $2.6 million over five years to specialist in-school arts education programs (Australian Government, 2023) — modest in scale relative to the broader Commonwealth investment in education priorities such as STEM.

In many schools, particularly in regional, remote and low socio-economic communities, access to quality music education remains uneven. Without addressing this implementation gap, the broader goals of cultural policy — participation, workforce development and audience engagement — will remain difficult to achieve at scale.

A practical approach

Rather than introducing additional policy structures, we propose a focus on implementation.

Arts and music education can be embedded across all five pillars of the National Cultural Policy — provided there are effective mechanisms to support delivery within schools.

This includes:

- supporting teachers to deliver music as part of the curriculum
- building capability within schools, not relying solely on external programs
- aligning cultural and education policy settings
- investing in models that are scalable and sustainable

The remainder of this submission shows what this approach looks like across the five pillars, illustrated through Music in Me as a practical example.

Embedding across the five pillars

Arts and music education are not adjuncts to the National Cultural Policy. They are foundational to all five pillars, and are already contributing across each pillar. This can be further developed through specific, identifiable mechanisms.

Pillar	What this looks like in practice	Mechanism
First Nations First	Recognition that First Nations music, language and pedagogy are foundational to Australia's cultural transmission, embedded in resource development and teacher capability under First Nations leadership.	First Nations–led commissioning and resource development; sustained investment in First Nations musicians, composers and educators.
A Place for Every Story	Equitable access to arts and music education regardless of postcode, family income or school sector, reaching the 69% of Australian primary children educated in government schools and prioritising regional, remote and low-ICSEA communities.	Place-based delivery models of mentoring (including Direct, Remote, Multi-year and Whole-School mentoring); expand co-funded Commonwealth–State delivery architectures.
Centrality of the Artist	Recognition of music educators and teaching artists as part of the creative workforce, with pathways for professional musicians to teach through mentoring as well as micro-credentials.	Arts and music pedagogy embedded in teacher accreditation, ITE benchmarks and professional standards established via the Australian Teaching and Learning Commission. Mentoring to support artist workforce working in schools.
Strong Cultural Infrastructure	Cultural infrastructure understood as systems, partnerships and workforce capability, not only physical assets, and including the teacher–mentor workforce that sustains music education in classrooms.	Sustained Commonwealth–State delivery architectures; coordination across the Office for the Arts, Creative Australia and the ATLC; co-investment in state Music Education Strategies.
Engaging the Audience	Recognition that audiences, creators and creative workers are formed in childhood, and that classroom music education is the foundation of lifelong cultural participation.	Investment in school performances and foundational music education as audience development, complementing programming and audience-engagement initiatives elsewhere in the system.

Embedding across these pillars depends on coordination between the Arts and Education portfolios — neither can deliver alone. These mechanisms come into effect through delivery, where the most consequential lever is workforce capability — the focus of the section that follows.

Supporting the teacher workforce

Strengthening the teacher workforce is critical to improving access to music education.

We support national advocacy by Alberts, NAAE and the broader sector to:

- strengthen Initial Teacher Education
- expand training opportunities in music across the tertiary sector
- develop clearer pathways for specialist teachers

At the same time, there is an urgent need to support the existing workforce. *Music in Me* teacher mentoring program provides a proven model of professional learning that is:

- practical and classroom-based
- sustained over time
- directly relevant to the teacher's context

A Federal–State partnership for primary teacher development could enable *Music in Me* to be scaled nationally. Flexible pathways for specialist teachers working across schools can be supported through mentoring. Where professional musicians enter the teaching workforce after gaining education credentials, *Music in Me* can support their transition through in-classroom mentoring alongside experienced practitioners.

A new study by Monash University, *Music in Me: Shaping landscapes of Australian music teacher professional learning and development* (Barrett & Zhukov, forthcoming May 2026), will further evidence the program's impact on teacher confidence, wellbeing and career sustainability — themes that speak directly to the BFSA's teacher attraction and retention priorities, and to the AITSL review of national professional standards now underway.

Supporting teachers to teach music is not only an education outcome. It is a workforce strategy.

Equity and access

Ensuring equitable access to music education is a shared priority across the Education and Arts sectors.

By the time young people reach national training organisations, many structural factors are already shaped. *Music in Me's* contribution at the foundational end of this pipeline directly addresses those factors before they become locked in.

Music in Me contributes to this by working with schools in:

- regional and remote communities
- low-ICSEA contexts
- areas where access to specialist teachers is limited

Importantly, the program focuses on whole-class delivery. This ensures that all students benefit — not only those who are already engaged or have access to co-curricular opportunities.

By building capability within the school, this approach creates sustained access over time, rather than short-term program delivery.

Aligning cultural and education policy

To support this work at scale, stronger alignment between cultural and education policy is required.

Cultural infrastructure includes systems, partnerships and workforce capability that sustain cultural delivery, not only physical assets. Recognising this, the next National Cultural Policy can support arts and music education through coordination across existing Commonwealth mechanisms, including:

- a Commonwealth–State Music Education Coordination Group, jointly convened by the Office for the Arts and the Department of Education
- alignment with the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement 2025–2034, recognising music education as a literacy and numeracy multiplier, supporting equity and access, student wellbeing, and including music teacher professional learning within the Agreement's workforce and professional learning commitments
- recognition of arts and music education in the establishing remit of the Australian Teaching and Learning Commission (ATLC), agreed in principle by Education Ministers in October 2025
- co-investment in state-based Music Education Strategies, including those operating or in development in Queensland, South Australia, New South Wales and Victoria
- develop the capacity of musicians and artists to support school education outcomes in the arts through targeted professional learning

This approach enables national coordination while recognising the diversity of state education systems. It also positions arts and music education to be embedded in the ATLC's design while its priorities are being set.

Recommendations

To ensure the ambitions of the next National Cultural Policy are realised in practice, we offer the following recommendations.

Recommendation 1 — Embed arts and music education across the five existing pillars.

Give arts and music education explicit, sustained expression within each pillar of the next National Cultural Policy, supported by clearer accountability for outcomes across the Arts and Education portfolios.

Recommendation 2 — Expand the capacity and reach of the Music in Me program.

Provide additional Commonwealth investment to expand *Music in Me*, building on the existing co-funded delivery model to reach significantly more teachers, schools and children — with priority to regional, remote and low-ICSEA communities. This recommendation is offered as a focused operational ask within the broader stewardship contribution AYO makes to the National Cultural Policy review, including through its companion organisational submission.

Recommendation 3 — Establish a Federal–State partnership for primary teacher development in music.

A coordinated partnership would enable national scaling of mentoring, support flexible specialist teacher pathways, and provide structured in-classroom mentoring for professional musicians entering teaching.

Recommendation 4 — Align the next National Cultural Policy with the Commonwealth's education architecture.

Adopt a coordinated approach through existing mechanisms:

- a Commonwealth–State Music Education Coordination Group, jointly convened by the Office for the Arts and the Department of Education
- alignment with the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement 2025–2034, recognising music education as a literacy and numeracy multiplier and including music teacher professional learning within its workforce commitments
- recognition of arts and music education in the establishing remit of the Australian Teaching and Learning Commission
- co-investment in state-based Music Education Strategies.

Recommendation 5 — Recognise music teacher professional learning as a workforce strategy.

Embed support for the existing music education workforce within the Commonwealth's broader teacher attraction, retention and wellbeing priorities — connecting cultural and education policy at the workforce level.

Recommendation 6 — Invest in scalable, evidence-based delivery models that build lasting capability in schools.

Prioritise approaches that work directly with classroom teachers, focus on whole-class delivery, and sustain access beyond the life of any single program.

Conclusion

The National Cultural Policy provides a strong foundation for Australia's cultural future.

The next step is to ensure that its ambitions are realised in practice.

This requires:

- aligning cultural and education policy
- supporting the teacher workforce
- investing in scalable, evidence-based delivery models that build lasting capability in schools

Music in Me demonstrates how this can be achieved. It is offered as a practical expression of stewardship at the educational foundation of Australia's musical pipeline.

By building capability within schools, it strengthens access, participation and long-term engagement — supporting the goals of all five pillars of the policy, and complementing the broader reform agenda advanced by Alberts, NAAE and the wider arts education sector.

> *Every child should have the opportunity to experience the benefits of music education. With the right support, teachers can make this possible in every classroom, in every school, across Australia.*

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