

CORRECTED VERSION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the education of gifted and talented students

Box Hill — 29 August 2011

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Witnesses

Mr G. Hunt, School Council President, parent,
Mr M. Karklins, School Councillor, parent,
Ms J. Grant, parent, and
Ms W. White, parent, Box Hill High School.

The CHAIR — Thank you for appearing before the committee. It sounds very formal. Just to highlight the process, it is a parliamentary committee hearing, as you know, for the Education and Training Committee looking at gifted and talented students. Just so you're aware, we collect this — we've termed it evidence — as part of our inquiry. Information will be recorded as we do in Hansard and you will be given the opportunity to have a look at it and if there is something that's wrong then there is the opportunity to fix that. The other thing to point out is that just as the parliament is given the opportunity to have parliamentary privilege in terms of what goes on in a parliamentary house, the same thing applies in this hearing. What you say is protected through parliamentary privilege, the same privilege is not entitled outside the room. If you go outside and say to the media the same sort of thing it is not covered. Certainly all the evidence in here is. For these purposes — we take names and all the rest of it. We don't need to state names in this one. We will get started. We have a number of questions to get through so rather than everyone answering, just one or two each time. That would be terrific. I will kick it off.

In terms of awareness of the SEAL programs and also with Box Hill, how did you find out about the SEAL program at Box Hill and did your child's primary school tell you about the SEAL program in general and what the SEAL program was — what a SEAL program was? So anyone?

Mr HUNT — Your experience?

Ms WHITE — In what sense?

Mr HUNT — Your research about looking around for a school.

Ms WHITE — We found out about the SEAL program from a neighbour who is involved in teaching a SEAL program. We were in an independent alternative school environment in primary school, so it wasn't something I would have an expectation that that school would inform us about. But at year 5 level we did change to mainstream for the purposes of an education system that would meet our daughter's needs and meet her gifted needs. It was at that stage, about grade 5, we started investigating and found out through a neighbour.

The CHAIR — So off your own bat as opposed to any school?

Ms WHITE — That led us to find a primary school that we could change to that catered pretty well for high achieving kids at that age and when we did go and see them they knew of a SEAL program. The primary school knew of it when we spoke to them about it. They knew of other schools so then we were able to have constructive discussion with them about pathways.

Ms GRANT — I found out about it via the psychologist who tested my eldest child and she said for him to ever have a chance of finding an intellectual peer he needed to come to this school where there are a number of SEAL classes, not just one. Because my children are all highly gifted — so one in several thousand incidents and such children are very, very isolated in any mainstream setting. Extremely isolated. They are as different from the norm as people who would be in a special developmental school.

The CHAIR — Did you want to answer, Greg?

Mr HUNT — Mine was just word of mouth by — my then partner was a colleague of one of the teachers here and in talking about a school for our kids we looked around local schools where we were, out at Mitcham, and we went along to those schools and while they would have been good the chance of getting into one where the kids have had such a successful school career, based on what she had told us about the school, we thought that seemed like a very good fit. They went and sat the entrance exam, they went to interviews, they got enthused about it — we had a good time.

The CHAIR — Just extending on from that, how did you then decide that SEAL was the best option for your children and did you consider other options?

Ms WHITE — If I could add onto that because that is what you were alluding to, Greg. We also went through an educational psychologist like Jenny. We had our daughter assessed to try and ascertain just

what her level of need was and what her needs were and so then we had advice from the psychologist and based that decision on that advice. We come from out of this region and chose for our daughter to travel some distance to get here for this school. That was based on the fact that government schools in our area were not going to come close to meeting her needs. There was no-one in our area running extension or special programs for high achieving students in government schools. We also investigated quite a number of independent schools to see if through fee paying we could meet her needs so we could stay closer to home. It was just not available. There were schools that believed they were offering accelerated learning programs and extension classes or high achievers' classes but the problems we saw with a lot of those is that they were only part-time, they were mainstream students accelerated for a very small part of the academic week. So they were removed from their peers and it was also — in some instances it was by invitation or by — it may have also been for a short period of the academic year as well as being a short period of the academic week. It is too difficult for kids to step outside of how they function and how they process and do it for an hour or two a week and step back to mainstream and cope in the way that Jennifer talked about and have peers they are comfortable with and not be set aside or apart in some way.

Ms GRANT — This is a full-time program because gifted children are gifted all the time. Not just for an hour a week where they go out to a workshop or an hour next term when they go out every second week for maths. That is a ludicrous solution.

Mr HUNT — Kids learn best in an immersion program. Gifted is an immersion program and that is what they are doing.

Ms MILLER — You have answered my question about developing programs being available at a primary school level. What options would you like to see gifted students have at primary school level?

Ms GRANT — I would like to see them clustered with other gifted students for at least part of the time — a good portion of the time. It is vital for children to develop socially optimally, they need to be with other people who they can relate to. If you have an eight-year-old who might be interested in computer programming is that 8-year-old going to find anyone else in grade 2 to talk to about computer programming? No, they will want to talk about Tazos or whatever it might be at the time. That child will be completely isolated. They really do need to be grouped and have some sort of a definite program that involves accelerative options and extension and enrichment options too within that.

Mr KARKLINS — I came from [REDACTED], just down the road here, so it was within the catchment and Box Hill has had a very good relationship with the school so we were identified early in the piece that my son should go for testing, my daughter as well. But the school is aware of that. Because of its close association as a primary school some of the younger kids are identified in grade 5 and 6 as having high needs so they will do extension work together. So there is that starting of a program, but I don't know if it is a formal program per se. I think it is something they have recognised that a lot of kids that come up here and have tested well — so that's been part of the form for [REDACTED]. It may be different for others.

Mr HUNT — My kids were at [REDACTED], which is over at Mitcham, and they had outbreaks — sporadic outbreaks — of special programs and go off to a writing workshop or a one-day program somewhere. That is what made us — our kids did pretty well anyway — it made us think that if there was an option that gave that sort of development that was more broadly available we would do it. It is the point that Jen made before, we are not talking about something that is a small part of the day and a choice issue, it is just the way kids are when they are in a comprehensive program and they are in it together.

Ms GRANT — They have special needs.

Mr HUNT — If you can put them in a situation where there is a cohort within that distribution curve that they can find home, that is what you want for your kids.

Ms WHITE — That is certainly our experience when we moved our daughter. How her life changed when she went into an environment where there were like-minded peers.

Ms MILLER — Based on your experiences did the teachers at primary school level actually identify

outside your own beliefs that these children were gifted and/or talented?

Ms GRANT — In my eldest son's case, yes, because he is so out there but it was identified in a very negative way. I was told, for example, "He doesn't belong at this school." When I said, "Where does he belong?" they said, "We don't know." So it wasn't a positive thing and they could see that he was gifted but had no idea what to do. No idea what to do. I see that all the time in the primary schools that I work in now. Teachers — primary teachers just don't comprehend what to do or how to do it.

Mr HUNT — In our case they identified kids and invited them to take part in these one-off programs, so clearly there was some kind of awareness that some kids would benefit from opportunities. How rigorously that was done across the whole lot I couldn't comment. I only know from my own experience.

Mr ELASMAR — Moving from one school to this school with such a large number of high achieving and gifted students, how does your child adjust?

Ms WHITE — Mine feels at home. Mine finally has kids that it's okay to be — the words we use — they comfortably use are "as nerdy as they like". They can talk science over dinner or over lunch in the playground or play their scientific games or — just do all those different things that I can't even pinpoint what they do differently but my daughter is comfortable and she is with people she can be comfortable with.

Mr HUNT — I wouldn't recognise that as a valid question in my case. There is no adjustment needed. It is just the way they are. I suspect my kids would have been all right wherever they went but here, because of the learning culture which they were immersed in, that is the way they are. For them it is — there wasn't any adjustment necessary because that is just what it is.

The CHAIR — Can I pick up on that? We got from the kids with some of the things about they were top of the class at the schools they were at and then when they've come here it is completely different so they see that competitive difference — in a different sphere.

Mr HUNT — We never really had that level of competition. I never got a sense of that from the previous school and so that didn't appear to be an issue at all for my kids.

Mr ELASMAR — Probably to your child it is not an issue but probably to other parents it is an issue?

Ms WHITE — Are you talking academically or socially? Certainly my response was a aimed more at socially. It is, in fact, there wasn't adjustment for us either. My daughter was able to stop adjusting. She didn't have to have to adjust to try to fit in anymore.

The CHAIR — She felt like she'd come home.

Ms WHITE — That's right. She didn't have to pretend to be interested in Barbie dolls or hide and seek when she was interested in computers or science.

Mr KARKLINS — My son came here with a lot of friends from the primary school on the accelerated program but he made just as many friends in the very early period with kids he'd never met before because they are so likeable for each other.

Ms GRANT — My daughter found it a social wonderland here. She has just blossomed and bloomed, you could not believe it. She has friends coming out of her ears. It was not like that at primary school. She is an easy going, sociable kind of girl. Social is important to her.

Mr ELASMAR — Many parents have told the committee they receive very little support, guidance or nurturing in supporting their gifted child. What information and support does this school provide, if there is any, and can you describe how the Parent Support Group at Box Hill works? Do parents find the support group to be useful?

Mr HUNT — There is a program of support for parents. I came to the first one and this has been — my

daughter had first arrived and it has been nine years since she started here so I didn't go to any more.

Ms GRANT — I went to every single one. I have had a student here in the SEAL program for probably nine years and have been to every single meeting. It is so valuable to me.

Ms WHITE — I come to as many as I can. I remember leaving one of my first meetings here quite emotional because it was the first point that, as a parent, I could sit with parents of like-minded students and someone understood me and people understood that I wasn't just going into bat for my kid or singing her praises. I had a kid with special needs and they weren't met. I must admit sometimes I come where there is a bit of a talkfest. I probably lament that there is not a greater opportunity for more parent interaction but that's — having said that I know — knowing the school I know that what they offer is as much as they can with the resources and the drain on teachers and all the things they do to support our kids. It is pretty much once a term there is an activity.

Ms GRANT — It is twice a term. There is a parent support group twice a term.

Mr ELASMAR — Do you believe parents need other support?

Ms GRANT — This school provides the most parent support that I've ever heard from any school for gifted kids, and I deal with hundreds of parents of gifted kids and hundreds of gifted kids every year, and this school is an absolute standout in what they provide in parent support. The gifted coordinator is here. If I have ever had a concern I will email or phone her and she responds incredibly rapidly, even at night, often out of school hours. The literature, research is given to the parents — disseminated amongst the parents to read. There is the parent support meetings where we ask for feedback on how we could improve the SEAL program. There's a dedicated parent/student welfare person just for the SEAL students. It is astonishing what is offered here in comparison to other schools.

Mr HUNT — In part the gifted coordinator here did work in the Education Department for some years in a coordination role. If there was going to be a school that did it well this one does.

Ms GRANT — Does she? I didn't know she did.

Mr HUNT — I used to work with her when I was there. That level of resource is why I think the school here is so good. Here is an issue I would like to raise later and that is the one about how you resource gifted programs more generally. That is fundamental to the success.

Mr ELASMAR — You talked about improving the SEAL program; what changes would you suggest? The kids before they said something so what would you use?

Ms GRANT — I've had two go through the program already, one is in it currently. They would like to see the SEAL cohort remain as classes together through VCE. Now they are mixed in with everybody else for VCE. They would like to remain as a SEAL cohort. There needs to be more staff professional development. Some staff need further training. Every person needs further training. I still regularly upgrade my knowledge.

Mr HUNT — The professional development issue, access to professional networks, teachers sharing strategies, not just in SEAL, that is how you teach. It is a collaborative activity. That kind of collegiality you get in a staff room with people sharing their stories and teaching strategies are so important.

The CHAIR — Other than what we have asked, and obviously what you have put in your submission, because that is certainly part of the evidence, is there anything else you would like to bring up that you feel is important for us to take into consideration?

Mr KARKLINS — One thing that stands out for all of us in our discussion is funding. We don't — you've just come into us today and talked about Maribyrnong getting \$4.5 million for their sports program. As a SEAL program we don't get funding.

Ms GRANT — Nothing.

Mr KARKLINS — Absolutely nothing. For something that is so fundamentally important for us as parents and for the — obviously for the area, and we get over 400 kids testing for 75 spots coming from all around Victoria, we are obviously recognised as being a leader in the area of SEAL programs yet we just don't get the funding we should be getting. That would just improve things dramatically. It is like this beautiful room that we are sitting in now, we spent the money getting it and now we don't have any money to fund it. We are having to have meetings for the local area schools that are a part of this to how we are going to manage it and what we can do and what we can provide. We have a centre of excellence. We have the provision to go out and see....

The CHAIR — If you had the funding what would you spend it on?

Mr KARKLINS — Programs.

Ms GRANT — Professional development.

Mr HUNT — We need to operate the place so we need to have a manager. We have a partnership with Deakin University and they will bring in some of their teacher trainers and we can run laboratory techniques for trainees. We are talking with groups like the Academy of Science, Technology and Engineering. We were talking with Siemens when talking about this project. There is a lot of things we can be doing. We have a meeting later this week where we will be looking at what we can be doing. This will depend on where we are on the continuum of funding support, on how individual schools can contribute — they are pretty stretched — and what else we can bring in from outside. Otherwise we have a lovely building but there won't be as much activity going on within it as it could be.

Ms GRANT — I think if you were meaning if we were funding for SEAL what would we do with it...

The CHAIR — Generally, if there was more funding available for your school where are the efficiencies and what are some of the things...

Mr HUNT — I agree with professional development but then there needs to be professional development opportunities as well. There is a Teacher Professional Association, have they got the resources to be able to develop the programs and then have the teachers got the opportunity to be able to take part in those programs. It is a two-way thing. Once upon a time Monash had the — Melbourne Uni had the CHIP program. Now, we need a much greater capacity for teachers to go to those sorts of programs. We need the programs and the teachers to be able to go to them.

The CHAIR — Any other issues?

Ms GRANT — I'd like to say all parents want their children to be happy. That is what all parents — we are not pushy parents, we want our children to be happy and for gifted children to be happy they need to find a niche where they can feel at home. My children have certainly felt at home here. My second one, so much so that he now, after finishing last year actually comes back here to volunteer a few days a week and on weekends because he feels that this is his second home. He probably spends more time here during his waking hours now he is at university than he does at home with us because he feels — he was here this morning, for example, setting up. If he had gone to any other school he would have been the little nerd who was ostracised, bullied and felt like an outsider whereas here he's been welcomed with open arms and nurtured and the staff have mentored him and they do it for others too, not just my son. This is home because they just feel they belong.

The CHAIR — Wendy, did you want to say anything.

Ms WHITE — I'm happy. I suppose I would support that from the point of view I rejoice in what it means for my family socially and in terms of broader problems in society. I saw '60 Minutes' last night with all the young adolescents and women drinking and things. Being comfortable in this environment means my kids aren't wanting to engage in that because it is okay to be with the nerdy kids and it is okay to just want to get together on a Saturday night and play twister till 10 o'clock and be picked up early or watch a movie or eat pizza. There is not a pressure to be able to do something else or extend into other activities that

aren't as healthy. That is part of the comfort here and being with like-minded kids, that is really important to us as a family.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for your contribution today. It has certainly been very important for us, and, as you know, certainly following along from the work we're doing. It is a very, very important area for us to get this right and we look forward to sharing the outcomes at a later date with you all.

Ms GRANT — Looking forward to it. Can I loan Parliament these documents which are all about acceleration? It is like a synopsis of research.

The CHAIR — We will copy them and get them back.

Ms GRANT — You can have them for as long as you like. You can get it online and can get it in hard copy. There is information how to do it.

Ms GRANT — Don't worry if it is a year.

Mr HUNT — Thanks for the opportunity. It is very, very important for this school. The SEAL program has been fundamental to the success of this, particularly since turning it around from 1994, I think when it first started. I was saying when we were having lunch, at school council we have a standing agenda item of publicity. We have been much relieved over the last few council meetings there hasn't been any items there because we are bursting at the seams. It is because of the program we are offering. We are turning away parents as it is now. It is not a nice thing to be doing but it is a very successful program.

Witnesses withdrew.