

CORRECTED VERSION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the education of gifted and talented students

Melbourne — 25 July 2011

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Ms J. Lawrence, Director, and
Ms W. Smith, Director, G.A.T.E.WAYS.

The CHAIR — We would like to welcome G.A.T.E.WAYS and its directors, Win Smith and Jill Lawrence. I will explain a couple of things to you. We are here today for the public hearings of the Education and Training Committee's inquiry into the education of gifted and talented students. All of the evidence that will be presented today by you is protected by parliamentary privilege, which is the same privilege that MPs are entitled to when they are in the Parliament. However, any comments you make outside of the hearing may not be afforded such privilege. Say what you like inside these walls. Hansard will be recording everything. We will provide a proof version of today's hearing to you to have a look at for anything that stands out — typographical errors or what have you — as being incorrect. You will have the opportunity to look at those.

I invite you to make an opening statement. We have half an hour to get through your submission. Can I suggest that the opening statement be brief? We have your submission.

Mr ELASMAR — There is no submission.

Ms SMITH — I was going to start by saying that.

The CHAIR — There you go. Maybe you might want to give a bit more in terms of the opening submission, but please allow us enough time because the Q and A is where we start to probe and get into it. Over to you, bearing in mind that we have to allow for some questions. I will leave it to you for your opening statement.

Ms SMITH — We are looking forward to the questions. We are an independent organisation. We started out in 1994 at the time the government brought in the Bright Futures policy that mandated that all schools had to provide for gifted kids. Our first program in 1994 was just a holiday program with 37 kids. Over the years we were gradually invited to run programs during school time, not just holiday time. This year we anticipate 14 000 children will go through the G.A.T.E.WAYS program.

I have brought in some figures I can show you when you are ready to see them. We run our programs in school time because our philosophy is that gifted children should not have to do things after school or in their holidays. It should be part of the curriculum. We run them in schools. Schools host the programs. We have about 40 schools currently in Melbourne and some interstate that host our program so that we are able to invite children to come into the host schools to do the programs.

Because we are an independent organisation we are not funded in any way, so we have to engage the people who present the programs. We have to do all the administration of them and invite parents to bring their children along to them. It is a user-pays program. Parents pay us directly for the program. That probably sums it up.

Ms LAWRENCE — In a nutshell.

The CHAIR — Do you have a duration of the program?

Ms SMITH — We have various programs, which I can show you. As I said, they run in school time. Some programs run for just one day a term. Other programs might run for half a day a week over four weeks, so the children have 10 hours a program. We have a club on Saturday afternoons. The children become members of that club, and they come on a Saturday afternoon once a fortnight for eight sessions in a semester. We have festivals and workshops which will just run for one day. Any one festival might have 600 children at it for that day. We will be running, say, 30 programs, and there will be 20 children in each of the programs. These festivals are usually held in private schools that have an extra week's holiday in a term, and so they hand over the whole school to us and then we put the program together.

Ms LAWRENCE — Having said that, our programs run in all sectors of the education system — state schools, Catholic schools, independent schools and Jewish schools as well. Children from all of those sectors attend and are all invited.

The CHAIR — As a percentage of the 14 000 children you currently work with, who will go through the program this year or who will have just gone through the program? What percentage would be undertaking a primary school program as opposed to the year 7 to year 9 program that you run and some of the after-school programs? Would the majority be within the primary sector?

Ms LAWRENCE — Yes, mostly for primary. We do not cater that much for secondary kids. We just have one program a year really, don't we?

Ms SMITH — We have occasionally, but we found that it is a timetabling problem with secondary schools, and also a lot of secondary schools have specialists who are extending the children already.

Ms LAWRENCE — Increasingly a lot of schools are offering accelerated learning programs and so on in the secondary state system.

Ms SMITH — I think one of the big advantages of G.A.T.E.WAYS is that that is solely what we do; we just run programs for primary school gifted kids.

The CHAIR — Ideally at what age?

Ms SMITH — Mostly years 1 to 6. We do have a limited prep program, but normally that is towards the end of the year.

Ms LAWRENCE — And a Bright Buttons club, which is a club for gifted preps, usually held in the second part of the year. So once they have been at school for six months and they are identified then they would come to that particular program.

The CHAIR — Great. We will get straight into our questions. At the end if there is other information that you would like to leave with us, that would be terrific and that would be treated as part of your submission today.

We have received a number of submissions which suggest that there are negative perceptions associated with the term 'gifted and talented'. Some submissions have suggested using other terminology, such as 'high performance', 'high intellectual potential' and 'high ability' students. Do you think this is a problem, and if so, what terminology do you think we should be using when we talk about gifted and talented students?

Ms SMITH — We are called G.A.T.E.WAYS, which stands for 'gifted and talented education ways', so we are stuck with it a bit. But on the other hand a lot of our literature says 'highly able'.

Ms LAWRENCE — And we would see ourselves as perhaps catering for the top 10 per cent of students, so from the top performers in a class, or near the top of a class, through to the very gifted, and of course there are not that many in the population. When we send out our programs to schools we ask the schools to select the children; we are not active in that part of the process. Schools look at their cohort of kids. Let's say we are offering a robotics program in this particular round of programs; the teachers would then look at their cohort of, say, grade 5 and 6 students, if that is the grade level at which the program is being offered, and select the students who they feel would best benefit from the extension of that particular program because they show potential in technology.

The CHAIR — I want to ask you some questions around identification. Children in G.A.T.E.WAYS programs are largely recommended by the teachers. Do you think that teachers have enough skills at the moment in identifying kids for your program and just generally in the area? And what support do you think do we need to provide teachers to be able to select students for those sorts of activities? Do you think teachers can identify students straight off the cuff, or are you finding at the moment that there are gaps that some more teacher training might assist with?

Ms LAWRENCE — I think there is always the need for training. As Pat said at the end of her submission, there is very little training in undergraduate programs and that is really where it is needed. But I suppose we have found from our experience that the kids who come to our programs on the whole are quite well selected, aren't they?

Ms SMITH — Definitely. And I think teachers have got better at it over the years. In the beginning there might be children who we would think were poorly selected, but we usually send out criteria with our programs to assist in selection. I would say that 95 per cent of the children who come to G.A.T.E.WAYS have been well selected.

Ms LAWRENCE — Particularly for the longer term programs, where the children are coming over a number of sessions and it is not just a single day, we ask the presenters to send us feedback at the end of the day to let us know whether there are children who are not really following the program or who may have found it to be a bit beyond them. We do not get many of those at all, and if we do, we would then go and follow it up with the school to see if we could support them a little bit more in the programs so that it is going to be successful for them.

The CHAIR — Have you seen examples where teachers might send somebody along who is a good student in terms of being well behaved but not necessarily a gifted child? Do you think that teachers are now selecting through some sort of testing in the classroom? How are these kids selected for your programs?

Ms LAWRENCE — As I said earlier, I think they look at the program that is particularly on offer. It may be a maths program, and so they will be looking at those children who are very good at maths and who they feel could do with extra extension with other like-minded peers. That is one of the benefits of the program — they are in a class with 19 other highly able children who are all really keen to come to the program and who love maths, say, in this case.

Ms SMITH — We run a range of programs right across the curriculum, and teachers know this, so they are going to hold back a kid until they find the program that is going to suit them.

Ms LAWRENCE — Parents have to pay for the programs, so I think teachers are very careful with their selection because it is no good if the child comes to the program and they do not get anything out of it. Teachers feel the weight and the responsibility of that choice; they are not going to choose a child to attend a program that may not work for that child.

The CHAIR — In terms of screening, some of our submissions have suggested that all Victorian students should be screened for giftedness. Do you agree, and if so, at what age should children be assessed; if not, what other mechanisms should be used to ensure that gifted children are identified?

Ms SMITH — I am wondering what ‘screening’ means.

The CHAIR — Testing.

Ms SMITH — I do not know. From personal experience, my two sons are obviously gifted, but they were never screened; they were never tested. I do not know what their IQs are. So my feeling is that there should be a range of considerations given to whether or not a child is gifted or highly able and testing should only be one part of it.

Ms LAWRENCE — We do not test all children to see if they are all elite athletes, do we? We know from our observations. I think teachers are pretty good at observing. There are identifying characteristics. So if you have a little child from a very young age who has a very wide vocabulary, is very articulate and has a phenomenal memory, those are just a few of the identifying characteristics. It is very easy to pick those up. Or you might have a little child who comes to school reading, or who, if they are not reading when they come to school, very soon after they start school they read and their reading does not progress in stages like the average child. They can read one day and then they leap; they do a huge leap, and then the next week they are reading chapter books. That is a bit of an exaggeration.

But I think teachers are able to see those things. I am not sure whether screening or testing every child is the right way to go. That is not to say that a lot of kids are not currently going under the radar. We see the children who come to our program; we do not see the children who probably would benefit from the program but who have not been identified.

The CHAIR — That brings me to the next point, which is around a number of groups that are, say, socially disadvantaged or indigenous and which may not be afforded programs or might slip under the radar. Does G.A.T.E.WAYS identify or provide programs for those sorts of groups?

Ms LAWRENCE — Disadvantaged groups, you mean?

The CHAIR — Yes.

Ms SMITH — It is one of our concerns, I think. Because our program is user pays we have costs to meet, but we realise there are many children who cannot afford to come to the program. We can only address it in a small way. We do give a few scholarships and a few complimentary places, but we certainly cannot meet that need unfortunately.

Ms LAWRENCE — We did have a bit of funding from what was originally the Education Foundation, now the Foundation for Young Australians. For a couple of years they did give us some funding to offer scholarships to children in state schools whose parents were on EMA. We were able to do it, but unfortunately we cannot do it on a large scale.

The CHAIR — Have you done any work on indigenous — —

Ms LAWRENCE — Not a great deal.

Ms TIERNEY — I want to go to the issue of best practice schools. From your experience, are Victorian schools providing appropriate learning experiences for gifted students? Can you give specific examples of schools that provide appropriate learning experiences for gifted children?

Ms SMITH — That is a hard one. Its varies; we know it is very different. We go to many schools — 40 to 100, I suppose, a year. We know it is different, but we never, ever name a school and say that school has the right programs. However, we know which schools probably do have them.

Ms LAWRENCE — Also we have hundreds of schools supporting G.A.T.E.WAYS and sending children to our programs. It is very hard for us to know, because we are not in all those schools, whether G.A.T.E.WAYS is their only provision or whether it is part of a whole raft of different things they do for gifted children. We hope that we are just a bonus and that we are providing part of their program but not the complete program.

Ms SMITH — We are aware of the fact that in some schools we are the only program those children go to. Then again, in other schools we know that teachers are doing fantastic things with their gifted kids and they just see G.A.T.E.WAYS as something additional they can offer them.

Ms TIERNEY — If we go to the issue of mainstream versus separate programs, in your experience do you think it is better for gifted children to have appropriate learning experiences in mainstream classes or is it better for gifted children to be educated with like-minded peers?

Ms SMITH — I do not know whether Ms Lawrence and I agree on this. I would go with like-minded peers because I think it is very difficult for a classroom teacher to accommodate the range that is within their class, given the resources and expertise they have.

Ms LAWRENCE — In an ideal world, with the resourcing, if you had like-minded kids grouped within a class so that you have the kids' ability grouped within a classroom and the teacher was able to provide for all those different ability groupings, that would be fabulous. Some teachers are able to do it, but other times it just does not happen. If you group the children into like minds and you provide them with a separate curriculum or whatever it is, at least you know that you are catering for them and they are getting what they deserve in our system. For us — I think Win would agree with me — we see it as a social justice issue. It is not elitist to provide them with an opportunity to learn when they go to school or into the classroom; we are only giving them what every other child in the system should have.

Ms SMITH — We do evaluations of all our programs, and the feedback from the parents and children is that they love being in like-minded groups. I was involved in the setting up of the accelerated learning program at Box Hill High School in the early nineties. I know how much more those kids got out of being grouped together than if they had been in a mainstream classroom.

Mr CRISP — Does G.A.T.E.WAYS provide programs in rural and regional areas? And what can be done to increase access to gifted education programs for students in rural and regional areas?

Ms SMITH — They are screaming out for it, I know that. The answer is no, we do not, because there is only so much we can do and there are only seven days in a week. We get a lot of inquiries from regional areas, and unfortunately we are unable to meet that demand.

Mr CRISP — Probably in the same area but looking back, your Bright Buttons program is of interest. Do you think pre-service teachers need training in gifted education, and if so, what kind of training do they need and should it be mandatory? How do you work Bright Buttons to get the teachers to identify it at pre-service?

Ms SMITH — It is in the second half of the year, so they will have had the children for two terms, or six months. Again, parents can enrol directly in our Bright Buttons club, so a lot of the enrolments that come into that prep group are because parents have recognised that their children need something extra.

Ms LAWRENCE — We send out programs to schools on an ongoing basis, so if schools get information about the Brainwaves club for the second semester and we are offering the Bright Buttons club, those kids jump out at them. It is not hard to identify a very bright prep, even if they are not writing fluently.

Mr ELASMAR — Some submissions suggest that there are negative attitudes in the community and among teachers about gifted education. Do you agree that these attitudes exist, and if so, what strategies do you use to overcome these attitudes in schools?

Ms SMITH — We have been working at it for 18 years now, and I must admit that in the beginning there was a lot of negativity, but I would have to be honest and say that in recent years we have had a lot of support from parents and teachers in the community. I think we have built up a lot of credibility. Do you feel there is a lot of negativity still?

Ms LAWRENCE — We are not in schools five days a week sitting in a staffroom, but no. When we first started, yes, but the attitude has changed the lot.

Ms SMITH — We have actually just started to increase programs that we are running in other states, and the same pattern has been followed there. We started in Canberra about 10 years ago in a very small way, just for the club. Now we are going up there regularly, and more and more children are coming — so much so that we have waiting lists as long as the program itself and we have to run extra programs. The same thing is happening in Melbourne, particularly this year. We can have 66 children in a program on any one day, and we will have 60 children on the waiting list to get into that program. This is another thing we have problems with and would like to address.

Ms LAWRENCE — About 500 or 600 schools are currently sending children to our programs, most of those in Melbourne but others on the fringe of Melbourne too. We have children coming from Gisborne, Macedon, Sunbury and Mount Eliza to programs in the Melbourne metropolitan area. Obviously there is someone in each of those schools who feels very strongly about the fact that gifted children should have some opportunities for extension, so I think that is evidence in itself that there is a lot of support. It may just be individuals within schools who are spearheading it, but obviously the principal is giving some support there.

Ms SMITH — I think those individuals and schools are very important, because what we have found is that if a particular individual who has been the G.A.T.E.WAYS coordinator, moves on to another school, then that particular school that person has left could drop off completely. It depends very much on the coordinator in a school being involved.

The CHAIR — Obviously we are not talking about your specific program — —

Ms SMITH — No, any program.

The CHAIR — It is just the general idea about gifted education.

Ms SMITH — And it is that person in the school — and again, you talk to them from time to time. Some of them are given time allotments so that they can spend time planning the programs and coordinating them, and in other schools it is something they have to do in their lunchtime or after school.

Ms MILLER — Do you use technology and online learning in your programs, and if so, how effective are they as learning tools for gifted children?

Ms SMITH — Not a lot. Jill mentioned the social side of it. We like kids to interact, to have hands-on activities and to interact with one another.

Ms LAWRENCE — I suppose the success of our programs is also in the passion of the presenters and their interactions with the children. Our main focus is working directly with children, not online, so we can not really make a comment there.

Ms MILLER — Would the regional and rural people be disadvantaged unless they came to the city to have that interaction with your program?

Ms SMITH — I think there are organisations that do online things with children, but we are just not one of them. The other reason that perhaps we do not use that so much is that we go into host schools, and they do not have that sort of equipment or those facilities for us to use. Very few schools that we go into, for example, have a computer set aside.

Ms LAWRENCE — But we have not put any of our programs online.

The CHAIR — We have come to the end of our time in terms of questions for you. Is there something we have not covered that you would like to add, bearing in mind that although you have not put in a written submission as such, we are happy for you to do so following on from this? If you would like to present a written submission, we are more than happy to receive that as part of this. Also if there are any other additional documents that you would want to offer, we would certainly include them as part of today's hearing. Is there anything specific — bearing in mind that we do not have a lot of time — that you want to highlight now?

Ms SMITH — We would probably agree with what Pat said. We overheard Pat saying — and we have said this for many years — that there is not enough teacher training at universities.

Ms LAWRENCE — We get a lot of calls from parents really wanting counselling, asking, 'What should we do? My child is gifted, and he is so bored at school' and so on and so forth. I think a lot of that would be overcome with the education, definitely undergraduate education, because, as we know, it is pretty much postgraduate.

Ms SMITH — And perhaps it would help if there were some more money available so that programs could be provided for those children whose parents could not afford it. I think it is unfortunate that a lot of the programs that are being offered are user pays and there is no funding for them.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for your contribution today.

Ms SMITH — I just want to clarify one point. When I said we had 14 000 children through programs this year, many of those 14 000 were repeat attendances — that is, children who come every time we have a program going. They might come to a program 10 times a year.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Win, and thank you, Jill, for your contribution. We will certainly take all those points on board.

Committee adjourned.