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EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the education of gifted and talented students

Melbourne — 25 July 2011

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Mr I. Burrage, General Manager, Education and Policy Research Division, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.

The CHAIR — Firstly, I welcome the our first witness, Mr Ian Burrage, who is the general manager, education policy and research division of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. I welcome Ian. I welcome members of the gallery who have come in to observe this very important inquiry. We can see by the number of observers who have come in today that it is something of high importance, and we welcome you. Today we will have a formalised process. The Education and Training Committee's inquiry is tackling a very important issue, the education of gifted and talented students.

All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege. Any comments, Ian, that you make outside of the hearing are obviously not afforded such a privilege, but certainly any comment that is made today will be treated as such. Hansard will be recording today's proceedings and will provide a proof version transcript so you can check any typographical errors. What I will do is invite you to make an opening statement, and at the conclusion of that statement we will then ask a series of questions. We obviously have a number of questions for you, so if we could ensure that you both keep the statement as brief as possible and keep the comments directed to the questions, we will hopefully get through what we have today. Thank you for coming, and please begin.

Overheads shown.

Mr BURRAGE — Thanks, David. Thank you to the committee for taking on this term of reference and inquiring into the issue. I have a short presentation I will make, and, as you have indicated, I am happy to answer questions of the committee.

From the department's perspective, we welcome the inquiry. We agree with you — it is a very important issue, and to some extent I think we would accept it is an issue that is underdone within the department at the moment. In looking at this issue we have fundamentally approached it as an equity issue and take the perspective — and it is reflected in the Melbourne declaration — that all children and young people deserve an education that is engaging, challenging and helps them to reach their full potential.

In achieving this goal we know that there are some parts of the education, some cohorts, that require specific responses to help them to reach their full potential. One of those groups is clearly the gifted and talented. This includes students with high levels of ability in one field or multiple fields, traditional academic areas but also areas not necessarily traditionally associated with the gifted and talented, cross-vocational fields, leadership, sports and creative pursuits. We think it is a broad range of areas to consider. Of course we are very conscious of the research that talks about the needs of this cohort and how they can best be met. Getting experience in learning that is appropriate for them — an appropriate pace, depth and complexity — socialising and learning with like-ability peers and connecting with people and opportunities outside the school is important. We know that without extra support this is a cohort that is at risk of disengaging because the content is simply not engaging enough for them. But we also know — and the literature on this from an international perspective confirms it — that the needs of these students can be overlooked, even the well-intentioned programs to meet the needs, and it can be a cohort where the needs are missed.

Last year we undertook some preliminary research on the area just to touch base with the number of schools to try to get a better sense of what was on offer. It would be fair to say that it was a little bit patchy. The schools, though, that we contacted were interested in the area but recognised that they would like to do more and that we needed to do more to support them. Looking at Victoria's performance and one of the key reasons why in the department we think it is an issue for us — if you look at this slide, it shows the top two bands of proficiency in PISA. It is the international benchmark, and in the department outcomes framework we talk about comparing ourselves against excellence internationally. As you can see, Victoria is a high-performing jurisdiction and does have good numbers in the top two bands, but relative to the highest performing jurisdictions we have a long way to go, and we would not step away from acknowledging that. Most Australian jurisdictions do, I might add, but in terms of competing with the world's best we are behind.

As we have approached the issue and as we have talked inside the department, we have favoured a relatively broad description of the issue. We would like to think about both performance and potential; consider a broader range of disciplines and skills, which I have already touched on; think about children from all backgrounds, acknowledging that some cohorts will require more attention than others; and about different ways of thinking and knowing and disposition. Of course the committee will not be a stranger to Gagné by now. I think if you look across other jurisdictions, you will hear a lot of people speaking about Gagné's definition, which we think

provides a very good working definition and a way to look at the issue. In considering the current provision, there is currently no statewide policy on gifted and talented students within the department and available to schools. We have identified that schools are responsible for identifying gifted and talented students, providing them with appropriate learning, experiences and support. The more you push it towards a school-level responsibility, the more variation you will get and the more patchy the approach will be. We would acknowledge that there is a significant variation in how schools provide for the needs of gifted and talented students.

Within the types of structures that we currently have we have schools with specialist streams, such as the college of the arts and the John Monash Science School. We have select entry schools. We now have four. And we also have 35 government schools that offer SEAL, the select entry accelerated learning program. For SEAL, just in short, it is mainly acceleration, with students completing four years in three. There is professional learning and a network available for the SEAL program. Some primary and secondary schools have developed specific programs. They cover accelerating learning and extending for students, high-ability groupings and, in those instances, providing mentoring and extracurricular activities.

Clearly there is some support to help teachers differentiate, and it is a big part of the department's philosophy around differentiating programs and personalising the learning available. That has been a priority for the department in its reform over 15 years. We know from various assessments that in any one class there could, for these purposes, be five years of variation between the students in that class. Of course we are very conscious that in a number of fields there are private providers that are accessed by schools, parents and individuals.

In terms of opportunities around where some of our internal deliberations have taken us we would certainly think there are a number of ways that we could provide more support for gifted and talented students, their teachers and, importantly, their families. From a quick scan of the submissions you can see the need for parents to be supported, and we are very conscious of that. We would like to see a more coordinated approach and some targeted strategies to fill key gaps in the current provision. In our submission we canvassed some of those opportunities from our perspective and we see them reflected in a number of the other submissions that have been provided as well.

We move on to creating a common understanding and focus — I think there is a lot to be done to win this as an equity issue. This is a cohort that has particular needs and those needs need to be supported, so creating a common understanding and focus I think is critical. The next point is building on existing identification processes — what assistance can we provide with assessment tools and guidance for schools? Next we have a specific focus on targeting those who experience educational disadvantage where we know the evidence would suggest that they tend to underrepresent and not be so proactive in demonstrating their skills. The next point is supporting gifted and talented children across all learning domains and not a narrow band, followed by utilising learning technologies more effectively and harnessing the power of ICT and the previous investment that has been made in that area by ensuring educators have sufficient resources and capacity, starting from a pre-service level with education and ongoing education as well as making it feasible for the sort of targeted work that is required with gifted and talented students on a daily basis. It is also important to provide appropriate information support structures for families, which we understand is a frustration for families, if you look at the submissions. The next point is creating the sort of coordinated opportunities that connect to a range of other providers. There is a range of other learning experiences which could be leveraged up to a greater scale which will provide more opportunities.

Overall I think the key challenge for us is around determining what support can reasonably be provided within the school setting and what needs to be complemented by outside-of-school settings, so what is the role of school and the provision of appropriate classroom differentiation and support. Another issue is the network or central level coordination of programs and support for teachers — what role could they be playing. Then there are out-of-school opportunities for students and also partnerships with the non-government school sector, business and community organisations.

We do not feel this is an area where we have to start from scratch. No doubt from the body of responses to the inquiry you can get a sense of the commitment a range of people have to the area, so I think there are opportunities to work from that to provide better overall statewide provision.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Ian, for that opening contribution. We will kick it off with some questions, some of which will certainly cover off a number of issues that you have identified. I am going to start and if I could initially cover an area of terminology: many of the submissions received by the committee suggest there are negative perceptions associated with the term ‘gifted and talented’. Suggestions for alternative terms include ‘children of high intellectual potential’ and ‘high ability students’. Do you think this is an issue, and what terminology do you think we should be using for gifted and talented students in Victoria?

Mr BURRAGE — I do think it is an issue. In passing, in our engagement, the idea of a gift can actually give a particular perception around how these kids will fare. Gagné in passing does say that this is a cohort that with their range of abilities will often sort themselves. But the idea of it being elitist is problematic. I cannot speak for every professional across every school in the state. I certainly know that when we put it forward as an equity issue we find some people find it hard to grasp, given the idea of the gift bestowed on these people with their innate abilities. I think it is an issue. I think a pressing issue for us to cover in this is to win the point of it being an equity issue — that this is a cohort with a particular ability, sure, often with huge commitment to their endeavours, but it is a cohort that has specific needs. So in the same way that we would ask other groups with specific needs to be addressed, we need to be able to do the same thing for the gifted and talented.

In terms of a preferred terminology, I do not think the department has one. We have tended to refer to what is the published research, so in a sense something that helps people engage with this as an equity issue is the response. I do not have one off the top of my head. As I have said, we have referred largely to the published research, but I think there is certainly a big marketing point if we are going to act in this area to actually bring more people on board with the issue.

The CHAIR — In terms of screening for giftedness, some of the submissions have suggested that all Victorian students should be screened. 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?

Mr BURRAGE — I guess my initial reaction is, no, I do not agree that everyone should be. I do not think it is a matter of screening, which is what large population assessments effectively do. Our broader approach is to provide assessment and try to get delivery at a point of need, so understanding kids’ progression on a continuum and making sure there is appropriate assessment and then corresponding instruction.

The targeted assessment strategy is probably more consistent with what we have done in the past. Depending on which definitions you are using — in Hong Kong they are working with 1 or 2 per cent of the population; Gagné might say 10 per cent — to screen an entire population for a relatively small identification does not seem to be particularly efficacious to me. But there should be better assessment tools available. I have no qualms with that; I absolutely agree with that. We would expect to see basically primary school on entry assessment to give a sense of how progressed kids are in particular areas. It tends to be more narrowly structured in the early years around literacy and numeracy skills in particular, so we could develop a broader range of assessment tools. They tend to be closed assessments, so there is either a right or wrong answer, and so in the assessment tools you would expect in this area you might need some more open-ended spaces so that kids could more readily express the full range of their skills. I think we would be looking to, in large part, existing structures for signs of giftedness and then have complementary assessment tools. That is probably a slightly more efficient way of handling this. Were there two parts to the question?

The CHAIR — No, that is fine. Carrying on from that, in terms of teacher identification, teachers can obviously play an important role in identifying gifted children, but it is argued that many teachers lack the skills to do so. What is the role of the department in ensuring that teachers have the capacity to identify gifted children? For example, do you think teachers need training in a specific area or that teachers should be provided with resources to help them identify giftedness — for example, a toolkit that has been developed in New South Wales?

Mr BURRAGE — Yes to both. Yes, there needs to be better pre-service education, in-service education needs to be enhanced and, when there are signs of giftedness, teachers need to have a process to follow and assessment tools to assess them. I think that is absolutely the right path. We have the challenge on the pre-service side regularly that everyone wants more time on their issue in pre-service education. People would say the same about maths, science, languages and a whole range of issues. Because this is a particular cohort with

particular needs, the awareness of their particular needs does need to be raised, but not every teacher can be an absolute expert in every field.

There is an issue about awareness and basic capability for all teachers. There is an issue for the department to raise the status of the education of this cohort and to draw attention to it so that people understand it and support it. Then there is certainly a role for some individuals who may want to pursue this particular path and for principals to understand their role as instructional leaders. This is a cohort that should be supported, but some people may not regularly deal with a kid with particular gifts at the very high end. You are dealing with potentially a quite small cohort, so finding the most effective way to respond on a case-by-case basis is again one of those things that is about greater efficiency rather than expecting every teacher in the state to be an absolute expert in the education of the gifted.

The department then has to meet its side of the bargain on what the assessment tools are that help and on providing kits to help people work through the process of identifying the gifted and then potentially providing the opportunities that could reasonably be afforded to them.

The CHAIR — This was part of the earlier question about age and identifying students at the earliest possible time. Where would you target that teacher training? You could answer it across the board, but in terms of weighting where would you put the focus?

Mr BURRAGE — My preference is that the pre-service training would pick up at least awareness of the concept, and it is raised but not in depth. I think then it is actually for all teachers to be able to draw on point-of-need support — that is, the kit, the website, the resources, the set of connections and people inside the department — to get the support they need, the earlier the better for identification.

When we talked about it internally we got to a little bit of tension around the idea of hothousing particular kids. It creates for us a bit of tension and a little anxiety around narrowing or hothousing a select cohort of kids. We would not want to be seen to be pushing kids beyond their own preferences or their family's preferences. You have to find the balance of what the individual wants to try to achieve, while actually being able to provide support for that. We tended to look at programs more at the secondary level, but the primary issues and the points of disengagement can occur quite early. The earlier kids are in school and the earlier they show signs of giftedness, the earlier we need to have a coherent response for kids showing those signs.

The CHAIR — In terms of identifying gifted students from disadvantaged backgrounds, the evidence received by the committee suggests that giftedness occurs in all groups. Some that are less likely to be identified as gifted are, for example, children from indigenous backgrounds and those with culturally diverse and low socioeconomic backgrounds. How can we increase identification of these groups? Has there been work done by the department up until now, or do you have some ideas about how we could potentially look at this?

Mr BURRAGE — I will reflect back on the question. The point there is that the general consensus around the evidence is that groups that tend to experience educational disadvantage experience it particularly in this area. The idea about people with language backgrounds other than English, because a lot of the assessment and expression of giftedness happens verbally, is that without a strong grasp of language conventions people can often not be easily identified as expressing giftedness. We are quite conscious of that. The issue then is: what are your targeted strategies into those cohorts, particularly raising school awareness? We know there are areas where there is a higher density of low SES kids or more kids from non-English-speaking backgrounds, so targeting and raising awareness of identification in those particular places would have to be prioritised.

In terms of support for Koori students, the identification and support of gifted kids serves multiple purposes, if you like. Firstly you are meeting the particular needs of kids in that cohort, but also it is an issue of providing role models and showing that excellence can exist in the Koori community. There are currently a range of activities that occur for Koori kids. There are the Wannik dance academies, which are provided for young girls in particular to show their skills in dancing and which naturally provide a cohort effect. There are Wannik scholarships — 20 students each year receive a Wannik scholarship worth \$5000 — and there are 40 students holding those across years 11 and 12. Balwyn Rotary in conjunction with the department provides scholarships for high-performing Koori students at \$8000.

Koori kids pursuing education into the higher years, as with all kids, should have an individual learning plan and the opportunity to identify their giftedness or particular talents. There is the Australian Indigenous

Mentoring Experience, working with Monash and RMIT to provide particular tutoring and mentoring for Koori kids from year 7 onwards. DEECD provides scholarships for kids to attend Trinity College at the University of Melbourne in summer breaks. There is the ASSETS program. DEECD has provided funding with the Royal Institution of Australia for students to attend the ASSETS program, providing particular challenges. Kids are attending in Adelaide for that program. The residential program for Koori leadership has been offered, and 30 Koori students from around the state attend that particular program. Every student receives at least \$1700 in year 11 and \$2200 in year 12 to assist in the completion of their school studies.

There are a range of programs, and they have been targeted in the context of the Wannik reform strategy. A lot of it is about building aspiration and making sure Koori kids are completing schooling, closing the gap to the completion rate of non-Koori kids, but there are some targeted things around Koori leadership and expressing their particular talents and gifts.

The CHAIR — Would you suggest that having programs helps with promoting to people the fact that there are things available and with assisting some of the identification of parents who put their hands up with their kids? How specifically do you tackle the issue of identifying these kids in the first place? We have programs that are available, but we need to identify more specifically some of these kids who are harder to identify from these backgrounds. How do we actually identify those kids in the first place?

Mr BURRAGE — It is actually an issue of proactivity. The assessment of gifts and talents I would think in large part would follow a similar path, but it is actually the proactive strategies that you use. Part of that is around targeting particular schools that have a high density of low SES kids. In terms of the general education and promotion of the issue, it is our responsibility to explain to educators and principals as educational leaders that for particular cohorts they under-identify in terms of their gifts and talents, and they actually need to be sought out within the school environment.

Ms TIERNEY — In the submission that you provided to us it says that Victorian schools currently have the responsibility for developing their own education programs, and indeed you confirmed that again in your presentation earlier today. I think you would also agree that this has resulted in a varied and often transient approach to gifted education in schools. Some of the other submissions have said that they really believe the department should play a more centrally coordinated role in the policy area here. I would like to know whether you agree with that, and if so, what kind of policy or other guidance is needed in the area?

Mr BURRAGE — Yes, I agree. Certainly, the department could do more, and it actually has done more in the past around gifted and talented students; it has previously had a higher profile, more clearly articulated policy and support. We have certainly done more in the past, and if it is the view of the government that this needs to be a priority, then the department will follow that absolutely and provide additional support.

I canvassed in the submission and in the presentation what I think some of the opportunities are. There is a lot that could be done, very pragmatically, to improve provision for gifted and talented kids.

Starting from the questions that in part were asked at the start: can we win this as an equity issue? What is the importance of meeting the needs of this cohort? What is the policy guidance from the department about setting clear expectations that schools do have these responsibilities, and education for the gifted and talented is an important issue?

Then, pragmatically and practically, what support can we provide? What support can we provide in identification, in meaningful curriculum, because that is what will make a difference with teachers on a day-to-day basis? How can you move into areas of the curriculum, how can you assess, how can you make it meaningful to what someone can do on a day-to-day basis in their classroom? How can you sensibly make connections to people online? When I say connections, I mean with like-ability peers, as well as with experts.

Then moving beyond the school experience, what are the out-of-school experiences that could be provided? Given the range of programs that is available in the area, there is the potential to further leverage. For example, the maths and science Olympiads: we are part sponsors of that, and about 30 kids also compete. You could actually do something around the outside of that to triple the number of people who get to participate in that experience. There is a range of things that we could do quite pragmatically to assist schools.

Ms TIERNEY — A lot of that is about really enhancing what is already there. How do we try to ensure that the coordination is there and we do not have the degree of variation in schools in terms of outcomes?

Mr BURRAGE — The department could provide statewide policy guidance and also the coordination, particularly with the use of ICT. It is quite possible to create networks and guidance that schools can work with. Statewide policy could provide clearer guidance on school-by-school expectations.

Ms TIERNEY — We also recognise from our own experience the ad hoc nature that is out there in terms of gifted education in Victoria, and it means that our committee does not have a good understanding of the programs that are currently available. In particular we lack information about the early childhood programs, primary school programs and secondary school programs other than SEAL. We would like to know how you would suggest that the committee obtain information about these programs.

Mr BURRAGE — If you want to get a clearer understanding of an existing provision, we have not coordinated that centrally. The website provides examples of the type of offering. Certainly when we touched base with around 30 or 35 schools we did a quick survey to get a sense of what the current provision was and then followed up with interviews in those schools. That is the sort of process we go through to gather information. From the SEAL network we get some insight as to the offering, but in large part we would have to go out to schools to get a full understanding of their offering. On the early childhood side I know less about communication mechanisms to that group. That I assume, in a similar sense, would be a sample survey of the requirements.

The CHAIR — Elaborating on that, the department does not have any specific information that it keeps on different schools and what schools are doing in this particular area?

Mr BURRAGE — Other than the specialist settings — SEAL specialists and the select entry — no, we do not collect that information as a routine. We have an annual census where we collect information from schools on a range of types. I am not sure if the window for adding questions to that is still open. That is our broad mechanism, but we do not collect the information as a matter of routine, no. In a range of areas we have tried to reduce the amount of information that we collect, so if we do not have a specific purpose for it at that point in time or a very clear destination for the information, we try to avoid putting a reporting overhead on schools.

Ms TIERNEY — We understood as a committee that there was a report commissioned last year.

Mr BURRAGE — Yes, we commissioned some work. I do not know if we got a final report, but we have touched base with some schools. I am happy to describe what we found in that. I cannot do it right now.

Ms TIERNEY — No, but you might be able to come back, and we would be grateful.

Mr BURRAGE — Yes, absolutely. I might say it was a report in which schools — and we targeted schools that we thought were doing perhaps more rather than less in the area — expressed their commitment to it but a bit of frustration about how much they could pragmatically offer. It suggests a very patchy performance of the system.

Ms TIERNEY — Thank you.

Mr CRISP — I am going to look, with you, at the early childhood programs and some primary school programs as well. You have talked about that earlier with the early childhood programs, and I gather that you said that the communication with what I call the kinders is pretty patchy. The department has had an increasing role in that in recent years. Are there any programs, or what are you aware of that has been provided prior to school entry?

Mr BURRAGE — I should say that I know relatively less about the early childhood areas, so when you say that communication with the kinders is patchy, that is probably my personal communication as opposed to the department's.

What we had reported in to us as we put the submission together was that some individual kinders actually do particular work with kids. Probably the main framework that I think will make a difference is the Victorian early years learning and development framework which actually provides, in a sense, a curriculum for the first time that is expected across kinders. That actually provides a basis to better understand the extent to which

people are showing particular gifts or talents. But I would think as a system there is less happening in the area and there is a cultural challenge for us about differentiating giftedness or talents versus what you might otherwise described as precociousness

I do not mean that pejoratively. People are showing skills or early development that might not continue on, and it is much harder to make assessments in those early years about the extent to which people are showing significant gifts or talents that will be sustained. I would think there would be significantly less targeted work and perhaps even acceptance of the concepts in early childhood. I am probably speaking a little bit outside my expertise area, but I think the growth of formative assessment based on the early years learning and development framework will probably help with some of that identification.

Mr CRISP — We move into discussion of primary schools now. Many of the parents in their submissions expressed frustration with the lack of primary school programs for gifted children. Do you agree this is the case? What work is the department doing in that primary area to fill that gap?

Mr BURRAGE — The department fields calls from parents seeking guidance about what they can reasonably ask from their school. Parents have expressed that frustration, and I would not seek to contradict the challenges they have experienced and expressed in their submissions. In the same way that we handle identification in secondary schools we would expect teachers to be working with kids. We expect them to be assessing students to understand their spread across a continuum — as opposed to thinking about a single year of ability — and to provide extension where it is appropriate. The constant contact of primary teachers with individuals helps in that identification. But in the same way as in secondary schools, I think we could do more around providing kits and assessment tools to help people identify giftedness.

We would expect from the current practice of assessment for people to get some indication of where people are showing quite high-level skills. The question then is: to what extent are they encouraged and supported to provide other diagnoses and understanding of the full extent of those gifts and talents of individuals?

Mr CRISP — Moving forward, what do you think about SEAL programs or other sorts of programs for primary schools? Do you have any thoughts on that?

Mr BURRAGE — It is possible. In a sense the primary organisation and the consistent work of individual teachers with individual students might provide a slightly stronger basis for in-class differentiation. Certainly I think there is more we could do to provide external support or a range of programs as guidance for primary schools. However, I cannot say that I am aware of primary SEAL having been discussed at length. As with other areas, based on the outcomes of this inquiry and the government's response to it, where we see there is an evidence base we will follow that through.

Mr CRISP — Another issue is early entry to and rapid progression through primary school. Do you think the department has a role to play in increasing strategies for early entry and level accreditation where appropriate?

Mr BURRAGE — Again, based on the government's guidance — and part of that will be as a response to this inquiry — we have a role in raising the status of the issue and winning the issue overall. In that context we would have a range of responses. The opportunity is there for early entry, acceleration and differentiated instruction. In primary schools there are quite a lot of multi-year groups, so there are more attainable structures within primary schools to provide that differentiation. Our starting position and our policy has been to provide differentiation based on the individual's needs. Primary does have some inherent opportunities for that, and I think if we promoted the status of gifted and talented education and raised its profile and alerted schools to the extent to which there are clear signals and indicated that we see it as a priority, then we would get more requests for early entry et cetera.

Mr CRISP — I think you have probably identified that guidelines on the issues would be useful for schools and parents, because there can be resistance at times to people coming in early or being accelerated through schools. How is the department thinking of dealing with that?

Mr BURRAGE — To repeat the earlier point, we have previously had more explicit policies and frameworks around gifted and talented education. I think if we provided a clearer policy setting and policy

context there would be a level of responsiveness from schools. However, that is the vanity of a bureaucrat, in part, talking. Schools are pretty keen to ignore me.

I think we could do more. We had the Bright Futures program for supporting gifted students. That was a five-year strategy, and we have done work to republish that, but that did not go ahead. The reasons driving that I could not actually explain to you; I could not get my head around them from inside the department. I think we could certainly do more to set the tone.

Mr CRISP — Thank you, Ian.

Mr ELASMAR — Submissions were generally positive about the SEAL program, but there were some concerns that the quality and content varies between schools. I think you mentioned a number of schools in your briefing. Do you agree there is an issue? What role can the department play in ensuring the more consistent provision of that program?

Mr BURRAGE — I could not confirm if there is an issue with the consistency of approaches. Consistency of expectation that there are opportunities for gifted and talented kids is an important thing. Consistency of programs only matters if some things are bad. Variation can breed innovation and improvement. If you get consistency, you want to do that with an upward bias so that people are moving towards the best as opposed to away from it. It is the common challenge we face in commonwealth-state relations. Consistency is great if it is with an upward bias.

As you would have seen from the range of submissions in regard to SEAL, there is a lot of support for it. Some schools neighbouring SEAL schools would probably argue that it is a marketing approach and that it is trying to draw away high-ability kids from their schools. In an environment where there is increasing choice it creates significant tension for some neighbouring schools.

We do facilitate the SEAL network. Those who are part of it meet and do professional learning; however, the schools do have their individual entrance requirements for SEAL. I am not aware that it is creating a particular problem, but we have not reviewed SEAL since 2004, so a review might be timely. I would think that in the context of the outcomes of this inquiry we might reasonably review where SEAL is at. Even if we did not provide state-wide mechanisms, we might provide clearer guidance and make the approach of SEAL and the various SEAL providers the benchmarks of what we understand to be best practice.

Mr ELASMAR — There are some submissions that say there are students in parts of the state — Bendigo, for example — who do not have access to the program. Again, do you agree? What is the department doing to ensure that gifted students living in a rural region of Victoria have access to the program?

Mr BURRAGE — I agree — without knowing about Bendigo in particular — that by definition if you have 36 schools doing SEAL, then there is not full state-wide access and there is not access in every single school. Absolutely, there are some places that would have limited access to SEAL. I think the question then is around whether it is feasible in more schools or in schools of a particular size. Would kids needs be better served by differentiated instruction? Would they be better served by being able to connect online with other SEAL schools or other selective entry schools or to be able to connect in with likeability peers? They then might periodically meet with their peers via the equivalent of, for example, maths and science Olympiads.

I do not think it is likely to be feasible to provide SEAL in every location, but where gifted and talented kids are identified there should be mechanisms to connect them with what is otherwise a reasonably well built infrastructure. It should be more readily available. Again, in the context of clearer guidance and processes to follow, I think that would be more possible.

Mr ELASMAR — Talking about the department, the committee understands the department commissioned a formal evaluation of that program in 2004. Can you provide the committee with a copy and what the key findings of that evaluation were? Have any changes been made to that program as a result of that evaluation?

Mr BURRAGE — I will have to take that one on notice. I am happy to follow it up. I remember it being in the ether inside the department, but it was not my area of responsibility at the time. I think SEAL did expand on the back of that, but I am best off not being on the record trying to guess. I will come back to you, if I can.

Mr ELASMAR — One more question: some programs have been provided in schools by external and private organisations, and some submissions have suggested that there should be a greater regulation of these programs; what is your view on this?

Mr BURRAGE — Increased access and improved consistency. There is a whole range of programs of many things that schools make decisions about. It is the big tradition of Victorian schools and it is about school autonomy; it is a federal direction and it is a state direction that schools will only be more autonomous in the future, not less. As I said, with policy guidance and a chance of assessing and engaging peers about what is best practice in the area, there will be more, in a sense, quality assurance. We see that as probably fundamentally being a locally driven decision, and we are not going to be in the business, unless it is putting kids at risk, of saying to schools that they are not allowed to do that. That is just not the way we work in Victoria.

We do not want people making bad decisions. We would encourage them to connect with networks and other people working in the area to have a good sense of the quality of the programs they are getting in. I think there is the potential for the department to provide some greater sponsorship. If we were able to identify funding out of a process that could take some quality programs to scale, that is quite possible.

Ms MILLER — Thanks, Ian. My question is about the equity of access. The evidence received by the committee so far makes it clear that not all Victorian students have equal access to gifted programs. Barriers to accessing gifted programs include the cost of programs and geographic location. My question is: what is the department doing to ensure that all gifted students in Victoria, including those who live in rural and regional Victoria and those who come from low socioeconomic backgrounds, have access to appropriate learning opportunities? What more could be done?

Mr BURRAGE — In terms of the selective entry and specialist programs, there is an equity component in the entry process for both of those. For the select entry schools, 10 per cent of enrolments are filled through an equity consideration category for Koori students and for parents with a commonwealth health-care card or pension card. That is available in terms of admission, but cost is clearly another issue.

Again, for the John Monash, 10 per cent of places are available for Koori students. There is some sponsorship of places and certainly for the John Monash we are looking at specifically targeting scholarships to enhance access for rural and regional students. But I would happily concede that the location of the selective entry schools would mean living away from home for some people, and it is prohibitive. I have already canvassed some of the scholarships that are available for Koori kids to access programs, but otherwise I am not aware of other funded initiatives. If I can reserve the right to come back to the committee, I will if I identify sponsorship of scholarships et cetera.

Ms MILLER — In terms of the promotion of gifted programs, the committee has received evidence suggesting that not all gifted students and their families are aware of existing educational options, such as the SEAL program and selective entry high schools. How does the department promote gifted education programs? Is better promotion required?

Mr BURRAGE — If I can take the second question first, the answer is yes, better promotion matters. I certainly do not think that the select entry schools in particular have any sense of undersubscription. There does seem to be pretty wide awareness of their programs. SEAL is not, in a sense, tightly managed, so I can understand that the awareness of that might be a bit patchy. Again, I will put this in the context of our having policy and guidance, and some support available now, but it is less than we previously provided. More consistency about raising awareness, more prominence in the information that the department provides and promotion, I think, would all help in a consolidated, coordinated policy response to the issue.

The CHAIR — We raised the issue earlier of teacher development in the identification process. In terms of ongoing teacher professional development to assist with students with gifted and talented needs, what would you recommend be done in this area to provide ongoing support? Do you agree that there needs to be more work in assisting with professional development for such teachers? Does the department have any ideas around that?

Mr BURRAGE — The way that I think we should respond to this is largely to build off existing, what I have described as, infrastructure arrangements. The SEAL network meets regularly. This is a group of people that is growing expertise in the area, so widening access to that professional learning and more promotion of it

should happen. Some regions and some schools contract out specific professional learning around the area. But again I think that falls into that category of cascading: what is the policy setting for it, what is the promotion, what is the professional learning, what is the program offering and what are the connections that we can make underneath that. I think it is an area that requires a response at multiple levels.

Yes, I absolutely think we could do more professional learning in the area. The continuing issue is, and you will have seen it through both the evidence and the submissions to the inquiry, that you can build up a great deal of expertise in a particular number of people, but we would also have people saying we need to significantly build up expertise in languages other than English. It is in sort of a contested area about the time and space that can be given to an issue and that individual teachers can manage, so it is about providing tiered responses and support for teachers for them to be able to deal with the issue.

Identification does seem to be a critical point, though, and the acceptance of it as a priority issue seems to be the priority, then a reasonably tiered response that does not try to make everyone an absolute expert in the area — they might not be dealing with the high-end gifted and talented kids very often. However, people should be aware and try to identify and be proactive in identification and then have potential responses, which the department really needs to support. I think that is an appropriate way and encourages professional learning, particularly for principals in their role. You have got to set the tone and provide differentiation. You need to handle identification, but we know their support at the back of that really matters.

The CHAIR — Regarding both the identification and the professional development would you suggest the department have a role in providing such programs and supporting teachers to attend such programs?

Mr BURRAGE — I think we could certainly do more, because professional learning, if it is done on a unit-by-unit or school-by-school basis, is expensive, apart from anything else. We could provide more on a statewide basis.

The CHAIR — I will just pick up on an earlier comment about the indigenous programs. You mentioned earlier an array of things and the fact that nothing specifically is being done in terms of the identification in Victoria. Are you aware of any other jurisdictions, states or places where there is specific work in identification of the gifted and talented sector of indigenous students?

Mr BURRAGE — Not that I am immediately aware of, but as you identified in New South Wales they have their identification kit. A quick scan of other jurisdictions shows their policy settings are more current than ours. I know there are non-government organisations that provide scholarships for gifted, low SES kids and are trying to target Koori kids in particular.

Ms TIERNEY — David, in his previous question, talked about teacher professional development. I just want to touch on the support that is there for teachers to underpin their activities. A lot of the submissions we have received say the department needs to play a greater role in supporting teachers and schools by providing access to information, specialist resources and expert advice and by increasing regional networks. The question is: what support and resources does the department currently provide to teachers and schools regarding gifted education, and what opportunities are there to increase this support for teachers? I know you have touched on this in previous answers, but I think pulling it together in the one answer here would be good.

Mr BURRAGE — We have our presence on the website that gives some guidance and references to approaches to providing for the gifted and talented. We have the SEAL network for professional learning and regular contact. People in the department do take calls and provide guidance to parents over the phone. They are the sort of key elements complemented by our select entry and specialist programs and the SEAL offering more generally. That is the core of it. Should we do more? We could do more, and I do think it is an important issue. In response to this inquiry and the government's position on that there is certainly more we could do; there is no doubt.

Ms TIERNEY — I would like to go back and touch on overcoming the negative attitudes that we all agree are out there and are reflected in the issues that were contained in the many submissions we received. We have also touched on professional development and teachers' greater awareness, pre-training and getting principals on side. What are your views about trying to get the community involved in making sure we stamp out these negative attitudes?

Mr BURRAGE — Trying to actually win it as the equity issue is a big part of it, in my mind. There are many places where there are more developed policies and programs than we have here or overseas. You could certainly make a case around this and how we are going to compete in a globalised society. Sure, you need a very educated set or group of — to take science as an example — science consumers who understand what is happening. But you also need science and other areas of innovation producers, the support people with gifts and talents. It is important for those individuals, the communities they are in and the broader society. I do not want to suggest I have a strategy for explaining everything to an entire society, but I do think the promotion and communications side would be an important part of any policy that we adopted. We know some of the negative attitudes, and we would have to have quite targeted and clever strategies for the response.

There is also a need for a pragmatic way for people in schools who have a great many demands on them to provide support for a whole range of kids. They need a really pragmatic way of being able to provide a response so there is not an undue onus on the individual teacher, principal or school, and that needs different tiers of support that are available. A lot of the work is difficult and the sophistication that is required in response is a big overhead, and I think some people get a bit scared of how they could handle that response. You have to find tiers of response and ways of changing people's attitudes. A lot of money is spent on telling people not to drink and drive, and they still do it. In getting attitudes to change I think you have to get to really pragmatic responses that can be handled locally.

Ms TIERNEY — Do you believe there should be an education program aimed at overcoming negative attitudes to giftedness; and if you do believe that, how do you think that might be delivered?

Mr BURRAGE — I think the primary issue — certainly what I would take to it — is around getting the support to the individuals where they need it. In a sense all activities sit in a community context, and providing pragmatic ways to meet the needs of the individual is probably what I would say is the priority — and it is what the department would take as the priority. Only in so much as the broader community attitudes create an environment where the needs of gifted and talented students are well supported is it an issue for us. We could make quite significant strides within schools and with community organisations around them that provide additional support without having to set it in a huge community campaign.

Mr CRISP — Back to technology, in your slide you mention using technologies more effectively and talk about the ICT ultranet. Does the ultranet provide anything specifically for gifted and talented students, and can it be used to provide effective teaching to gifted and talented students?

Mr BURRAGE — Yes, and yes. The ultranet has a design space for the SEAL network at the moment. It is a starting point. But the nature of the ultranet provides a virtual learning environment which could very effectively connect up an entire network of teachers and kids to get particular forms of instruction connected to the Victorian curriculum and future Australian curriculum. It actually links into the FUSE digital content repository, so interesting digital content can be drawn into it. For areas, particularly rural areas, that do not have immediate access to SEAL or other programs you could quite effectively create a network through which people were experiencing targeted programs across the state, or anywhere — internationally if you want — with a stimulus from external providers.

We have just worked quite intensively with the science specialist centres. We have a network of six in Victoria, and they have been pushing a heavy focus on outreach programs. So there is a range of extension that could be offered by the ultranet. I also think there is a very important point about engagement with like-ability peers. That could also be facilitated through the ultranet or other technologies. Providing people with a peer group, external stimulus and actual targeted programs is possible via the ultranet. The only starting port at the moment is the SEAL network design space, but, in the same way as we would say it is the responsibility of individual teachers to differentiate, there is a range of quality resources we could draw on via the ultranet.

Mr CRISP — My last question is about supporting students. They tend to have particular emotional needs and they require support and often counselling. This was raised by parents. My question is: do you agree that the support is needed for these students, and what role can the school and department play in supporting these students?

Mr BURRAGE — I think all students require appropriate support, vocational guidance and people to interact with as they build the programs that they want to be part of. I do believe that gifted and talented students

have a particular set of needs. We would not at this stage have a different charted approach for gifted and talented kids. The same sort of support that we would expect to be provided to any individual who was trying to find their pathway, to design their program — we would expect kids and their families to be able to engage with the school in a dialogue about how their needs can be met. I am not aware immediately of the specific needs of gifted and talented kids for the purposes of counselling outside of other kids — and we would largely expect it to be managed at the school level. But, as I have said, there is a chance for us to get clear guidance on policy, program responses, clear expectations, identification — there is a whole range of things we could do more of.

Mr ELASMAR — In your submission you identify the areas of opportunities to improve the provision of information and support to the families of gifted children. What do you believe is the kind of support parents need, and what is the best way to provide them with it? What is the role of the department in ensuring that parents have access to this support?

Mr BURRAGE — I think in the same way as we would see it is important to engage educators in a discussion about the importance of the issue and smart ways for a differentiated response and reasonable expectations and guidance about what might cross the threshold of giftedness or talent, we have the same responsibility to provide that information to parents, and parents should have confidence about what is the department's expectation of individual schools in responding and whatever tiered response we might have to that. Parents are obviously overwhelmingly the most powerful advocates of kids. Certainly some schools would report to us that some parents might think their kids are reaching a performance or a potential threshold that they might not be and personalising 28 — if you are in a class of 28 — individual lesson plans is not feasible, but individuals should have a learning plan and schools should understand what their skills are. Where there is that threshold of giftedness or talent they should look to extend that — I think communicating that to parents so they can have a reasonable expectation. That communication between families and parents needs to happen concurrently with communication with schools. We could provide that online and promote that and make it available. As well, there are other ways within the family. People might look at opportunities to extend. Also, networks could be created for kids and families around supporting gifted and talented kids.

Ms MILLER — My last question is about cross-sector collaboration. Your submission refers to the potential benefits from engaging with business, industry and community partners and higher education institutions to develop new learning experiences for gifted students. What sort of collaboration could be developed?

Mr BURRAGE — I think this is probably at the core of where I personally believe we should go as one of the critical tiers of support. I mentioned, for example, the science Olympiads. It is a very elite activity with high-quality learning — a group of people getting to engage with external experts on interesting content and deal with like-ability peers. It ticks a lot of boxes of what would be an appropriate response for gifted and talented kids. That happens for quite a small number of people but there is a big infrastructure that goes into putting that in place. Without knowing all the detail of it, to me the question is: how could you put an outer rim around that to make sure that rather than 30 people getting access to it, at least in the training and competition aspect, the group that is participating is significantly larger, even if they do not get together at Monash University to undertake it. For leadership, Victoria has a range of programs, but how can we get that to a better scale?

There are some areas of the curriculum which are better serviced than others, but there are industry groups that would happily, I think, if we provided a pragmatic structure and made a contribution to their experts, provide external stimulus to a network of gifted and talented kids. I think we could, quite sensibly, put together structures that would allow people to express interest in that form of engagement with industry partners and industry associations. There are a number of experiences that people can currently have with universities. A number of people doing VCE are undertaking first-year university subjects. I mentioned some of the activities for Koori kids where there is engagement with universities at the moment. There are a number of those types of activities that are occurring. The Maribyrnong sports school partners with VU. There are things happening with those types of partners at the moment.

In the context of a clearer sort of policy framework and a greater aspiration of the program offering, I think we could invite potential external partners in to work on smart programs that do not present a huge overhead for the partners and could be provided in practical terms or facilitated in practical terms by the department.

Ms MILLER — What benefits would these collaborations provide over the existing ones?

Mr BURRAGE — You could get to a greater scale relatively quickly, I would think. You could fill gaps in areas that are not currently that well serviced. Clearly areas in the performing arts and maths and science are quite well served. There are other subject areas that you could fill in where people are expressing gifts or talents but are not necessarily that well served. You could provide external stimulus, get world-leading experts involved and provide an industry perspective. There is a range of expertise that could be drawn on in quite pragmatic terms that would meet a lot of the needs, and with some sensible coordination around you could get those benefits of peers being able to deal with like-ability peers, with leading-edge content and real experts in moderated environments. You could have the experts interacting with kids. Some of the gifted and talented can see role models in others who have had the experience that they are currently experiencing in dealing with their gifts and talents. I think there would be a range of benefits that could be accrued from that sort of partnership approach.

The CHAIR — Thank you. We have come to the end of our questions. If there is anything that you think we have missed that you want to just briefly point out, we would give you that short opportunity.

Mr BURRAGE — I would just say that there were a number of questions about could the department do more and what should the role of the department be. There is no doubt the department could do more, but the decision about doing more sits in the context of a range of other priorities. I think we could do more quite pragmatically and quickly and draw in a range of partners who could make a good contribution to the area. As I have said, in part that decision will be made in the context of your inquiry and the government's response to it. In terms of the department's role and what more we could do, I have no qualms that there is more we could do, but it needs to sit in the context of a range of government and community priorities. There is no doubt that this is an equity issue and there is a cohort that has particular needs and we should make sure we are doing our best to address those equity needs.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much, Ian, for coming along today. We will follow up with you with a number of questions on notice that we require more information on. We appreciate your contribution today, and we look forward to the rest of the hearings. Hopefully we will be dealing with the department in presenting more work.

Mr BURRAGE — Thank you, and good luck with your deliberations.

Witness withdrew.