

CORRECTED VERSION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the education of gifted and talented students

Melbourne — 26 July 2011

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Ms J. Garvey, Principal,
Ms M. Akins, Assistant Principal,
Ms A. Porter, Assistant Principal,
Ms J. McCutcheon, Assistant Principal, and
Ms V. Hayes, Leading Teacher, The Mac.Robertson Girls' High School.

The CHAIR — Thank you for joining us at this hearing. I am not sure whether all of you were present at the introduction before, so I will repeat it. As you are aware, this is the Education and Training Committee's inquiry into gifted and talented students. First we take the opportunity to thank you for hosting us here at your school for the visit and for taking part in this inquiry. I point out a couple of things. The information that you give us at today's hearing is covered by parliamentary privilege — the same privilege that members of Parliament are afforded — but anything that is said outside the room is not. Also, Hansard will be recording everything, and you will get a draft copy of the transcript and have an opportunity to look at any errors.

What we normally do, Jane, is give you the opportunity to make some opening remarks if you would like to do so. Then we will go straight into questions. We have half an hour in total.

Ms GARVEY — I would just like to say how welcome it is that there is a focus on the education of gifted and talented students. We are slightly wary of the term 'gifted and talented'. I prefer to refer to the students as highly able. Some of them are gifted across the board; others are just very, very hardworking, high-ability students. To label them is sometimes to create a definition which they are not comfortable with. Rather than labelling them, we should work with what we have.

Providing them with opportunities is what we are focused on in this school. As you have heard the girls testifying, a lot of them feel enormous relief at arriving and finding that they are working with other girls who are highly motivated and highly interested and who have high ability. The teachers report that they get through work at about four times the speed of a mixed-ability class. Even though we warn new teachers about this, they are sometimes quite staggered at how much preparation is involved in catering to them.

Some of them are gifted across the board; others have particular gifts in certain areas. The entrance examination means that they are tested across the board, and if they have a big deficit in, say, literacy or numeracy, they probably would not get a high enough score to get an offer, so generally speaking they are able across the board. When they get here, we are interested in providing them with opportunities. The co-curricular program is at least as important as the core curriculum, because it allows them to work collegiately and collaboratively and engage their creativity and their interests in performing in sport, in debating and in a whole range of activities.

Social equity is something that concerns these students as well. They are highly focused on social service and on contributing to the community. A lot of our graduates spend longer at university than others because they have intervening periods of work in Third World countries and are involved in contributing to good causes. I would be very disappointed if the students here did not approach me after every major disaster that occurred around the world, including the Japanese Fukushima disaster and the Christchurch earthquake. They are busy raising funds for all of those. They are also supporting students through World Vision and through a variety of other causes. In the week of the bushfires in Victoria they raised \$10 000, and they went on to raise more.

That is from a community that is not rich. A lot of the students — at least a third of them — are EMA, or education maintenance allowance, students. That means that the families do not have much money and therefore they work very hard to raise funds. That is not the only sort of thing they did that year — they really focus. They collect for the Red Cross, for example. They have won the cup for the most money raised — something like \$30 000 last year — and they have been challenged by the Red Cross to do better. They are actively engaged on a number of fronts. I remember that a group of principals from Singapore, on hearing from the students a few years ago, asked the question, 'Where do you get the time to do all this?'. The school captain of the day said, 'Well, we don't waste time watching television, for a start'. They are highly focused.

I have the best job in the world, and I have a great team of people supporting me and the students. We have some terrific teachers, and you are looking at a really high-performing team sitting in front of you here.

The CHAIR — That brings me to the first question I am going to ask, which is about teacher qualifications and training. Many submissions to the inquiry have suggested that in general Victorian teachers do not have sufficient knowledge and understanding to provide effective programs for students of high ability. What kind of qualifications or training do Mac.Rob teachers have to deal with this particular cohort of students, and what kind of pre-service and ongoing professional development do you think teachers need to cater effectively to gifted students?

Ms GARVEY — Mac.Rob is part of the education system, and therefore the employment procedures that we go through to employ teachers are the same as everybody else's. All we can do is look at the CVs that the

teachers provide. We can ask questions about their competence in delivering pedagogy, because if you do not know your stuff here, you very quickly lose the respect of students and they work around you rather than with you after that. They have to know their work, and they have to know how to deliver it in a variety of ways. We have developed our selection processes to incorporate that sort of questioning. I guess we are looking for teachers who have done postgraduate studies. We are lucky that people who apply to this school generally understand that the student cohort is different and that they will be required to contribute and to teach in a different way.

Occasionally we have very disappointing circumstances when we advertise a key position and then find we are required to take a referred teacher who is declared in excess from another school. That teacher may not have the wherewithal to teach. A recent example was a French teacher. When we advertised for a senior French teacher we were forced to take a teacher who had never taught French at VCE level and was not even a native speaker of English. It is disappointing when things like that happen.

The CHAIR — What about ongoing professional development?

Ms GARVEY — Once we have the teachers here we work in a very concentrated way to help them to help students and to develop their pedagogy. Our leading teachers have been selected for their ability to coach teams in developing innovative curriculums and pedagogy. Amy can probably tell you more about it because she is in charge of providing the professional learning program for the teachers.

Ms PORTER — Currently we have a very large budget dedicated to professional development, which is not always the case in every school even though there is a focus on professional development through the VIT and the department. Staff pretty much tailor their professional development to their own needs, but we also have a system of working collegiately on projects through professional learning to develop key areas where staff feel they need to develop. In the most part that is working on curriculum or pedagogy. I am relatively new to the school, so please forgive me if I do not know all the answers. Previously I was at Melbourne High School. It is very similar to Melbourne High; it is really staff based, because our staff are so able in teaching gifted and talented students.

With new staff coming in, that is the main thing. It is a big learning curve, and we rely on our leading teachers and also on their fellow teachers to make sure they are up to speed, to provide them with curriculum documents and support and to ensure that I am aware of any professional learning needs that individual staff may have.

The CHAIR — Other than knowing their staff, what are the specific skills that teachers need to be able to deal with this particular cohort of students compared to, say, at another school?

Ms PORTER — Can I just add one thing? I think most of the professional development out there that is aimed at teaching gifted and talented students really does not understand the way in which these students operate. Often it is a waste of time for staff to go. Unless we have been to the professional development previously, we tend not to advise staff to go because it is often disappointing.

One of the things we have been looking at is dealing with student stress levels and levels of de-stress, because obviously, as the girls were telling you and as we are well aware, high-performing kids often have high levels of stress. Again we know that our parent community can often put pressure on students to achieve. Our focus has really been on de-stressing staff, working with staff to put less pressure on themselves and then working through that, while also working with students on their stress levels.

Ms AKINS — Picking up on professional development, we have a long history of offering professional development at the whole-school level since, I would say, the early 1990s. We have done Julia Atkin, we have done quite a number of the gurus in Australia and we have in-serviced the whole staff. A lot of the staff here are longstanding, so if they have been here long enough, they will have gone through that whole journey for 15-plus years.

Hawker Brownlow did a really good job for quite a while — I do not know what they are doing at the moment — by bringing in speakers from America. They are a part of the Alliance of Girls' Schools conference, and occasionally they will get people.

We have networks at different levels, so if there is someone of note who is worthwhile listening to, we would do that. But if you actually look at a lot of the focused PD, you will notice that a lot of it is probably year 8 or below. There is very little — and this is not only the gifted PD but anything else you are looking at — that actually focuses on the higher ends of the school apart from the subject associations and the VCE focus-type PD. There seems to be a bit of a dearth at the top end in terms of catering for specific needs in that area.

Ms PORTER — Our maths and science teachers generally do not go to maths or science PDs unless they know it is worthwhile, because often they find it is targeted at a level that is not relevant to the students we teach. I guess the only other thing I can say is that every second meeting is a professional learning meeting, which focuses on PD and professional learning for staff. That is really important.

Ms HAYES — The other one was the trip that Marilyn organised to see the top-performing schools around the US. We went over there to see like schools and what they are doing to bring those practices back here. That was a part of PD.

Ms AKINS — We also took students for two years to Singapore for an international science challenge and for one year for an international maths challenge. It was very good, because we had a teacher of that subject area accompanying the group of three or four girls. I think it was very eye opening, too, in terms of the different ways in which the education system operates over there, specifically to target high-achieving students and to give them lots of opportunities in terms of problem solving and writing up problem solving. I think there is a worldwide movement to pull in those students, and that is followed up with offers at tertiary education level and all the rest of it. The focus is quite different if you are looking at some of those Asian countries and what they are trying to achieve in order to cater for those students and to attract them into the tertiary education sector.

Ms HAYES — There is also the resources they are given. It is just mind-boggling what they are given, including technicians to run the equipment for their projects. We cannot compete.

Ms TIERNEY — What are the biggest challenges in teaching students of high ability?

Ms GARVEY — One of the focuses of our current strategic plan is personalising education. There is a tension between delivering a high level of curriculum and personalising it so that the students feel supported to become strong and independent learners. We have had professional development just on techniques to learn the students' names quickly so that you can learn quickly about their capacity and so that each of them feels known by their teachers and individually supported to continue to learn, because as already mentioned, some of the stresses and strains that are placed on them make it very difficult for them. Quite often their parents have ambitions for them to enter high-status professions, which are not particularly what they would choose for themselves. Therefore, it is about supporting them to balance those subjects with their parents' desire for their daughter to be a lawyer or a doctor. They need other balance in their curriculum as well.

I think that personalising is a real challenge, especially as we now have a mixture of teachers who have been here a shorter time and teachers who have been here for sometimes over 30 years. They are very wedded to traditional stand-and-deliver-curricula and adopting the attitude that they do not need to understand the students. They assume that they are all of high ability and you just deliver a high-level curriculum. The students' needs are far greater than that, so getting all the teachers on board with that deep knowledge of individual students is probably the greatest challenge.

Ms TIERNEY — That was a good answer. It was so good that it actually answered my next question, so I will ask a different question. Knowing what you know now about interacting with and teaching students with a high ability, what would you suggest in terms of changes to teacher training?

Ms GARVEY — Certainly that ability to work with individuals and to support them rather than dictating what they should be doing is important — that is, listening to what the student needs and negotiating the curriculum with them. One of the things I have been complaining about is that we have square classrooms and no facilities at this school where we can work with a couple of classes and a couple of teachers and be in an ICT-rich environment where they can do a whole lot of student-managed activities supported by their teachers as learning coaches. I think that the understanding of being a learning coach and being really engaged in supporting what the students want to do, rather than dictating, is probably the key in training teachers to work particularly with high-ability students, but I think it works equally at the other end of the spectrum as well.

Ms AKINS — I think one of the other important things, and the students have already mentioned this, is having teachers who do know their work and know it to a level that they can have conversations with students off the curriculum and will enthuse and inspire those students. There are some teachers who come through and do a bit of this, a bit of that and a bit of something else. By the time they end up with three years of a degree at university, some of them are not really masters of very much at all. It is about depth of knowledge.

I am a maths teacher with three years of double method maths all the way through — I know maths — but you do get some other teachers who when you go to hire them might be very interesting for you, but how will that actually translate into a curriculum where they can deliver to students, other than it maybe being interesting to have the occasional conversation? Where is the depth there? You need to have the depth to be able to go on and actually deliver that.

Ms HAYES — I think depth is important too, because for a lot of the students it is easier to sit back and be lectured at. They are really great at rote learning; it is getting them to the next step where they can do the problem solving and challenging them. If the teacher does not know enough of the content to do that, they will not be confident enough to give control over to the students and let them puzzle. Otherwise the kids will say, ‘I can’t understand this; you’re not explaining it’. You have to have enough confidence to say, ‘Hang on, you have to understand it’. If you do not have the depth in that subject knowledge and the pedagogy, you are not really going to be able to deliver that. It is really important. When we have the student teachers in, if they do not have that depth, they really do struggle.

Ms AKINS — I think the other thing that can happen is that teachers can be deskilled very easily. A few years ago I was interviewing a teacher who was an ex-student of this school. She wanted to come to this school to teach maths. I had a look and I thought: she has not taught any maths. She may be qualified, but she has not taught senior maths for 15 years. She had been trapped teaching years 7 and 8. I think it is really important that teachers have the capacity to teach across years 7 to 12 and to do it regularly. If you do not teach at the senior levels for 10 years, you will lose it. Then, yes, you might be very good at doing some of the things at the lower years, but if you do not do something else to revitalise yourself as a teacher, where is your new knowledge coming from? Where is your development as a person and being able to contribute to a rich educational environment?

I think that is something else. Some teachers tend to think that they have their degree and their diploma, which may have happened 30 years ago, and that they do not need to do anything else. Yes, they can keep up with professional development and all the rest of it, but when you go back as a student, having been a teacher, you learn a heck of a lot about being a student again and you take that back with you into the classroom. You understand the demands of having a lot of things to work on and still meeting time lines that are at a different level than what they are in the school. I think that is a valuable experience as well.

Ms PORTER — I come at it from a slightly different point of view. I think pedagogy is absolutely essential, and I do not think we teach enough pedagogy in teaching courses. They are very flimsy. You go in for an hour with your tutor — I studied media, so I would see him for an hour — but we were not ever taught how to teach and how to actually get students to engage with what you are trying to teach. The other thing is that people coming from industry are really important in particular areas — certainly in, say, media studies, IT and even PE.

Ms HAYES — Chemistry.

Ms PORTER — The more people we can get back in from industry who have real-life experience and who can do real-world teaching, which I think one of the students alluded to and I certainly agree with — making it relevant and showing students where the learning connects with things they are going to do in their future — the better off we are in the classroom, for all students but for gifted students in particular.

Ms GARVEY — In support of that, one of the things that some of our graduates say when they come back to talk to us is that first-year university was boring because they had already done it. The level at which they are working is actually beyond year 12, so that is supporting the fact that the teachers really need to have a high-level understanding and something to teach.

Ms MILLER — I think it was noted earlier that not all students are at this high level. How do you address that?

Ms HAYES — Personalise the learning. It is about knowing the students and knowing which ones you can give extra stuff or extra challenges to and which ones you have to help along the way.

Ms MILLER — So at the end of the year, for example, they all come out at the end by tailor-making that particular curriculum?

Ms HAYES — I think they all go on. I do not think we have any who repeat or fail. We have to be careful that we do not judge them as having to be at the Mac.Rob standard. We still compare them against the VELS, so where are they on that level, given their strengths? They do not fail because they are not at Mac.Rob standard. It is an issue we often talk about. They may not get that level, but compared to the state, to build their confidence up, they are still quite good. They are just not the Madeleines, the Hillarys or other exceptional students we have had. It is about balance.

Ms AKINS — The other thing is that when they get to VCE they get the choice of being able to tailor courses according to what their strengths are. What we always try to talk to the students about is looking at their strengths and looking at the things they like. If they choose those subjects, they are going to do much better. We are still fighting against the parents whose expectations are that they will be brain surgeons and they must do maths, chemistry, physics and everything else. Maths methods, for example, is needed for so many courses as a prerequisite. They may not do maths when they get to university, but it is a subject that 95 per cent of our students have on their list of things that they carry through to the end of year 12. They are not all brilliant mathematicians; you work with them.

In other words, for the high-flying ones, yes, you give them the extra challenges and keep them going, but you keep the other ones on track too because it is important for them. They may not have to get a 90 in the subject, but they do have to get that pass — that all-important pass. That is basically where the teachers work. They actually work with the weak ones to keep them on board and keep them going. It may mean that for various reasons — they may be sick or whatever else — you modify the work and say, ‘Okay, you don’t need to do this and this’. Basically it is always an interactive process, knowing the students and catering for their needs and what you know is going on. If there is a critical incident that they have during their studies, you modify. We have a good student support team that is there to help the students do precisely that. If you have other high-flyers, we also have subject enrichment opportunities at the other end so that they can go on and develop that, whether it is the Olympiads or whatever it is.

I think the thing that is really different in this school is that the students do not feel as though, ‘Oh, they did that’. We try to provide opportunities for everyone to shine somewhere and to recognise those achievements, and it does not matter whether it is a high-level academic achievement, a musical opportunity or a sporting opportunity. We try to make sure that we provide recognition wherever possible. Even if we find out about something the girls are doing outside of school that has nothing to do with us but we think, ‘That’s really good’, we try to make sure that people know about that as well. We are trying to build their esteem as individuals so that they know where their strengths and weaknesses are and so that they can appreciate that others have different strengths to them and it is all part and parcel of what a community is all about — to recognise and celebrate.

Ms MILLER — How many of your students are offered places under equity consideration? Do these students face particular challenges at Mac.Rob?

Ms GARVEY — Last year 23 students received an equity offer in round 1. All of the students who received an equity offer accepted that offer. There were no students who received an equity offer who were above the initial cut-off core of 170.35 — that is out of 200 — which means that they would not have received an offer in the normal course of events. Each of the equity students received their offer because they were equity students, not because of their achievement. The final cut-off score at the conclusion of all rounds was about 166.5. Of the students who accepted an equity offer in round 1, seven were above the final cut-off score and 16 were below the final cut-off score.

That is a concern to us, because in the past, before we had the four schools and we ran our own selection processes, which were incidentally run by the same people who are doing the work for the VCAA now, we did on occasion find some students whose cousins we felt may have sat the exam for them. In other words, when they came to the school their abilities meant that they were struggling; they were just not able to keep up with

the work. Those individuals — and there were two, three or maybe four of them over a number of years — were clearly in the wrong school. It was very distressing to them, because although they might have been good students in a normal school, they really did not cut the mustard and they were just not able to keep up with the cohort. Having students come in well below the cut-off point on equity is a concern for us because it is so deleterious to the students themselves. I just wanted to make that point.

Ms MILLER — Are there any indigenous students at the school?

Ms GARVEY — We have had indigenous students, but we do not have any currently.

Mr ELASMAR — Your submission highlights that able students often have heightened emotional or other needs. For example, you acknowledge that a number of your students are at the highly performing end of the autism spectrum.

Ms GARVEY — Yes.

Mr ELASMAR — How does your school support those students?

Ms GARVEY — We bend over backwards to help some of these students. I am thinking of a couple in particular who were really behaviourally very different from the norm. One of the great things about the school is that the students here embrace them. They recognise what is wrong quite quickly and they go out of their way to support them. There was one particular girl who found it difficult to cope with even simple things like public transport. The girls would make sure she knew what tram to get on, and they would make sure she got on the right tram. Later on, when she started making strange appointments to meet some boy in the park in the middle of the night they understood that she did not understand the dangers that she was putting herself in, so they reported the situation to her parents. They went to the park to meet her. They would go to extraordinary lengths to offer friendship and support and to get on with work in the class. The students are selected because they have high abilities, but they need to be able to be managed one-on-one to be able to apply that. The level coordinators and the heads of schools have spent hours and hours supporting those students.

I am thinking of one who had panic attacks about twice a day. She had a roster of teachers and places she could go to where she would find support. She would adopt the foetal position on the floor and shake and would then relax slowly and be able to talk through the issue with that particular teacher and be supported to go back into class. She achieved a really high score in year 12 and went on to university where she succeeded at first year, but I think it all got too much and the level of support was not there by the second year. There are remarkable behaviour problems with some of these girls and, as I say, we work around them.

Ms PORTER — I have worked in two select entry schools. I was at Melbourne High School before this. The schools are a level playing field. Most of the kids had experienced some sort of bullying or some sort of intimidation because of their intelligence. They accept people on their intelligence and on their ability to be motivated. They want to have an education and they do not look at the other things.

Obviously you have much more autism and Asperger's in boys schools because it is more prevalent in males. Over and over again I have seen kids just accept other kids at face value. They accept their differences and they accept their personal interests because the intelligence and the passion for learning is what makes them the same. That is part of why these schools are so important, because those kids really do find a safe haven. My concern is when they go on to university. There is a big gap, and they have been in this very safe environment. Because we have less behavioural issues — because everyone is on the same page and going in the same direction — teachers, administrators and the welfare teams have more time to focus on ensuring that kids who have special needs or emotional needs have their needs met.

In other schools — having been in an average state school — you are often so focused on behavioural issues that certain kids, who are capable but not necessarily succeeding to the level they should, fall through the cracks. I think the advantage of the kids being in schools like this is that they perform better than they would in a normal state school.

Mr ELASMAR — Many Victorian parents have told the committee that they receive very little support or guidance in nurturing their gifted child. If your school does provide some support, what sort of information and support does it provide?

Ms GARVEY — We have regular parent information sessions where we deal with these things. People like Michael Carr-Gregg will be employed to come along to talk to parents about ways in which to support them. Students are also given access to that sort of support. This year for two days a week we have employed an additional social worker who is able to deal with some of the high-level cases in addition to our student welfare coordinator. There is a wellbeing committee, a welfare committee and two level coordinators at each level plus the heads of school. There is a very big welfare team. As Amy said, classroom management is not an issue for the most part, so they are able to focus on the sorts of problems we are talking about.

The CHAIR — Amy mentioned before that students do better here than they do, say, in a different environment. Is there anything statistical or quantitative to demonstrate that?

Ms GARVEY — I would say that the VCE results last year are a very good example of that. We had a cohort of nearly 250 who sat. Of course all of them passed. Something like 80 per cent of them scored above 90. We always have these high-flyers. We had four who got perfect scores. The high-flyers are probably going to get there anyway, although they may be handicapped by some of the problems we have just been talking about, but the middle level cohort really lifts and so the majority of scores are above 90.

There are very few who score low scores. In the previous year we had one who got 70. That was an excellent effort for her because she had had such emotional problems and such health problems during her last two years of schooling that it was an outstanding achievement for her and for the coordinators who had got her to the starting blocks. For the most part we do not have a long tail of scores; it is a compact number. They are not all of outstandingly high ability; they have worked together and the tide has lifted them all.

Ms HAYES — That is because the scores — talking about how they are above what they predict their scores would be —

Ms GARVEY — Yes.

Ms HAYES — If they say, ‘This is what the prediction is’, they should be getting 2 or 3 or 4 up from that, which talks about the cohort and what the teachers are doing here.

The CHAIR — What about in terms of preparing the students for life beyond the academic result, in terms of what they go on to achieve? We spoke about that a bit earlier and about the alumni of the school.

Ms AKINS — The alumni have not really been a great support up until now, but they are now talking about ways to provide mentoring in a just-in-time way so they can connect a student with somebody in the career area that they are interested in, maybe for a small project or for ongoing mentoring. I think that will be a great thing. Part of the co-curricular program is an involvement in social service. For example, each year we work with the lord mayor’s charity. There is a whole team of girls who go out and do that. There was a team of girls who went out last term to do restoration work in bushfire-affected areas. There is a whole group that gets involved in political interests. It is really amazing to me. The first thing I know about it is that I get a phone call about the protocol for a minister’s visit, because ministers always come here. It is close to Parliament House, but they are also interested in presenting to our students.

There is a big interface with the universities as well. We have had in place for a number of years mentoring systems with Melbourne University and Monash University in particular, and that takes them into that. There is a whole range of competitions where they are working at the highest levels with people in industry sometimes. There is a huge range of ways in which they interface with businesses and community groups.

Ms AKINS — As well as that we also have, for example, the year 12 camp, which is at the very start of the year. While we are looking at what skills girls need to get them through this year, we also start focusing on what is going to happen beyond year 12. We have something called regeneration day, which happens just after the mid-year exams in year 12. If any students are feeling as though they have gone through the exams and they have not performed as well as possible, it is an opportunity to pick them up and refocus them.

Some of the things we do include getting ex-students back and having athletes in to give them motivational talks about what happens if you do not get this score, the fact that it is not the end of life and that there are all these other things to consider. We also try to put a focus on that, and we have a similar sort of program at year 11.

When the students come to us in year 9, one of the reasons they get off to such a good start here is that they do a camp up at Valley Homestead, which is a camp aimed at team building, sharing resources and getting to know each other. That actually pushes the girls to be beyond their comfort zone and learn that they have to rely on each other to get there.

We also take opportunities throughout the four years if there is something else that comes along that we think will be really good. We have a course that we offer to year 10s which is all about mental health. We are working with the Sunrise Foundation on that; this is our third year of doing that. We are currently putting together what will be a four-year package which will focus on study skills plus a whole lot of other things that we think they will need to get them through, so there will be a consistent program over the four years. It will repeat some of the stuff and build on their skills, but it will be focused on not only the academic program but also learning to know yourself as an individual, learning your strengths and trying to build on them. Anything that comes along that we think is a good opportunity, we grab.

The students themselves are also very good — for example, you have heard about student clubs and all the rest of it. The students know that if they want to do something or if they want to start something — a political group, an Amnesty International group or something else — all they need to do is come and ask. We have a program that says, ‘Okay, then, who’s going to be targeted? How many people have you got interested? You’ll be fitted into the program’. We support them in their capacity to come up with an idea and say, ‘We want to follow this through’.

Ms PORTER — If you want some evidence of their ability, university dropout rates are probably a good place to look at the mix and pathways. Both Mac.Rob and Melbourne High have very low dropout rates. Kids often swap courses because they may be forced into a pathway they are not interested in or they may think it has a high profile so they go in that direction, but then they find other interests when they get to university. Compared to private school students — dare I say — the dropout rates are very, very low.

The other thing I would say is that we are looking at introducing a lot of elements from different curriculums around the world which look at things like increasing risk taking, because I think that is one thing our girls do not do. They do not take risks. They do not want to fail, so they try to play it very safe. That is something they really need to do — some careful risk taking, being inventive and having the initiative in the workplace to create their own work and their own jobs — because that is what they are going to need in the future. We need to prepare them for those sorts of things out there.

Ms GARVEY — The leadership program is really important. Perhaps you might like to say something about the leadership program, Janet.

Ms McCUTCHEON — I think there are a lot of opportunities for students to be involved in leadership and to develop their different leadership skills. The five girls who spoke earlier are all part of that leadership program. We have had contact with student leaders from last year — I am only new to the school as well — and they have been telling us about programs that they are getting involved in at university as well, so they definitely carry those through. They really are given the opportunity to manage their own programs. They are not directed by us, but we offer them support and mentoring where they need it, whatever the opportunity is.

We have quite a large system where we have about six class representatives per form group as well as senior school leaders, so you can really move through the program and develop. A lot of students get the opportunity to participate because they are all really quite competent.

Ms GARVEY — And there are conferences and other opportunities for them to participate in.

The CHAIR — We have come to the end of our formal questions and, unfortunately, our time. If there is anything, Jane, that you think we have not covered that you would like to say in concluding remarks? We could take that on.

Ms GARVEY — One of the things that upsets me is the assumption that we steal other people’s students. If only the people who so jealously guarded their high-performing students — and we cannot take very many, at maximum 5 per cent — could see the advantages that they enjoy once they move to this school, I think they would probably settle down a bit. It is not about ownership of the students, it is about providing the best opportunities for students who will actually provide an enormous resource in our community.

I think to get the most out of these students is really important to the Victorian and Australian economies. These opportunities should be provided for them. They are not adequately provided in most mixed-ability schools, and anything we can do to encourage them to reach their potential, rather than hide their potential out of social embarrassment, is potentially the best thing to do for our society in the future.

The CHAIR — That is a great place to finish. I want to thank you first for hosting us today and showing us around the school and secondly for your contributions at the hearing. We are certainly very impressed with and congratulate you on the work you are doing in helping the students to realise their potential. Keep up the good work. Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.