

CORRECTED VERSION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the education of gifted and talented students

Melbourne — 26 July 2011

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Anna, Georgina, Kayla, Lorraine, Zoe, year 12 students, The Mac.Robertson Girls' High School.

The CHAIR — Welcome to this public hearing. It is a very full-on process, but it is certainly important for us as part of our work. The Education and Training Committee is doing an inquiry into gifted and talented students. We are here at Mac.Robertson Girls' High School with Anna, Kayla, Zoe, Lorraine and Georgina. I point out to all of the students that what you say at the hearing today is protected by what we call parliamentary privilege, which you will be aware is the same sort of the thing that is afforded to parliamentarians. It means that anything you say within these four walls is protected by parliamentary privilege. Unfortunately, it does not apply to what you say outside, so you should bear that in mind. Also, there are Hansard reporters at the end of the table, and they will be recording everything that is said today. Each time you speak — not just the first time but every time — please give us your first name.

On behalf of the committee, I thank you for showing us around today. We are all very impressed with the facilities and with the different opportunities you have in terms of the different types of programs that are offered here. We are looking forward to exploring those a bit further with our questions. The way it will work is that we all have a series of questions that we will ask you. Relax and feel free at any time to chip in with your feelings as to the questions. I will kick it off. The first question is about your experience with the high school you have come from, so reflecting back a little. What do you think are the biggest differences at Mac.Rob compared to your previous high school?

GEORGINA — I will start. I am Georgina. The first thing I noticed when I walked into a classroom at Mac.Rob was the fact that everyone wanted to be here. There is no-one here because of obligation; they are here because they want to learn and also because they are intelligent. I think that makes a classroom a lot more pleasant place to be, and you get a lot more work done.

ANNA — Going on from what Georgie said, there is definitely a bigger appreciation for academic success at Mac.Rob compared to where I used to go to school. It is not just the sporting achievements and the co-curricular achievements which are supported, it is all the academic ones as well. Also, with the school being a single-sex school — my old school was co-ed — I definitely find that the girls here are more willing to voice their opinions and be open than in an environment with boys where sometimes they felt that maybe they could not be intelligent or they could not come across as being intelligent because there were boys around and they did not want to seem too pushy in that sort of environment. Those are the main differences I have found.

The CHAIR — Have all of you come from co-ed schools? Most? Except for one. In terms of negative attitudes to perceived ability or to your ability, were other students at your previous high schools negative about your academic ability or your achievements?

KAYLA — Yes. It was really hard to be open and to grow as a person, let alone as a student, in a classroom at my old school. I came from a girls' school as well. The girls at Mac.Rob are completely different to the girls at my old school. It is a relief to get into a classroom and feel that everyone wants you to grow. Everyone actually wants to hear your opinion, and you can debate something and nobody is going to take it outside the classroom and hold it against you that you have a different opinion. It is really nice to go into a classroom and learn, comment, be interactive and not worry that someone is going to think the worst of you. You are all friends anyway, and it is just a matter of developing as a person.

The CHAIR — Have any of you have had a past experience of teachers not being supportive possibly about your academic ability? How did you deal with those attitudes?

ANNA — I found that it was not necessarily that the teachers had a negative attitude towards academic ability; it was more that they had to focus a lot on the other students and could not necessarily provide you with the extension you might need, whereas when you come to Mac.Rob work that is seen as extension at other schools may be the class work you are doing. The teacher does not have to put aside extra time to help you because it is just part of the curriculum.

The CHAIR — How did you cope with that?

ANNA — Basically just taking it all on board myself at my old school. It was years 7 and 8, so I did not view it as being as important as, say, VCE. But it was definitely just having to go to the teacher outside of class because they did not necessarily have the time to help me inside class.

KAYLA — I am going on from what Anna said. It was not so much that the teacher was negative towards your ability, it was sometimes that they were a bit frustrated that you had finished the work that they had set for the class. We have this drive always for more, more, more. When you are in a class with 25 girls and a good 80 per cent of them do not want to be there and are not paying attention, I suppose it can get a bit irritating when a student keeps coming up and saying, ‘What do I do for the next 40 minutes?’, because we had 75-minute periods. Because of that I had to do Kumon outside of school. I was not into tutoring, but I was into doing extra work and things like that just to keep up with something because it was not being pushed at all. I was just sitting in class all the time.

GEORGINA — I did not have so much of a negative experience with my teachers when I was a normal student there, but after I decided to make the move to Mac.Rob I think I found that a lot of the teachers were quite negative about that in itself. I got a few comments — ‘Is this school not good enough for you?’ kind of remarks — and things like that. I know a couple of friends whose schools have offered them 100 per cent scholarships just to try to bribe them to stay at their schools because they are so desperate to cling on to their students. I felt a bit strange because I had been at the school for two years. I was happy there, and I felt a little awful to leave on a bit of a sour note.

The CHAIR — The next question I am going to ask draws that out just a little bit. Do not feel that the fact that you are not at that school now or you are where you are at the moment is an issue. Do you think a selective entry school is the best option for you? What if there had been more options available at the school you came from? Do you think if that school had had more options in terms of more appropriate educational opportunities available you would have been tempted to stay, or do you think this is a better environment?

LORRAINE — I feel that the atmosphere at Mac.Rob is unique in the sense that we have a lot of drive here that is not really present at other schools. You might be able to make the facilities that are at Mac.Rob available to other public schools, but the student focus and the student determination we have here is all student-based. I do not think you can really foster that; you need to have that learning system ingrained in your mind when you are young. You cannot just bring in new facilities and expect students to take them up as warmly as we do at Mac.Rob, because I think at Mac.Rob we are all here, as Georgie said before, because we want to be here and because we know that our attitude is very important to us. We treasure our experience, and that is why we are here at Mac.Rob. I feel that all Mac.Rob students have that kind of positive attitude to learning, whereas not many other kids in other schools have that.

GEORGINA — I do not think you can recreate what we have. You can mimic the facilities and the opportunities we have, but I do not think you can mimic the girls. I do not think you can get that same drive from the general cohort of students. I think it is unique here, and I do not think you would be able to replicate it.

The CHAIR — Knowing what you know now here at Mac.Rob, what sorts of things would you do to some of the schools that you have come from to improve the academic experience for high-ability students in school?

ANNA — I think one of the big things in any school is the quality of teaching. I think at my old school it would have been good if I had had the quality of teaching of maybe some of the teachers I have had at Mac.Rob. I am not saying teachers in my old school are bad, because I think a good teacher will impart knowledge to a student no matter where they are, and a high-achieving student will make use of a good-quality teacher at any school. I often also find that some teachers that I consider to be great teachers are willing to help the students that want extension a lot more than other teachers. There are some teachers who just want to get through the class and they want to focus on the students who may be struggling as well, but I think a good-quality teacher is able to accept all different methods of learning — there is kinaesthetic learning and all those different methods you get told about — and that quality of teaching no matter where it is really helps high-achieving students.

Ms TIERNEY — What is the best thing about being at a selective entry school?

LORRAINE — I think the opportunities that I have received since coming to Mac.Rob I probably would not have received at my previous school. Being in Mac.Rob I have been to all these additional camps, and I have been exposed to so many different experiences. We have affiliations with other universities and other schools, and we have been given opportunities to go and explore their methods of teaching and learning and so on. It has definitely broadened my horizons in terms of what to expect from schools. Also at Mac.Rob we are all

quite similar in the sense that we all have that drive. Mac.Rob has this great emphasis on things like the music program and the co-curricular club, which is not something that most schools would do. Our leadership program is quite an extensive one, and I really do value it. It is quite good because Mac.Rob really does place emphasis on things that most other schools would miss or dismiss quite flippantly, I suppose.

KAYLA — I have a little bit of a different point. I love what Lorraine said, but for me it was about the way we are prepared from year 9. The way that everything is applied, it is not just for your classroom; you can take it outside into the real world. You can attend a meeting and actually know what is going on. It is because of the support you have had and the fact that girls are always there who want to learn, and you can talk to anybody. I think that is something you cannot really get at another school. I definitely did not get that at my old school.

There are the opportunities that come with that, and also the fact that from year 9 upwards you start this journey and everybody works together to make sure that you end up where you want to be. And people — teachers and students — are so generous with their time: if you need extra help with your work or just need someone to talk to just for a second, they will willingly stop what they are doing and organise a time just so we can work it out. That is amazing, because everyone cares. I think that is something we will be able to take into the workforce.

So in a way they are enabling us to better our society while being at school. I think that is something you can get from a selective entry school, because we are like that, really compassionate as well as wanting to learn. It is about more than the drive. Drive is really important, but we are still people and we have emotions and everything like that. Sport is very important to us; music is important to us. There is more to us than a career, and I think that is something you can get from a selective entry school. That is what most people do not see. They think selective entry schools have to be academic, but we are so much more than that, and so the school prepares you for that. It challenges you, but it also gives you that backbone and says, ‘No, you can be more; you can always push yourself further’.

ZOE — I think in comparison to my old school I really like the atmosphere that the girls here just give off in general, like the general motivation to want to work hard. At my old school I found a lot of the people just did not want to be there at all, and it was kind of hard to be motivated yourself. But in coming to Mac.Rob I find that I just work a lot better and a lot harder, and I think that is just because I am around like-minded girls who want to do well in life and want to have a good career in the future.

Ms TIERNEY — What is the biggest challenge that you face being a student here?

ANNA — I think one of the obvious challenges of going to a selective entry school is the pressure that the students put on themselves. It can be hard first off when you come to Mac.Rob or another selective entry school in year 9 to deal with realising that you are no longer the best student in the class, that you are no longer going to top the class every single time you sit a test, that you will not get an A+ on every single piece of work that you do. It is a big difference when you first come, and that can be quite shocking and something that is quite hard to deal with at first.

There is also the pressure, especially once you get to VCE. Because everyone is so driven to get great results at the end of the year, you can lose sight of the fact that it is not all about the academic performance, that that is not all that school is about. But sometimes when you go home at the end of the day it is hard because you feel like you have to do so much study and that if you do not do the best, then you will be letting someone down. Of course you do not want to let yourself down, but the school is not going to look upon you badly if you get one mark less on a test, which is something that is quite hard to deal with, because when you first come to Mac.Rob you are used to getting 100 per cent every time. Then you come in and you get Bs, which are great! But at first it seems, ‘Oh, a B! What have I done? I have come to Mac.Rob and I have suddenly lost all my intelligence’. That is probably the biggest and most obvious challenge at a selective entry school.

The CHAIR — Your teachers have told us that they try to personalise education and learning. How do they do this? Do you think it is effective, and if so, how effective do you think it is?

LORRAINE — I find the teachers here at Mac.Rob are very willing to talk to you outside of school, and you can just sit with them one to one and talk about not only your studies but your own kind of interpretation of what you are studying. For example, I am doing philosophy this year and I find that I can talk to my philosophy teacher quite easily outside of class and just speak to her about what I feel and what she feels and can debate with her and bicker about the issue that we are talking about. That is unique. You probably would not be seen

with your teacher in your old school — that is socially unacceptable, I suppose — but at Mac.Rob it is quite fun. Teachers here are very open-minded. They know the girls here do strive to learn and do have this kind of gift for talking a lot! They do understand we are quite strong-minded girls, so it is quite fun. Sometimes they do not necessarily treat you like a student; they treat you almost as an equal sometimes. They do impart knowledge to you, but they know you may also have your own personal ideas and theories which may actually be as valuable as theirs, so it is quite exciting in that respect.

KAYLA — When you come to year 9 you stay with your form group for a lot of your core subjects, such as science, maths and English. My form group was really different. We are diverse, and everyone learns in completely different ways. The teacher was able to interact with every single group. It did not matter where you sat, the teacher would go around and every single person would be able to understand what was going on and take away from the class the same knowledge, but they could apply it in different ways. The class might have people who learn by relating their learning to different things — for example, relating something about maths to the business world, so half of the class would get the point; then some of the people needed to relate it to science and things like that.

That kind of teaching was amazing, because not only did you learn your way, you learnt how to learn someone else's way. That meant that when someone had a problem you knew how to help them. So you are teaching yourself and learning as well. Especially with language, we practise with audio, dictation and every single type of learning that you could think of. That makes you so much more aware of the culture, because speaking is so different from writing and everything like that. It is just really good. It is giving you a great understanding. It helps when you have to interact with other students who learn completely differently to you.

ANNA — I have something to say that is a bit to the contrary. Although I have definitely had teachers at Mac.Rob who have catered to my individual learning style, and I have learnt heaps under them — I have learnt heaps at Mac.Rob in general — I think one of the difficulties of going to such a school is when the teacher is moving the class at quite a fast pace and you do not grasp the concept, and for the rest of that class you do not know exactly what is going on. Sometimes you can ask the teacher to explain it, but the rest of the class does not want to sit there and have to listen to you getting an explanation of a concept that they may have understood in the first 30 seconds but is taking you maybe three classes to learn. They do not want to have to sit through something like that. For some subjects I find that quite difficult, but the good thing about the teachers is that you can go to them outside of class and they are willing to help you outside of class, but sometimes in class it is hard to get the individual attention you need if you are wanting to move at a slower pace than the class is going at.

The CHAIR — Is there anything that you would recommend that could be done differently to improve learning here at Mac.Rob or at other selective entry schools for students with high ability?

KAYLA — I do not know about classrooms, but with form groups I think it would be really interesting to have a group with year 9s to 12s, as a tutorial group. It would still be 25 kids, but you would have six from years 9, 10, 11 and 12. That way when you have questions about the future and things you would not have to talk to each other and be like 'I don't know' and wait for a teacher or book a time. You would have that support there. When we do clubs and things like that it is amazing to be able to interact, even for 15 minutes, with girls from different year levels. Even as a year 12 you learn so much from year 9s to year 11s. Everyone looks at the world differently, so that would be interesting. But I am happy with my classes.

GEORGINA — I think the focus needs to be not on how we can get the girls to learn more but on how we can get the girls to just stop learning at some point in time and step back from everything. When I come to Mac.Rob it feels a bit like a wave, like I am continually swept along. It is intense all the time. I would say that encouraging girls to step back, relax and do something other than academic work is probably the most important thing.

ANNA — I would agree with Georgie about maintaining co-curricular programs or starting them up if they are not strong in other select entry schools. Those sorts of things can be an outlet for making friends and just doing something different. The focus is often on schoolwork and academic achievement, but all the other things help you to grow as a person and help you to make friends, as I said. I think that if you do not have those things in a school, if you do not have a diverse range of activities for the girls to do, then you burn out so quickly just doing work all the time. I know that I would have if I had not had all the other activities to do at school.

Mr ELASMAR — How does your school use technology to enhance students' learning experience?

KAYLA — Last year I did year 12 accounting, and every single one of our classes was in a computer lab. That was really interesting because in the real world when you do bank statements and reports it is all done on computer, and we were able to use those programs. When it came to the exam, every single student was so accustomed to the paperwork that it was better than second nature to us. What was more, we were able to do assessments on the computer: statements, Excel documents, pie graphs. Everything for accounting we did on the computer, and that was amazing for me because I am not very IT savvy. I struggle a lot with Word, but to be able to use all those different documents and understand exactly what was going on was really good, and I can use that outside of the classroom as well. It meant that presentation for other subjects was much easier to come by.

GEORGINA — Am I allowed to go back to the previous question quickly?

The CHAIR — Yes, sure. That is no problem at all.

GEORGINA — Something that needs to be worked on is maybe educating the parent population to some extent, because I think a lot of parents with very high-achieving children have very high ambitions for their high-achieving children, and they push and push. Some girls spend 6 hours at school each day, then go to 2 hours of maths tutoring and then go to 2 hours of English tutoring. There is no time in their day to relax. I think the pressure that a lot of girls get from their parents is one of the really decisive factors in causing anxiety, stress and things like that. That might be something else.

Ms MILLER — Do any of you ladies see yourselves as gifted students? If you do, how do you feel about the term 'gifted', or would you say you are just fast learners or high achievers?

ANNA — I personally would not consider myself gifted. My opinion of the girls at Mac.Rob is that they are girls who are willing to learn. Maybe they are fast learners, but that may help them to be ready to learn. Because they learn quickly it is easier for them, but personally I do not like the term 'gifted'. If you put the effort in, you get the results.

KAYLA — I agree with Anna. When people use terms like 'ambitious' and 'gifted' they sometimes have connotations from all other schools. People immediately distance themselves from them. I am no different to a year 12 at any other school. The difference is that I might have a stronger goal than they have. That should not have an impact on whether I am friends with them or whether I can interact with them at all. In school it is a little bit different regarding how much work you want to do; that is your personal choice. I do not think the term goes really well with the students. It does not describe us as who we are. It kind of makes you seem like a bit of a robot: gifted goes in this box. It is not really an appropriate term. We are just students wanting to learn.

Ms MILLER — It appears that you are in a more motivating environment here at Mac.Rob and that that makes you more motivated to achieve. Is that how you feel?

GEORGINA — Yes, definitely. I could kind of coast along at my old school. There was nothing to make me keep up or push myself. I could put in minimal effort and still get decent grades, and there was no impetus to make me work any harder, but then you come here and everyone is so intelligent and puts in so much work. It is massive motivation to start working.

ZOE — On that note, I know of people who worked really hard at my previous school and then moved to another school for years 11 and 12 and their motivation has decreased over the years. I find that really surprising, and it makes me really grateful to be at Mac.Rob, where everybody has this constant motivation and is wanting to work hard. If I had stayed at my old school, I may have gone down the same path because I would have constantly been around people who do not really want to work anymore.

The CHAIR — Can I get an indication of whether you went to a public school or a private school, without saying the school?

GEORGINA — Public.

LORRAINE — Public.

ZOE — Private.

KAYLA — Private Catholic.

ANNA — Private.

The CHAIR — Is there anything you would like to say that you think might help us in terms of our work — something you think may not have been covered? Obviously what we are trying to do is improve the levels of education in schools, particularly around high-performing students to ensure that they are able to get the best education possible.

KAYLA — With regard to the curriculum, there are some points at junior levels as well where sometimes it seems like you want to do more or it is just not up to date with society. There are things that are going on in the world that we should be able to relate more to our classes. There is nothing wrong with the course curriculum or statements or things like that, but especially with humanities, with the problems going on in the world and everything like that, we should be able to be studying those so we can understand the world a bit more, because that helps in a lot of things.

Sometimes it feels like we are learning something, but what is it for? I think teachers get a little tired of us asking the question: how do we apply it? If there were more of that in the curriculum, I think any student from any school would take a liking to it. If you can apply it to something you know in the world, then suddenly it makes it a personal subject and you can speak strongly about it. People become passionate when they know what is going on. It gives you a sense of pride — ‘I actually know this’. Someone else might know about this country, but this is my area and I can teach them, and I can learn more. Across the whole curriculum, if you could do that, especially when it gets up to the senior year levels, that would help a lot.

LORRAINE — This is completely unrelated, but I think with high-achieving schools, with selective schools, what we really should focus on is the fostering of a really good support network, not just in forms but across the school with student-teacher relations. A lot of high-achieving students do fall prey to the pressures of society and the pressures of family and stuff, as Georgie mentioned before. I think a lot of Mac.Rob girls have times when they struggle, especially during crunch times like midyear exams, SAC weeks and stuff like that. It does get very intense and quite emotional sometimes. I think everyone needs to address that. Emotions have to be tackled. A lot of girls do fall prey to these pressures, and I think it is a very common issue for select entry students. I know from being at this school that a lot of my friends do feel really pressured and stressed and feel lost, because in this fast-paced environment — like Georgie said, wave after wave — it is quite hard to stick your hand up and say, ‘I need help’. It is not really embarrassing, but it is quite — —

KAYLA — No-one does it.

LORRAINE — No-one. Not many people have the honesty and bravery to say, ‘I need help’, so I feel that should be addressed.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for your contribution. It certainly will be very helpful for us in our inquiry. Once again, thank you for showing us around today as well. We were very impressed with all of you and also with the school and the facilities. Good luck for the next few months. It is a very busy time for you.

Witnesses withdrew.