

CORRECTED VERSION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the education of gifted and talented students

Berwick — 26 July 2011

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Mr R. Page, Principal, and
Ms T. Meath, Assistant Principal, Nossal High School; and
Professor L. Piterman, Pro Vice-Chancellor, Berwick and Peninsula campuses, and
Dr L. Kronborg, Senior Lecturer and Coordinator, Postgraduate studies in Gifted Education, Faculty of Education, Monash University.

The CHAIR — I welcome both Roger Page and Toni Meath from Nossal High School and also Professor Leon Piterman and Dr Leonie Kronborg from Monash University. As I have indicated, which I need to repeat, this is a public hearing into gifted and talented students as part of the Education and Training Committee's inquiry. All evidence given today is covered by parliamentary privilege, which is the same parliamentary privilege which covers members of Parliament, although anything you say outside the room will not be given the same privilege. You should feel free to say whatever you wish. Hansard is recording the proceedings. You will receive a draft of the transcript. You may make corrections to any typographical errors.

I will begin by asking for an opening statement from the Principal of a couple of minutes on where he sees things. We will then ask some questions and, if we have missed out anything, there may be an opportunity at the end to cover that as well.

Mr PAGE — Thank you, and thank you for coming down and giving Nossal the opportunity to share its story a little bit too. We think we are doing some pretty exciting work here. We are very pleased with where we have got and very pleased with where we think we are going because of the work we have done to date.

Nossal came about as a government initiative. We have been really fortunate in some aspects in that we have been reasonably autonomous in being able to build what we think is a very effective school with some significant advice from some significantly informed partners and supporters, one being Monash, of course, and the other being the selective entry network, which was formed as a part of the structure and the development of Nossal and Suzanne Cory. We have been able to share the learnings from the two existing selective schools, Melbourne High School and Mac.Rob, and to build new learnings as we have developed a selective entry network in two new selective entry schools.

We have also informed a lot of the work we have done with Toni, who is also a research student in gifted education and thinking curriculum. As a principal I have been in a really fortunate position basically to create a school design almost from scratch with information from people with knowledge I do not have, but also with some background and experience in education of course; and also to create a curriculum from scratch without a whole lot of constraints other than the required curriculum, but being able to build what we liked because we have also been able to hand select our staff. From my point of view that is probably the biggest advantage we have had as a new school — that our staff, as you have already seen, have been specifically selected because firstly they are outstanding teachers but also because they bring a range of other things to the school as well. Each step along the way with our staff selection has been really important because we have captured particular people to do particular roles and we have captured the best possible ones we can.

Some of the things and some of the developments we have seen here at Nossal have been as a result of people being able to come in and take their head, basically, but also being able to capitalise on things that perhaps they could not achieve in a mainstream school, because we do not battle with a whole range of things as you do in a mainstream school. Our Wednesday afternoons are focused on professional development. They are focused on curriculum and pedagogy; they are not based on student management because we do not have student management issues like you would in a mainstream school with such a broad spread of student aspirations, student attitudes and student performance. We have some significant advantages, but we also have done some significantly good work. I feel a bit humbled hearing the teachers and the staff talking. Sometimes one of my main roles is to keep out of people's way and let them go ahead and do an outstanding job, which generally they do.

The CHAIR — Great. Just picking up on that specifically, Roger, dealing with teacher professional development and training, your submission states that the school will develop improved quality of teaching practices of pre-service teachers. How does this happen?

Mr PAGE — It happens directly. The design of the school is such that we have actually built it to accommodate up to about 10 pre-service teachers at a time within the school, because the research and the information we looked at suggested that pre-service teachers work better in a group and they work better as a cohort working together within a school environment. We work very closely with Leonie and the school of education at Monash, which provides teachers who are doing gifted education studies as student teachers at Nossal High School.

A little bit less directly, but with the professional development program and the professional development centre here, we host a lot of visitors, whether they are teachers, principals or academics, who come into the school and work directly with the school or who just work within the school environment. Also, being a new and relatively interesting school we host a lot of visitors from the academic and educational community who come down to look at what we are doing but who also share what they are doing too, so it is very much a two-way communication, which is nice.

The CHAIR — You mentioned earlier about being able to start from scratch and recruit teachers. Many of the submissions we have had state that it has been difficult to recruit teachers who have this sort of expertise to teach in this area. Has that been an issue for you at Nossal?

Mr PAGE — No, probably quite the contrary. As I said, first and foremost we look for outstanding teachers. Again, a large advantage I have as a principal at Nossal compared to many of my colleagues is that we attract considerable interest from the teaching community too, because lots of teachers would like to work at Nossal. When we advertise jobs we have a significant pool of applicants and a significant pool of good applicants to draw upon, and we do exactly that. However, as part of a selection process we look carefully at their academic ability and experience, and we will select them based on a range of criteria, one of which is an ability or potential to work within a school like Nossal and to deliver a program to gifted students.

Having said that, we have appointed a range of teachers, as you have seen today, from very experienced teachers who have been around for a long time to some first-year-out teachers who have outstanding potential and outstanding backgrounds and abilities, so we have a nice breadth of teaching staff in terms of age and experience.

Ms MEATH — I will add to that. We have looked for something different in a teacher. We have looked for buy-in. We have looked for a teacher who wants to have that buy-in to the school. They may not have the qualifications in gifted education, but therein lies our responsibility to professionally develop them and give them those skills. We would much rather start with a high-quality teacher who is an expert in their field and has that moral buy-in, and then we will develop them. One of the constants in the hiring of staff is that Roger and I have been on each of the selection panels for the staff, so we are able to bounce questions off each other. What do we really want? What is the fit going to be like? What are they going to bring to Nossal? So far we have been quite lucky.

Mr PAGE — I mentioned on the tour, but I will reiterate it here because I would like it recorded, that one of the nice things we have done at Nossal is that we have given students a very strong voice in the school community. One of the things we did this year was train up students to sit on interview panels, so we had two year 9 students last year and we have had two year 10 students this year on each of the staff interview panels. They have an equal say in asking questions and helping to make the decisions about staff appointments, and that has broadened our expertise and our field of selection too.

Dr KRONBORG — I am fortunate that I have been involved in the teacher education research that has been going on here for the last 12 months in conjunction with the school. We have just analysed the results of that, and something you cannot underestimate is the importance of the leadership we have in this school. It is really quite unique in that Roger has had experience of being in a selective school before with the SEAL program and Toni is experienced in gifted education. The team of the two of them together selecting the teachers was really spot-on in who they were able to select. We found that there were six teachers who came into the school who had backgrounds in gifted education in some form or another, whether it was through experience or through professional learning, but those they selected were all experts in their particular disciplines. They had all been highly successful teachers or highly successful in whatever roles they had been in before. They were very clever in their selection process.

The CHAIR — This question is for anyone on the panel, and I asked a similar question of the teachers: what are the characteristics of a teacher in this particular area? Are there certain things that a teacher needs when they are working with students of high ability compared to a broader cohort of students?

Dr KRONBORG — Domain expertise is one thing. You cannot teach physics to highly able year 12 students if you are not competent in it, and I think the teachers have self-selected to come into this environment. Most of these teachers were really gifted students and individuals themselves. Stuart mentioned earlier the

amount of time that goes into lesson preparation at night. You have to be dedicated to put a lot of extra hours into curriculum preparation. These teachers have all been doing it, but they also love what they are doing.

They have created a fantastic culture here at the same time. Last year we worked on developing the social and emotional needs of these students, and that was one of the focuses of what we had. We brought in international experts, which was one of the positives of working with Monash. We had two leading international experts who were counselling psychologists in gifted education — and there are not many of those around the world — who were able to come and work with the teachers here. Also, teachers in the bigger region around here who are interested in gifted education were able to come to a couple of the sessions that were provided.

Ms MEATH — Some of the identified characteristics of gifted people are a heightened sense of humour, the ability to see the quirky or the eccentric and the ability to see something different, and these are teachers who also appreciate a sense of humour. They can allow something to run in a different direction and not be threatened by it, because they can see the possibilities and the opportunities. These teachers are quite courageous and brave as well. They are able to take risks and opportunities with their learners because they themselves are exhibiting the characteristics of gifted people.

Prof. PITERMAN — I get the sense that a number of the teachers are fulfilling a position description comparable to that of a university academic. They have the same desire to gain knowledge, to be a tier of knowledge, to look for evidence for what works and what does not work and to critically appraise evidence. It is really raising the bar. It is not just repeating and regurgitating things that are done in a fairly stereotypical fashion.

Dr KRONBORG — And they are very open to learning themselves. You are talking about a developmental process that is going on here. They are not all experts in what they are doing now; they are still developing. They are still learning about how to differentiate curriculum and are still learning from a core group of teachers who did have the skills initially and have been modelling to other teachers here. There has been a lot of thoughtful work in the whole planning process. They have templates for curriculum units that Toni and the IT teacher carefully structured based on evidence in curricula for gifted students. All teachers have been given those.

One of the things that Margaret Plunkett and I found when we evaluated the SEAL schools around Victoria was that a key factor was the competencies of the coordinator of the gifted program. I see Toni in that role. When you have a leader who is as informed as Toni is she can bring in some very key people to provide the professional learning that the teachers need. She is on track all the time too. You are really offering quality learning in this whole environment, which is fantastic.

Prof. PITERMAN — I think Toni doing her PhD in the field has made a huge difference as well.

The CHAIR — Roger, Michelle pointed out earlier, when we had the teachers, that there are a number of high-ability students and then a smaller number of actually gifted students, and it is about working with the two cohorts of students and how you handle that. Here at Nossal, not giving me exact numbers or anything, if you were to scout around and say, ‘We have X number of what we would term gifted’, what do you think that number would be, versus high-ability students?

Mr PAGE — Leonie or Toni might take a stab at that.

Ms MEATH — I will answer that. If you look at Gagné’s model, which is probably the accepted model, Gagné would talk about gifted students being in the top 10 per cent of their peers. The very nature of the test to get into Nossal or to any of the select entry schools is that it tests for two things: one is aptitude and one is achievement. You do not get a place at Nossal unless you have some level of giftedness as well as high achievement. We have students here who might be mildly gifted, and we have students here who are profoundly gifted. We have each end of the spectrum, but to get a place at Nossal I would say that 100 per cent of our students have some level of giftedness, and they develop the talent. That is part of our responsibility.

You are testing for aptitude and achievement, so to actually get a spot in a select entry school you have to exhibit some level of giftedness. You might be only mildly gifted, and it is about what we do with that. I would say, and Gagné would probably say, that the students who are coming into Nossal would be called IGAT students — intellectually gifted, academically talented students — of varying levels.

The CHAIR — I am sorry to push you, but what about at the pointy end? I do not mean the ones we are going to build up in terms of ability through the talented area. They are all gifted, but what percentage would be extremely — —

Ms MEATH — Profoundly gifted?

The CHAIR — Yes.

Ms MEATH — If you look at different models, Miraca Gross talks about 1 in 10 people being mildly gifted; 1 in 100, moderately; and 1 in 1000, highly. If we are looking at 400 at Nossal but they have all been taken from a pool at that really high end, at the highest level, we are probably lucky to have 2. But I would say there is a whole bank of them sitting there in the moderately gifted group. It is probably like a bell curve, I would suggest, and we would have perhaps one or two who are right at that end, most sort of in that lower hump there, and so on.

Dr KRONBORG — However, one of the things that we have found with Perth Modern School, which became a selective school five years ago, is that in the first year it had the lowest level of rating of students who applied and each year the quality of the applications has increased.

Mr PAGE — We are seeing that, yes.

Dr KRONBORG — That is what you would expect to happen here. I have not done a strict analysis of the data of the students who are coming in and their ability levels.

Mr PAGE — We can see it coarsely in the cut-off scores from the testing results that we get.

Ms TIERNEY — Leonie, you have mentioned a few things, and also Roger and Toni have told me a couple of things as well, but given that we are on the record, would you be able to lay out for us the partnership that Monash and Nossal have and what the direct benefits are for students and teachers?

Mr PAGE — I will start, and the other guys can jump in. When it was first proposed that the location was to be on the grounds of Monash the relationship started right from the beginning. In fact we met very early in the piece with Phil Steele, who was then the Pro Vice-Chancellor at Monash, and started to work with Phil on inculcating Nossal into the educational community locally too. Some of that was to do with the sensitivity about having a selective school in the neighbourhood and working as part of a network, and some of it was also about creating that bond and that relationship with Monash. We did it on a number of fronts.

One of them was to have Nossal introduced to the community reasonably strategically, and we did that by working with Monash on structuring some programs specifically around professional development on gifted education et cetera. The rest of it was to do with creating very concrete links, the most obvious one being us working out of the university for the first term while the buildings were being finished. We also made very early contact with Margaret Plunkett and Leonie Kronborg to start doing some planning for our curriculum and our professional development as well, so that we were building our school around a bit of a research base. There will be some obvious and very specific programs that will run as a result of our relationship and our links.

My vision in the future is that once our students are in year 12 they will be moving quite freely between the university and Nossal and doing studies up there. Monash has made all of our staff adjunct members of Monash, and as members they have access to Monash facilities. Monash has been outstandingly generous in its support both in concrete terms in the provision of the facilities and use of its buildings and lecture theatres and also in terms of its involvement. Leon Piterman sits on our school council. Leonie Kronborg is down here every second week and working directly with our staff. Over the longer term we have lots of goodwill from the faculties and individuals at Monash too, who are all wanting to work directly with us but we have not developed a whole lot of that yet because we have been too busy building and opening the school.

The CHAIR — Leon, do you want to add to that?

Prof. PITERMAN — I think we are just seeing the beginnings of a very fruitful relationship. I support everything that Roger has said, and will add just a little bit more. Next year the education faculty will have a strong presence here. We are starting 10 new degree courses at this campus next year. Of those, three will be from the Faculty of Education, so in fact the Deputy Dean of the faculty will be based here. Those courses are a

bachelor of education P–10, masters of teaching, and also a masters degree in teaching leadership. Having a physical presence here from the Faculty of Education, again, would just cement that relationship and enhance it.

Apart from the research benefits which Leonie and her group have brought to this campus, there are a number of perhaps more salient or subtle benefits of having Nossal on this campus. One of those includes the attraction of staff to the Berwick campus — that is, recruitment of staff — because here is a special school and they may have kids who could possibly go to this school. So rather than going to another school, perhaps a private school somewhere, there is a possibility that their kids might get into this school. We have found this to be a carrot in attracting others. We have the Berwick government-funded superclinic opening in a month or two. There has also been interest from health professionals who want to work at that clinic. They are asking, ‘What is this about Nossal? We are moving into the area and we are looking for schools’. These subtle benefits have occurred as a result of this. Then there are the other organisational things such as sharing the facilities.

Roger mentioned that we provided facilities in the first year of Nossal’s presence. We may be asking it next year to return the favour, because with the new courses starting our infrastructure is not yet sufficiently developed to accommodate all the students, so we may find that some of our students are having lessons at Nossal.

Mr PAGE — In fact they are. Nursing is running out of our science lab now.

Prof. PITERMAN — Yes. We may find that classes are being run here from 4 until 7 because we do not have enough space over there. There are lots of synergies. I think we have just begun.

Dr KRONBORG — Also, I just think it has been a unique opportunity to have a university working in gifted education with a selective high school. I know one of my concerns about Mac.Rob and Melbourne is that they have not had the opportunity to be working very closely with the university, and across Australia there has not been research done from a selective school from the beginning like we have been able to do here. What was wonderful for us, we thought, was to be able to come in and find out what types of teachers want to come to a school like this and what the benefits are and to actually observe teachers in their teaching, survey teachers at the beginning and look at their attitudes to see if there are any differences at the end of the year. That has not been researched before. We did get some initial funding from the Deputy Vice-Chancellor of education at Monash who supported research and bringing international people here initially too, which was great. As well, Margaret Plunkett and I had a small Monash grant that helped fund the research initially too. We have had support from different areas.

Ms MEATH — Our students are very comfortable on a university campus. Many of their parents have been to university; many of their parents have not. The year 9s go to the canteen. They are very comfortable. They work with the professors. You heard the students say they have NIMS — which is the Nossal Interactive Media Society — meetings where Monash lecturers give up their time to work with our students every Monday at a high level, at a university level. Our students are very comfortable talking to the lecturers and the professors, so there is a naturalness to it.

The CHAIR — Fantastic. We have some questions specifically for Roger, but feel free to contribute.

Ms MILLER — Now I will ask the question! How many of your students are offered places under the equity consideration, and do these students face particular challenges here at Nossal?

Mr PAGE — The equity came in as part of the restructuring of the selective entry network. When Nossal and Suzanne Cory were first proposed we got together with Melbourne and Mac.Rob and put some framework around the selective entry program. It then became a common entry exam, a common entry process. Part of that process was that 10 per cent of intake had to be under an equity component. It is a bit rubbery because we do take a 10 per cent equity component but there are quite a number more than that who are eligible for equity but do not apply for it or who get in above the cut-off score anyway, so they get in without using the equity component as well.

Quite frankly I could not tell you how many there are, but there are more than 10 per cent. As to how they are doing, on the whole we do not see a whole lot of difference in their performance at all, although I suspect, without having any scientific basis for it, that they would be the students more likely to struggle because their background is likely to be less economically sound, perhaps, than that of some other students so access to

resources might be more of an issue for them; their parents might be working longer hours or they might be from single-parent families et cetera.

Ms MILLER — Are there any indigenous children here at the school?

Mr PAGE — Yes. We have one officially, which was a 100 per cent improvement over the previous year! But there are a number who have not declared themselves as such but who are of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background — we can pick them up through our cases and census documentation but they do not actually declare themselves publicly as such. So there may be more than that, but not a huge amount. That is one of our targets.

Ms MILLER — What is your process for admitting students under the principal's discretion? How, if at all, is this discretion used to give access to students who might not otherwise have access to the school?

Mr PAGE — The principal's discretion is a bit of a moving feast. Basically again a 10 per cent allocation is put under principal's discretion. They are students who still need to score above a certain cut-off score in the entry exam, so below a certain point they will not be offered a place at any of the selective schools regardless of how many students we have applying. That is a point deemed by a psychometrician to be the lower level of entry into the selective schools, and below that they would be struggling to perform at the level we would need. It may cover any student above the cut-off score who has been excluded from Nossal because of the 5 per cent rule — as in we have already taken 5 per cent out of their existing school — or they are they are within 5 marks of the cut-off score and eligible to apply for principal's discretion.

In our first year, being new to this, Toni and I offered that opportunity to all the students who were eligible for principal's discretion, which was about 200 of them, and 150 of them applied, which meant then they had to process 150 applications — and people had put in significantly detailed applications. This year we offered it to a more limited range of students — that is, ones that we saw from schools that were either underrepresented or students whose abilities we thought were going to be enhanced by coming to Nossal and based on their scoring and the information we had from EduTest. We offered about 30 people the chance to apply; we selected those after going through a written testing and interview process and made our selections based on what we saw at interview basically. Some of the students who got in scored significantly lower than some of the other students but they got in based on their interview, leadership potential in some cases, social awareness or community responsibility — those sorts of things. We were looking a bit more broadly, I guess, than purely at academic results, but academic results underpinned their option to get in anyway.

Ms MILLER — That fits with your comment earlier about IGAT and the difference between the talented and the achievers.

Ms MEATH — Yes. In the first year in our 10 principal's discretion positions all of them all ended coming with leadership aspirations, and they have all proven that they can develop those. In the second year in filling our principal's discretion positions we were looking for what they could give to the school. They stand out when they come in, and you think, 'They will be right for Nossal'. As to the ones we looked this year, we looked at those who put Nossal as their first preference. That showed they wanted to come to Nossal; it was not a Mac.Rob first, Nossal second — they purposefully wanted to come to Nossal — so we put that into the mix as well.

The CHAIR — That has concluded our formal questions. I know, Leonie, we are catching up with you at a later date, but if there is anything any of you would like to add that you feel has not been covered either in the submission or today — obviously what you have given us by way of submission will be included as part of our considerations — please take the opportunity now to add to that.

Ms MEATH — I would like to say something. I think this model works, and I think for the population of Victoria we need to have more select entry schools. In New South Wales there are over 25 select entry schools. In Victoria we now have four, and two are relatively new. This model provides an authentic choice for many parents to put their highly able students into, so I would like to see more selective entry schools in Victoria.

Mr PAGE — From my relatively limited experience in selective schools, what I really like about Nossal — I was talking a little bit about it on our tour — is that it is not the measurable stuff necessarily, it is not the expected academic results that stand out. But it is the community, the atmosphere and the collegiality of the

students and the support they give each other, which I think was coming through very strongly when the kids were talking. That is the thing that strikes me most here as a school community. I think we can take some credit for it because we have structured and built and aimed to create and provide that, but I think the students have also found that by being amongst a group of like-minded peers they are feeling safe, encouraged and supported to step outside their comfort zone — which for a high-performing kid is a nice thing to do — and that they can actually achieve and push themselves broader, higher and further than perhaps they would have done.

Prof. PITERMAN — I would just like to make a few comments about infrastructure. We are in the midst of a huge growth corridor, as you all well know. This area has been designated as a health/education precinct. That includes Chisholm across the road, Monash, Nossal and other surrounding schools. Transport is clearly imperative. We have been having discussions for quite a while with VicRoads about access from the station across to here. We are concerned about student safety. There has been discussion about the possibility of a bridge across the road to enhance student safety. I think I would like to put it on the record that if we are going to have in this region a community which has a focus on health and education, we need to make sure that the infrastructure is there to support it, particularly transport, especially for the Nossal kids. We see hundreds of them strolling across the road. Clyde Road is going to be widened — more traffic. We want to be sure that hazards are reduced.

The CHAIR — Thank you, and thank you to all for your contributions today. It has certainly been very rewarding for us to hear the work that is being done at this school and also the partnership with Monash University, which is a great model. Thank you for hosting this as well — to you, Roger, and to your team and to Toni and the rest of the staff and students for showing us around. We appreciate that. We will conclude.

Witnesses withdrew.