

CORRECTED VERSION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the education of gifted and talented students

Berwick — 26 July 2011

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Mr G. Swayn, School Council President,
Mr B. Verity, School Council Member,
Ms A. Hermans, School Council Member, and
Mr M. Jones, parent, Nossal High School.

The CHAIR — Thank you for attending here today at this hearing and for the contribution you are about to make. As we have pointed out, this hearing is to look at gifted and talented students. It is part of the Education and Training Committee's inquiry. As we have stated previously but is important for me to state again, the information that you give to us today is covered by parliamentary privilege. The same sort of cover does not apply to anything that is said outside this room. The other thing is Hansard will be recording everything. If there is anything that is incorrect in terms of typographical errors or what have you, there is an opportunity to cover that off with a draft that you will be presented with. We are limited in time. I do apologise for that, but what we will do is get straight into questions. If we could try to be as brief as possible, as I said there will be an opportunity at the end if we have not covered something off that you feel is important to be covered off, to do so. I will kick it off.

I want to find out a bit about the awareness of selective entry schools, because some of the contributors to the inquiry have told the committee that many students and their families are not aware of their ability to apply for selective entry high schools. How did you find out about Nossal and the process for applying for admission to a selective entry school?

Mr JONES — As a parent here and not a council member, we started going on the internet about four or five years ago. We moved back from Singapore and we were looking for any school that in fact was not necessarily select entry but had a program associated with it that would meet my son's needs. We actually bought a house in this area knowing the school was going to be built in this area. We did that three years before the school was opened, so we had a fair bit of confidence that my son would get in. We pushed him in and he happily chose to sit the exam. We were excited. I know I was in Bali at the time with a friend and he had not hit the accept button on the internet. I told my wife to grab his hand and force it! But he chose to come to the school, and it has been fantastic since. We would have a family visit our home about once every six weeks or eight weeks and say, 'Your son goes to Nossal. Our son is having issues' or, 'Our daughter is having issues', 'How did you get in?'. We end up having coffee and fruitcake and sitting down. And that is a regular occurrence.

I have heard all the students here. It is all the same sort of story going on. The biggest word of mouth I think now is from these kids because these kids, as you have heard, do not speak like normal young adults. The other parents from other colleges and public schools in the area come and knock on our door. They find out where we live through contacts, whether friends or through church or something else. That is where they are getting the information. Whereas we were probably proactive getting onto the internet and looking for anything, I think there is still a gap sitting there because otherwise they would not necessarily be asking us. It is interesting if you go into the local Indian takeaway food shop and you open up the Hindi newspaper — there are about three pages dedicated to tutors who will tutor the kids to help them sit the exams to get into the school. There is certainly a network out there but it is not necessarily hitting the broader community.

Mr SWAYN — My experience was — my daughter is in year 10 now, so she was in the first intake — we struggled to find out information about the school. We actually struggled to get the information out of the local school. They were not willing to share that information about the school. My wife was involved and she heard some whispers, so we had to do our own investigation to find the information. Even last year it was the same situation. When the exams were coming up they were not really advertised at the school. There is a SEAL program at that school and it was not advertised to the students that this was on. We experienced similar things. We had parents coming to see us because they knew our daughter had got in here and wanted to know the total experience and what to do. I have met other people who say similar things. They come to us and ask, 'How do you get in there? What do you have to do?'. Because inside the mainstream the school is not really trying to advertise that program.

Ms TIERNEY — I am interested in your previous experience. Were your children in gifted programs or SEAL programs or anything like that at their other school?

Mr SWAYN — Yes, my daughter was in a SEAL program at the other school. I have two daughters. One daughter came here and one daughter has gone to another school. Both had gone through the SEAL program. At the end of the SEAL program — it finished at the end of year 10 — they ended up back in the mainstream and there was no real plan. When my second daughter was going through the SEAL program the level was much degraded. The teaching and the classrooms were not even of the quality of past years, so that is why we looked around for something different — to give her the opportunity to use her talents.

Mr VERITY — I have a son who did year 12 last year. He has just finished year 12. He went through the high achievers program at Berwick Secondary. My daughter started there, and then she came here last year, in year 9 as well. That was a really good program. I think I would acknowledge the work the teachers do in those programs. The kids got a lot out of that. I think some of the things Michelle said earlier about the SEAL program are probably true. You feel like you are a bit set up in a school like that. You are set apart and you are not part of the mainstream of the program. I think those programs are great for kids at certain levels. I think this is another step up in terms of the standard expected of the kids and the stimulus they get from their colleagues. Obviously there are a lot of kids who have a similar motivation in a school like this, and I think that has been a real benefit for my daughter.

Ms HERMANS — My son was not in a SEAL program. He has been to a number of different schools. I have even in his very early years homeschooled him. I knew that he was different educationally. I am a trained teacher myself. We tried a number of different schools. His first school was a very small school, and it had extra things that you could do, special projects, and he would often enter into those and do very well in them and come home all excited because he had won some award. Then we moved and he tried a local Catholic school. There the Principal realised he had other gifted children in the school so he got a small group of them together.

At that stage my son's personality was starting to change because he was really struggling, and when he went into this small group he came home and said, 'Mum, there are other kids like me', and he started to feel normal again. As I said, we went to a few different schools. When he got to year 7 I was concerned about him socially because he does not have great social skills. I put him into a small Christian school thinking it would nurture him and encourage him, but what it did not have was any form of acceleration program in the school. And it actually did not help in one sense because he started to feel very different again and when he had to do a presentation he would say, 'I do not know how to do it because they are not going to understand what I am going to say. I do not know how to put it in a way that will make it easier for them'. He found it to be a real struggle.

When he got in here he totally transformed. I mean, I felt like crying. I wrote a letter to the school. He was so different even on the first day of coming here. He was a transformed boy. He walked taller. He was more confident. He was excited about what he was learning. He made friends. He was around other students who he could talk to. He said to me — he is often on Skype at night and even on Facebook; he uses it as a learning tool — that they will pool their resources. They will be doing a project together and they will communicate: 'What have you looked up? What have I looked up?'. He said, 'If I were in a normal school, nobody would even think to use this this way, but that is the only way we use it.'. They just love it. They thrive on that. Everything is about their education. They come home and discuss with their friends what they have learnt. For me as a mother to watch my son growing in the school and transforming, I just feel like crying. It has just been such a wonderful experience for us.

Mr JONES — I would like to share two things. One is that my son went to a school that did not have a SEAL program. It was a private school. I found that over the last eight years the best way is to get pretty intimate with the teachers. I think in every school he has been in we have been fortunate that there has been one teacher who has been really committed and that teacher has nurtured our son. But at the last school he was at he basically in the last four years just taught himself. He was in a different year at school and he would have to sit an exam. Or if he went to the year 10, because he was in year 7, he was missing out on something in year 7.

One day he went to school and they said, 'You've got to do your exam', because he was doing the year 10 exam. So they put him in a room. During that exam another class came in and wanted to use the room, so he got moved into the computer room. In the computer room he shared the computers. You can imagine an IT-savvy boy is more interested in computers and what the other kids are doing than what he is meant to be doing — that is, sitting his exam. He finished the exam, and he topped the class. But in reality he spent four years without having any teacher; he has taught himself.

He came to this school and he is doing VCE maths. You have met my son. He is sitting there asleep. He is doing VCE maths. He is a year 9 student. He got behind so he is studying here during lunchtime. Some other kids came around and said, 'What are you doing?' and he said, 'I am doing maths'. They asked, 'What sort of maths? That's not the same maths' — they are inquisitive — 'That's different maths'. They had a look and said, 'That's not our maths; that's VCE maths'. He had to admit he was doing VCE units 1 and 2; most kids are a little bit shy about admitting that. And they said, 'Wow'. He was like a hero. He came home, and I overheard

him talking to his mum. He said, 'Mum, at the other school I was the least popular kid. At this school I am popular because I'm good at maths'. And on Skype — when the kids are struggling they get on Skype and get onto him and he runs tutes at home to help the other kids using Skype.

The CHAIR — And charging them for it!

Mr JONES — Understand the difference between the kid who was ostracised for being different — when the teachers are trying to do the right thing by helping them and exciting them, what they are actually doing is making the kid different. To a point — and he has done it — he would deliver class average results. In spelling he would get 17.5. Somehow he knew what the class got the week before and he would get the class average. I know he can give 100 per cent, but the kids are so bright that they are adjusting themselves to the other level so they are not ostracised, they are not different, instead of being able to excel and to be something that they are really meant to be. We saw the same thing. The difference in two weeks was just outstanding.

Ms TIERNEY — That is fantastic. In terms of support for you as a parent, this committee has heard from other parents that they receive little support and guidance in nurturing their gifted child. Has that been your experience? And what information and support, if any, does Nossal provide you as parents in this area? What support generally do parents need?

Ms HERMANS — I would say that as a new school it is an area that is still developing in the school, and there is still a lot of potential for development in that area. For me personally, I have got involved in the school. I have gone on the school council so I could feel more part of it and find out what was going on and contribute something, so I could not really speak for a parent who is not in that situation. But I know that there is a lot of opportunity, and I know there is a lot of talk about how we can bring in more parents and start more parent involvement so there is more communication. I do not feel not supported. With anything that happens in the school I feel that the school communicates to us and lets us know and informs us. We have a school news-sheet that comes out to parents. It is very regular. Teachers make themselves available. Parent-teacher interviews are terrific, and teachers are very friendly; as they are with their students, they are with the parents. We have the opportunity to communicate if we want to, but there certainly is the opportunity for more improvement in that area, which, being a new school, I think will develop.

Mr JONES — Can I make a comment? This is not something that starts at year 9. The third day of prep I got a phone call, 'Please come and see the Principal. Your son is not normal'. I have gone through Asperger's tests, intelligence tests, IQ tests, physio tests, psychology tests, occupational therapy tests — he does not write tests. I have been through all of that. The kid is normal. We had one person who is a behavioural optometrist, and he has given us more help than anyone else in those early years. But this is not something that starts at year 9. Year 9 is where there is a support structure, and for those first five or six years at school — we would start the year at school and we would be going back through the testing all over again. Is he Asperger's? Can we get some other special stuff?

Yes, he is different to the other kids. We accept that. That is not a problem. We would go to the school, and we ended up moving to Singapore. We had a file that big that we gave to the school. It was almost to the point where the school did not want you. The kid who brings the AIM test and everything up off the record — they are almost saying he is a bit of a hassle because we have to put up with a grumpy parent. You get to Nossal, and I must admit it is almost like an absolute relief to say, 'Roger, he is now yours', because they know how to deal with him. That is the difference. There is no stress, but this does not start at year 9. There has to be some support structure for the parents to get there. I met someone at a barbecue recently, and they said, 'Mac.Rob saved our daughter's life'. I think that is the key. These painful years leading up to this — we are here, relief.

Mr VERITY — I think I was going to make the same comment. If I look back over my son's schooling — the bit where we got least support was in primary school. There are SEAL programs and the high achievers program and schools like Nossal and select entry schools that give kids great support at secondary level, but I think in primary there is very little. I think the average primary school is not equipped to handle that. Often in this area a lot of the schools are struggling with kids at the other end. I understand that, and that is appropriate, but that is where I felt really let down — that there was not much for the really inquisitive and curious little kids who want to learn everything. A lot of it was really squashed out of them a bit through primary school. I think part of that is that there is a real need for more subject matter experts in primary school. There are a lot of generalist teachers. There is no-one who can actually give the kids a bit more because there are no maths

specialists and science specialists and artists and all that sort of thing. Those are some of the things that are really important to recognise.

Mr ELASMAR — I will ask one question. How did your child find the move to Nossal High School? What adjustment issues are there for students who enter selective entry schools?

Mr SWAYN — I was going to say that my child came here and changed. There was an adjustment; Wayne talked about it earlier. Wayne Howarth talked about it in terms of your being the no. 1 at the last school or being very high and you come into this school and you are going to be somewhere in the middle range potentially; you are not going to be at the top. But I think they found that was still encouraging because the community itself became the encouragement. There is no top person who is cut down; everyone is encouraged.

The school itself did a lot right at the start for my year 9 daughter coming into a new school just to encourage and build that. I have to say that the programs that were put in at the start at that school were really good. I think we had 98 schools represented; schools with 1 student and some schools with 10 students, so there were groups who knew each other and there were schools from where 1 student came. They did a lot of work here, and I think they have encouraged that and carried it on to the next year. They talk about buddies. I know that one year my daughter became a buddy for a year 9 student coming in, because they are good models and have good ideas to use, and I think they will continue to roll that through.

Ms HERMANS — My son was the only one from his school. The first orientation day the school actually seemed to organise groups a little bit according to where students had come from in terms of location, not in terms of schooling necessarily. He instantly made local friends, whom he still has and with whom we carpool. That has been really encouraging for me as well, because I know that my son has friends who are nearby as well as knowing other friends who live in different places. The school actually set that up itself. It must have taken the time to work out which students to choose and how they would network them. It allowed them to make those friends and encouraged it, and it has been terrific.

Ms MILLER — The literature refers to gifted and talented students. I have a two-part question. The first is: I would like to ask you as parents how you feel or think about that term and, if you can, to comment on your children's understanding of that term. Do they like to be referred to as gifted and talented, or do they like to see themselves as high achievers or advanced learners? We will take the parent perspective first. Be honest!

Mr VERITY — It is a phrase I do not use with my kids, and it is not one that I like to label them with. I just take them as they are and whatever level they find themselves at. I obviously encourage them to get to the level they can. It is not a phrase I am comfortable with. I guess I do not like labelling things too much. I think there is a whole spectrum of people, and there is a risk in putting people into buckets. I guess it is not a phrase I use.

Ms MILLER — How would you — —

Mr VERITY — I would say they are high achievers, highly able students. Yes, that would be my phrase.

Ms HERMANS — I do not have a problem with the term 'gifted' or 'talented'. I know that it has been used to refer to my children in different ways and for different reasons by other people. I have never seen them react to it at all; they just accept it. I think the thing is that certain forms of giftedness sometimes make you isolated because you are a little bit different. Sometimes having a name for it allows a child to realise that because they can do something that is a little bit special, it is okay. It is sort of not a derogatory term. I do not have a problem with that. I think everybody is talented. We all have talents, and what we use them for is up to us. In all of us there is this something that is special, and that can be celebrated. I do not think it hurts to give it a name sometimes.

Mr JONES — I was given the term by one of the testers that he was 'giftedly lazy', and it actually gave us relief, because at that point we had been told all sorts of things. Somebody just summed it up and said, 'No, he is just giftedly lazy'. It was that he was learning his own stuff. You could put him on an island and he would learn. In terms of us, with our peers and how we would communicate to him, we would probably like to use the term 'talented' and say 'Of those who have been given a lot of talent a lot will be required'. We have probably set pretty high ideals to achieve what he can achieve. Currently he wants to be a ski patroller when he grows up.

Ms MILLER — Nothing wrong with that! Are you able to comment?

Mr SWAYN — I would say, similar to Bruce, we have never really said she was gifted. I think we said she is talented and has been given the opportunity to use the ability she has got, and being in this environment it has given her that opportunity not to hide it but to actually excel from that opportunity. That is one of the things about being in the other school; as you heard, you dumb down. You dumb down your results because you do not want to be put out. We are not specifically using any terms like ‘gifted’ or anything like that for my daughter, but we are saying she is using her talents and her abilities the best she can.

Ms MILLER — Do you know how your children feel about that term? You may or may not be able to comment on that.

Mr SWAYN — I think my daughter would agree with what I just said.

Mr JONES — I do not know whether it is the same with all the kids, just from hearing them speak, but what the teacher says and what the Principal says is it, but I do think we have been comfortable in talking about ‘You’ve got talents, and you get the best out of those talents’.

Ms MILLER — So it would appear that a comfortable, motivating, safe environment is encouraging them to excel in their talents, whatever they may be.

Mr JONES — It is not the tall poppy syndrome where you put your head up — it is exactly the opposite. At the school sports I went to I cried. Sorry to take your time, but you have to go to their school swimming sports. I had a chat with my son, who is a good swimmer, and said, ‘What do you want to achieve?’, because the last time he was second best in his school, but it was only a small school, and here there are 200. He said, ‘The demographic group, Daddy, I have already considered. Asians can’t swim very well; I want top four’. So I went to the school, and interestingly the kid who blitzed him was a guy called [REDACTED], who is a Chinese student. He is swimming Geoff Huegill-type times, he is an Asian kid, he is not allowed to train because his parents want him to focus on his studies and he is blitzing them.

The kids down the side are cheering, screaming, all dressed up in their colours — not for [REDACTED], who is winning, but for the girl in the bikini down the end who is jumping in and has got floaties on with a green dinosaur around them dog paddling down the pool. That is not an Australian school. There was a Sikh kid who had his head in a turban. There were Islamic girls who were fully dressed and swimming, and they were cheering those kids. You would have seen the same. They are not cheering the kids who are up the front and winning for their school. I grew up in a high school where the kid who was good at sport got the recognition. It is a really different atmosphere at the school.

The CHAIR — We are going to have to draw things to a conclusion. If there is something that you feel we have not covered that you want to put on the record, I am happy to take that.

Ms HERMANS — Only one thing: I would just like to reiterate what I heard Toni say. The number of schools for select entry in Victoria seems to me to be extremely limited. If Nossal had not come about, we would have only had the option of Melbourne High. I was very grateful that there was something a little bit closer to home that we could send our child to. I know that it is costly, but I think it is something that the Victorian government should consider.

Mr JONES — Primary schools.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for your contribution. Murray, we did hear that there is some work in primary schools as well, so we will take that on board. Thanks for your contribution and thanks for hanging around for us today. We appreciate your input.

Committee adjourned.