

CORRECTED VERSION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the education of gifted and talented students

Berwick — 26 July 2011

Members

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Mr N. Elasmarr
Ms E. Miller

Mr D. Southwick
Ms G. Tierney

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Witnesses

Aswin and Theresa, school captains, year 10;
Praveen, Kavinda, Greg, Stephanie, Emma, Neha and Shevin, year 10 students; and
Genevieve and Nathan, year 9 students, Nossal High School.

The CHAIR — Firstly, I take the opportunity to thank the Principal, Roger Page, for hosting the committee here at Nossal High School. We are certainly very impressed with what we have seen thus far. It is an excellent facility. It was also great to have the students come along on the tour with us today. What we are about to do probably looks very daunting, with all these microphones here. I need to point out that this is a hearing of the Education Training Committee, of which we are members, which is designed to look at gifted and talented students and how we can assist in that particular area.

There are a couple of things to point out. Firstly, no matter what you say here today, do not worry about parents and teachers at the back. Everything you say is covered under parliamentary privilege. It is the same parliamentary privilege that members of Parliament are entitled to. That means that everything that is said in this room is covered, but that is not the case when you leave this room. Feel free to say whatever you like when you are in the confines of this room.

The other thing is that everything will be recorded by Hansard and will be used by us in formulating our report. Because we have so many of you, I ask just a couple of things. Firstly, at any time when we ask the questions, feel free to make a contribution. It does not mean you all have to contribute each time, because there are a lot of questions. Do not feel as though you have to contribute, but there will be an opportunity for you all to say something. What I suggest is maybe you could just signal that you want to say something, then whoever is nearest to the microphone could point the microphone in the direction of the person that is speaking, because we need to cover that all off through Hansard. The final thing I ask is that you state your first name — we are only using first names — every time that you make a contribution. That is so we can identify which individual has made that particular contribution. We will not be using students' surnames at all in any of this. Once again, thanks to all the students for being here.

We will ask a number of questions, which I ask you to answer as you see fit. I will start with looking at your experience before entering Nossal. Reflecting back, what would you see as the biggest difference in being at Nossal compared to your previous high school?

THERESA — My old school, [REDACTED], is about 5 minutes from my house. Coming to Nossal has definitely been a different experience for me. It has provided me with confidence, I guess. In my old school I would not have taken up a leadership opportunity, so coming to Nossal has really opened my eyes. Taking the entry exam was the first step in coming to this school, and I started thinking, 'I will not be smart enough to come to this school'. However, once you come here you realise everyone is equal and nobody is above another, and even though there are others who are smarter, everyone is keen to help you. I definitely do not regret coming to this school; I love it.

NATHAN — My last school was [REDACTED], which was on [REDACTED], and that closed down at the end of last year. Probably the biggest difference is the grounds. Here at Nossal everything is open. There is not much confinement, quite like a university. At [REDACTED] it was the typical classroom, as you would find at a normal public high school. Another key difference is probably how the curriculum is run. Here it is a lot more open, whereas because [REDACTED] was a small school there were not many opportunities. Being in a bigger school probably helps as well.

The CHAIR — I am interested in other students' attitudes to your academic ability at your previous schools. Did you find there were negative attitudes at times towards the sorts of things that you liked doing or the level of, say, your intelligence in certain things compared to theirs? Was that a problem for any of you at your previous schools?

STEPHANIE — At my previous school, definitely if you ever tried to rise above the normal group or if you ever tried to be smarter or different, you were just really cut down. That was the biggest change on coming to Nossal, because everyone here is so accepting. It does not matter whether you are smart, not as smart, better at something or different from the norm — everyone is accepted. At my old school if you tried to be smarter or you were more academically successful than anyone else, you would be cut down.

PRAVEEN — I went to [REDACTED]. I guess one of the main changes was that in maths class everyone used to call me smart and everyone knew I was smart because I would always get good marks, but on coming to Nossal I realised that I was not as smart as everyone else and that I was just a normal person. I guess that was more of a

reality check that I needed to work hard rather than having people telling me I am smart and just getting that result.

The CHAIR — What about teacher support? Did you find at times that you were not necessarily getting the level of support that you needed at your previous school? And how did you overcome some of that?

ASWIN — At my previous school there were certain accelerated programs. They would say to the smarter students, ‘Okay, we will set you this work’ — for example, when we were in year 8 they would give us year 9 work or something. They would set it and sort of let you go, and they would get back to the rest of the class. I guess that was sort of a disadvantage as they were saying we had to do this other work by ourselves and there was not much learning there. That is the main difference once you come here; there are teachers for everything, and they will not let you do things by yourself because they are really supportive of you. The teachers here are sort of like students because they are really friendly and open, and I find it a lot easier to learn that way too.

The CHAIR — In terms of a selective entry school, do you think that would be the best option for you compared to what you could have had if your old school had had all of the support systems and the teaching in place to be able to provide the level of academic support that you have here at Nossal? Or do you think it is better being around a whole group of students who are all like minded?

EMMA — At my school we had an accelerated program that I was part of. I can definitely say it is better to have a whole school than it is to have a selected program. The support from the other students here across the entire school is just astounding, whereas at my old school it was just in the class alone, and I felt very isolated.

The CHAIR — What about some of the others? Does anyone have a comment on that?

PRAVEEN — At my old school we had accelerated programs as well, but attending those programs meant that we missed out on other classes. We were losing out on other subjects to do extra science work, as well as having to keep up with the science work that we had to do with the rest of the class. We were pretty much doing the normal work and doing extra work, whereas at Nossal everyone is doing extra work and it is a lot easier.

The CHAIR — In terms of education for high-ability students in, say, schools that you have all come from, now that you have seen what happens here at Nossal, how do you think the education could be improved in those schools? Looking at some of the things you do here, how could you improve the schools that you have just come from in terms of what they offer?

ASWIN — I think above the technology and all the new facilities that we have at this wonderful school the most important thing is the teaching and the style of teaching — group teaching to the whole class and getting everyone involved. I think that is the most important thing, and that is what you find here at Nossal compared to all the other schools. That style of teaching is probably what we need to implement more in the other schools.

NATHAN — At my old school they were technologically advanced. They had interactive whiteboards in nearly every classroom. However, because it was a small school, it could not get any further. If it had received even a small amount of funding from the government, it probably would have been able to further its facilities enough to make itself independent and end up not closing down.

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

THERESA — Definitely the people. I have to say the people are so friendly. They help you. They are very helpful. If you are stuck on a topic or anything, if you go and ask someone, there will always be someone who will take time out of their studies just to help you out so that you also achieve your best; but then you also help them out. It is not just the students; the teachers are also very helpful. If you are staying back after school or anything, there is always a teacher there who is willing to give you the help that you need with your work.

GREG — I would have to say it is the environment. Because it is so open, you can easily ask teachers for extra work, or if you are having trouble you can easily ask them for help. Because it is so friendly and open you find it very easy to excel past what you would achieve if it was more confined and if you had more limited resources within the school.

KAVINDA — What I found was that not only are most people at this school academically capable but we have a variety of talents. There are other students who get involved in extracurricular activities such as sport,

photography and media. We have a diverse range of talents, and all that makes this a strong school community. Seeing the talents that we have can contribute to many different academic areas. We have a mix of everything.

Ms TIERNEY — What is the biggest challenge of being a student here?

NATHAN — Probably the biggest challenge would be keeping up with everyone else. Especially when you first come here from a different school where you have been in front, when you come here you suddenly find you are behind everyone else. It can be a reality check, and more often than not it gives you the extra edge you need to improve your VCE results.

The CHAIR — Your teachers have told us that they try to personalise education for each student through individualised learning plans. How do you contribute to those learning plans for yourself, and are they effective?

NATHAN — I am ahead in maths, so I am currently doing VCE maths. However, with science, humanities and English I might be ahead but still it is at year 9 level. I have been in meetings with the teachers. I have been asked what I want to do. We have gone through my entire VCE plan, checking it over and over again to be able to best suit the courses to me instead of trying to suit me to the courses. I must admit, feeling like I am a part of my own future is definitely a good feeling.

The CHAIR — Great. Fantastic.

ASWIN — At our school we have a careers teacher, Ms Rackham, and she actually organises pathways and things like that. We have lots of examples of how we are looking to the future. We had a work experience program for year 10s this year, so that really gave us an insight into work in the first place in general. There are lots of other things. There is a VCE careers expo tomorrow night for all the students, and we are just looking at our individual pathways and what we really want to do. I guess at year 10 it is sort of here and there and you are not exactly crystal-clear sure, which is probably a good thing, but we are thinking about it.

The CHAIR — Good. I know it is early days for a number of you now, but is there anything that you would change here in terms of curriculum or the way things are taught? Are there any elements that you would change at Nossal if you had your opportunity to do so? Do not be intimidated by the people in the back!

THERESA — Definitely, because this is a selective entry school it fast-forwards the pace a tad, and that does give us a mountain of homework that we do not generally always complete because we are so pressured. I do think their idea of going fast forward is to give us double the amount so that we learn a lot in a shorter amount of time, but if the pace was slowed down a bit, maybe we could digest the information a bit more.

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

NATHAN — We support the one-on-one laptop program brought in by Labor a few years ago.

Ms TIERNEY — A good program! An excellent program!

NATHAN — It does help the students a lot. From what I have seen, the programs that students have on the laptops include the latest Microsoft Office software. We also have installed on each of the laptops the software to be able to run the interactive whiteboards around the school.

It all fits in together rather nicely. It also means that each of us has our own email address and our own laptop. No-one needs to book a computer lab for a lesson when we have laptops we can just pull out of our bags. It is quite handy.

NEHA — Just adding to Nathan's point, we also have SharePoint, which is where, say, if we are away one day, the teachers put PowerPoint presentations or lesson plans — technology files — on there so that we can access them from home. If we want to revise for exams or something like that, it is also good that we have the technology and can easily access it from the laptops that are given to us.

GENEVIEVE — Elaborating on what Nathan said about the emails, it also allows us to communicate with our teachers more. If we are ever having trouble at night with our homework or anything, we can always email

the teacher and they will get back to us straightaway to answer our questions. It definitely helps. Instead of staying stuck, it definitely helps us to extend ourselves and get work done better.

Mr ELASMAR — We talk about going from one school to a different school and about how students — and I am sure you will all agree — have higher abilities in some subjects than others. How do you cope with this? Do you find it difficult to keep up with the subjects that you do not have high abilities in?

GENEVIEVE — We are offered a lot more support in the areas that we struggle in more. One of my maths teachers said that the things you are good at are important but that the most important things are the things that you cannot do. We are praised for the areas that we are good at, but we are also given much more support to extend ourselves in the areas that we struggle with more, so it makes up for it.

GREG — When I came to the school I was more of a maths student. I had a lot of trouble with English and was not very good at creative writing, but since I came here my English marks have gone up and I am able to compete with some of the better English students. It also helps me in maths; I am excelling in maths more. This year I am doing maths methods, which is a VCE subject. Even if we are weak in a subject, the school does help us to keep up and excel in that subject too.

SHEVIN — At our school there really is no excuse to say, ‘I’m not good at a particular subject’, because there are always teachers and students available. When you are at home teachers are just an email away. I just came back from holidays, so I am about a week and a bit late on work, so on the weekend I emailed my teachers and in about 10 minutes I had a reply on how to get my work — they directed me to SharePoint — so now I am up to date with all my work. There are help and resources readily available, so there really is no excuse to say you are not good at a subject, because there is help.

Ms MILLER — How do you feel about the pressure to achieve highly here at Nossal, and how do you cope with this?

THERESA — I think everyone would agree that I am one of the students who stresses the most. The pressure here is quite mountainous, but you can learn to overcome it. You can learn to devise a timetable and plan out what you are going to do on certain nights or who you are going to ask for help on certain days. You kind of book a day with a teacher and they will help you out and guide you through all your homework, and eventually you will get it done. The key thing is knowing that it is about organisation.

GREG — The school does not really leave you on your own for organisation and everything like that. At the camp that year 10s have coming up — the residential study conference — a lot of the programs we will be doing are aimed at helping us to organise our workload and to get the best out of our results. It will help get some of the weight off our shoulders, so they will help us a little with that if we are struggling.

The CHAIR — I think a little earlier it was Theresa who mentioned to me a student who had a good voice but did not sing at the school she was at because she felt uncomfortable doing that. That student is not here, is she?

THERESA — No.

The CHAIR — Can you relay that story for us? I think it is important to get it on the record.

THERESA — I was talking with a student, and she was saying how back at her old school she felt like singing was not her thing — it was not something she could do — but once she came to this school the students became supportive. A lot of the students can pinpoint your strong points and reinforce them. If you do not think you are particularly good at the drums or something and somebody hears you playing the drums, they will think, ‘You’re really good’, and then everyone will start encouraging you. You start feeling more confident about the way you carry that out. She began singing at the school. She takes lessons here, and she has an amazing voice. Coming to this school has boosted her confidence and has given her the motivation to want to carry out her passion.

The CHAIR — Do you think she felt intimidated about singing at her previous school?

THERESA — I think she did. I think she felt like she was not good enough to do it. Coming to this school has lifted her spirits and given her a sense of, ‘I can sing, and I am actually good’. There really are no obstacles standing in her way; it is just what her mind generates in her head.

The CHAIR — We have come to the end of our questions. You have an opportunity to say something, particularly anybody who has not spoken or has not had the chance to say much, if there is anything you think we should know in this area of trying to support students with high ability and ensuring that you get the best education possible. If there is something about school that you think we have not covered, if there is something about a previous school that you think we should know but have not covered or if there is something about parents — whatever it may be — feel free to say something now if you wish. If not, I would like to thank you all for being part of this inquiry into gifted and talented students. It is a very important area, and your contribution today will certainly help. We wish you all the best in your future studies and careers, and we look forward to seeing where you end up and what you end up doing one day. Thank you very much.

Witnesses withdrew.