

CORRECTED VERSION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the education of gifted and talented students

Southbank — 15 August 2011

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Mr C. Simpson, Principal,
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Mr P. Nucci, Head of Academic,
Mr M. Sargeant, Head of Music,
Mr T. Storey, Head of Dance, and
Mr N. Adam, Head of Student Services, Victorian College of the Arts Secondary School

The CHAIR — Thanks Colin and Hilary for having us here. We are certainly very impressed with what we have seen thus far. Just in terms of the purpose of today, obviously this is part of a hearing process looking at specifically issues to do with supporting gifted and talented kids so as part of your presentation that you'll be giving we're obviously recording everything on Hansard to be used as evidence to compile a report. If there are things that are typographical errors you will have the opportunity to correct them. I do have to point out that whatever's said — and also for the students as well — is actually covered under what is termed parliamentary privilege. So you have the same privileges that we do in terms of being covered by that process in the hearing but anything that is said outside of this particular room and these hearings aren't covered by the same parliamentary privilege. So you can go for it and say whatever you like. So we will open up to you, Colin, and then I will probably have to repeat that again just for the staff and students.

Mr SIMPSON — Thank you to the Committee for coming to see us because I think that the story that the Victorian College of the Arts Secondary School has to tell in terms of the gifted and talented but also the provision of education to Victorian children is a really interesting story. It is an interesting story in terms of Victorian culture and particularly around the arts given the fact that we were established by a premier who was also the arts minister, which I think was really interesting in terms of the support that he gave to a process which was outlined by a state-based, at that stage, tertiary institution. I won't labour on that except to say that what's fascinating is that this state has created one of the most important schools — secondary schools — for dancers and musicians internationally. I can say that after benchmarking us with schools like ours around the world. That is a very interesting thing for us to create here in this state. This school looks after young, talented dancers and musicians as its prime business but it also looks after other gifted and talented children from the areas of circus arts, gymnastics, ballet, which is interesting because we have two dance programs in our school, one which we run and one which is the national trainer. So we've got really interesting contacts with other people. And sundry young sports people who are on a really interesting journey to either compete at the Commonwealth Games or the Olympics and reflect, I think, the Victorian community's interest in sport, the fact that we have a special sport school in the state and we have a specialist arts school that looks after sports children. That is interesting. People would see lots of connections between the two.

I want to start off by also saying that we regard ourselves as a highly professional school. That it is a hallmark of a really outstanding school to be highly professional. We approach that in the way we market ourselves, talk about ourselves and present ourselves. Next to that is the high expectations of not only students but also staff and I think that high expectation environment is one I have seen our students really grow into and excel in. If you examine high performing schools across this country they are all schools that have really high expectations of young people and if I could get one powerful message through today of what I think is important, I think it is really important for us to have higher expectations of young people in our community. It is not just about isolating gifted and talented children and looking for definitions of that it is actually having high expectations of children in general and our work with them to see where those young people might be able to be value added to or develop or grow, depending on their circumstances.

Our school is competitive to get in and that is something we don't walk away. I think it is a really critical component because you can work in an environment where everything is equal, and I know that in a lot of primary schools kids get participation medals for being in a race and schools would tend not to find a winner of that. I think communities have really struggled with that notion. When I first came here I found that whole competitive element of it really quite challenging because we've grown up in a system where we try to make things equal and equitable and fair and I've realised that you can still do that in an environment where there is competitiveness. Certainly in the worlds of dance and music you will not be successful unless you are part of a competitive framework arrangement and it is competitive to get into our school.

We were set up to help identify and assist children with exceptional potential regardless of their personal circumstances. That is why the Victorian Government for 34 years has offered a very generous scholarship to come to our school. It was central to what Lenton Parr, who was the director of the VCA and Sir Rupert Haymore, were aiming to achieve, that all Victorian children should be able to access this school. That is something we really consciously follow because we think it is as relevant today as it was then.

The other element that is really worth saying is that when Minister Kosky was the education minister the school said to her, “We provide to all Victorian children” and her office came back and said, “Prove that.” So the school did benchmarking at that time and one interesting piece of data we found — this is fairly consistent — we have the western region of the education department is one of the regions that is seen as being lower socioeconomic, less opportunity for children in that area, less secondary schools, those types of things. We actually have 70 children from that community join our school each year in our group of students. So that’s something we’re pretty proud of as well as being a provider to the whole state.

Support is required for children in this school. The support comes in the form of the extra money that we get to run our expensive dance and music programs but also support comes in the way that — the attitude we have to the work we do. We have a head of student services and that is a very well planned approach to looking after our students. So we have four senior staff who work with Hilary and I; the Head of Academic, Head of Dance, Head of Music and the Head of Student Services. That is about supporting children and backing them up.

In terms of our disciplines, if you are talking about dance and music you have to start early. In dance, children in other parts of the world are taken into dance training institutions from 5, 6, 7, 8 years of age. Eight is a bit late in some places. You are not going to be a talented young person, as we’ve had quantified by Professor Gary McPherson, who’s done some work with us, from the University of Melbourne — you need 10 000 hours of activity in that discipline to be successful in it. So to become a young musician you have to practise for 10 000 hours of a whole range of different activities to get to that point. It is equally true in dance as well. You have to start at an early age. That is why the school was compelled when set up to request that we operated from the year 7 entry point, which is 12 years of age.

The other element of that that is worth looking at too is that the gifted children benefit from close association with other children, and we see that in our school. Support of the costs, which I’ve spoken about. Our school organisation, which is flexible to make those programs effective and run effectively. We can access distinguished practitioners. We have people that come to this state to do creative work and are pleased to work with our students. So they are excited about working with young dancers and musicians and also that we have an audition process where potential is taken into account as well as talent. There is a degree of talent spotting in that and it is something the school does.

What’s been interesting in the recent era is that we have a community where people really shop for schools now. If you look at the street I live in there seems to be about 11 school uniforms every morning leaving those front doors. People don’t just use the local school now for a number of reasons that aren’t relevant to this conversation. People shop around for schools and we have seen that growth of shopping for schools and people look for outstanding places for their children to go to school. In terms of our work you have probably heard negative things about some selection. Certainly Mac.Rob in Melbourne would traditionally get some criticism from the sector for selecting and taking out the best students. We really are quarantined from that because we are seen as looking after a niche group of students. Every school would have the story of a young dancer or musician who doesn’t quite fit in so the sector tends to support the notion that children are well placed in a school like this rather than being isolated in their other schools.

I have given you this in a document but I wanted to talk about a couple of things students say. One of our music students said, “We don’t waste any time during the day. We don’t have regular assemblies, we don’t have half an hour in a homeroom in the mornings, like at my friends’ schools. We just come to school and get on with it.” I think there is an element of that when working with gifted and talented children. Getting into the activity, not labouring things and getting into it as the student said. A dance student I would like to quote says, “The thing I love most about this school is I can share my passion for dancing with loads of other people.” So it is putting that cohort together as well. Students regularly talk about our flexibility and the way we can deal with things and arrange ourselves. We are responsive and we found that, along with all schools, we were getting not so good data from our year 9 students about connectedness to school and brought in the year 9 integrated program which dramatically increased their connectedness to school. I talked about the value-addedness. If I was going to refer you to any chart in the material I gave you it is that value added material and we see that this blue bar indicates the point from the predicted score, which is indicated in the red line and what our school is value-adding to students and clearly in an environment like this when you have a like group of students working together in an environment with high

expectations and we get incredible value-addedness to our students. They do better here than they would if they weren't here is the way to define that.

I also put in some of our government school performance summary material. I think that that's interesting to see that this environment creates a higher-than-expected response in key areas. I think that is good evidence for the work that we're doing here. I won't labour over that.

I did want to talk about our VCE study scores of 40 or more which over a period from 2002 and earlier are showing great opportunities for students to get extremely good, what are called ATAR scores now for university entry. That is part of our pathway approach. The interesting thing about that is if you were counselling children to get the most outstanding grades in VCE many schools are counselling them out of the arts and into subjects that are seen to be better for getting a higher score, the sciences and the maths subjects and those sorts of things and languages. We teach those subjects as well but what is interesting here is that in the arts we show that we can be sitting amongst the best schools in the state. There doesn't have to be a compromise to a child's objectives in terms of what they want to achieve. They can do it with the subjects they want to do here at school rather than having to put it on hold and do science subjects and pick up subjects, as you hear students pick up arts subjects, when they go to university.

I've put a bit of material in there about how we approach the definitions. We work in a departmental framework and like the definitions of giftedness and talent that the department pursues, although it is problematic in some circumstances. People want to draw the line of what gifted and talented looks like at different points and clearly the response to SEAL programs in schools is something you will look at as well.

What do we think here? We think that gifted students require minimal repetition and that you get on with the work and give them a high degree of quality work to do. I've mentioned high expectations already. Extended and involved tasks over a longer period of day. We have a much longer day than most schools have. For us thorough technical training is part of that day. Daily classes and many hours of practise, high quality performance opportunities, provision of fantastic facilities and resources — which we have been able to achieve — a very well planned program — and we have that in our three areas of academic, dance and music — a safe and purposeful school environment. Children need to be at liberty to be able to learn. They do that in a safe and purposeful environment. An active promotion of cooperative and supportive relationships.

Some final considerations from me that might be of use. The selective schools and specialist schools are one way of addressing this need that many young people have. As are SEAL programs, and they're present in schools and worth exploring and thinking about. The Government's looking at 25 new specialist schools in terms of some of the money committed at the last election. That will, of course, be rolled out which will create opportunities for schools to become one of these 25 schools. I think, for us, the resourcing of children in this area is worth discussing because the resourcing, the providing of the type of facilities, opportunities we have only comes about through the allocation of high levels of funds. That is problematic. These children need to be resourced better. I think, as well, to help communities, not just the resourcing but help communities better identify children with these capacities and I think that's quite a challenge. It's currently mostly well resourced communities can identify children that are gifted and talented. So therefore a normal child with opportunity can sometimes get confused with a child that is gifted and talented. I think there needs to be some good assessment around that about what that looks like. Certainly our processes, as we are running at the moment in both dance and music, are extremely detailed and careful in the way we select and we certainly encourage that.

I think it is also useful, probably in the Victorian community, to help families navigate through those terms because you will find in the sector — I'm sure your research has shown — people don't really have the same definition of giftedness and talent. That is true in parents as well. Parents find it really hard to know how to define their children. That would be a really good part of this process to help people work around what is their understanding of, say, the autism spectrum but family aspiration, desire which is part of that as well.

From our school's point of view we certainly support the model of grouping together of gifted and talented

dancers and musicians to provide the best environment for their development in these very, very specialised, competitive and training-demanding critical fields. What we see from our data is that the grouping together of these young people in this situation massively value-adds. That's proven by our data to the development of those children, not only academically but also in dance and music pathways. Our students leave here and go on to dance and music pathways, whether they're academic or performance based. That's what they go onto. If they don't want to do that we encourage them to seek other really good educational opportunities. If a student in year 10 started saying, "I want to pursue medicine and am not that interested in dance anymore", we would counsel them to take that somewhere else and to work on their academic program in another school that helps them focus on that. I would recommend a broad discussion about what the most appropriate groupings are but certainly in terms of big specialism I think we are a pretty good model.

The CHAIR — Thank you.

Mr SIMPSON — We've got Tim Storey, Michael Sargeant, Paul Nucci is our Head of Academic. Tim Storey, our Head of Dance.

The CHAIR — I just wanted to welcome you all to this parliamentary inquiry and as you are probably aware by now we form part of the Education and Training Committee. We are the Education and Training Committee that is looking specifically around gifted and talented students and what we can do to improve opportunities for this very important cohort of students. So as part of the hearings today the committee will ask a number of questions and feel free to give input into those questions. We'll take certainly the input that you've given today as part of the inquiry and we'll form a report which we will present to the Parliament. Just a couple of things. Firstly, we are recording everything on Hansard, so that becomes part of the evidence today. So it seems quite formal but it's just part of the process but you'll be pleased to know that everything you say today is covered by parliamentary privilege, which is the same privilege we are afforded. So you won't be sued because of anything you say in this room. However, I do have to point out that that is only covered within the room. So if you then wandered out and had something else to say that you weren't happy with in regards to the school or the education department or anything else it is not the same sort of privilege. We do thank you and would just like to point out straight up that we were very impressed in terms of the tour that Colin and Hilary gave us and we think you are doing some wonderful things and we chose to come out here because of the work that you do. Congratulations to you on what you're doing. What we might do is kick it off and I'm going to start in specifically looking at — this probably might be one for you, Colin, in terms of the submission that you presented, and you've mentioned also today, that you cater for all students. In terms of the students that are here at the moment, what proportion would have disabilities or come from, say, a low SES, culturally or linguistically diverse or Indigenous backgrounds?

Mr SIMPSON — That is quite an interesting side of the school. We have an audition process that is very well defined in terms of what we are looking for in terms of students. So we have one student in our school who is defined and is supported with autism...

Ms BLAND — Funded two days a week.

Mr SIMPSON — And there are a number of other students who would fit somewhere on the spectrum. Because they passed the only criteria we have set in that. In terms of Indigenous students, we have three declared Indigenous students in the school in the music program at the moment, but we have had Indigenous students in our dance program as well. I think that our socio economic agenda of making sure the school is available to a broad community means that people feel they can access our school and therefore we attract suitable students from those areas as well.

The CHAIR — So in terms of the entry pathways, what sort of alternate entry pathways do you offer to support those students who experience those levels of disadvantage?

Mr SIMPSON — We make sure the audition process is actually non-intimidatory in the sense that every student who auditions for our school, we aim for them to have a really outstanding experience. The way that the dance staff manage the dance auditions, it is a really fun day for the students. As the day goes

on — because if you are more successful going through the process you stay longer and you get tired — every child that goes through that dance audition has a really fantastic dance experience that day. The same thing goes for the music audition. The panels have, as part of their framework, a welcoming approach and even children who clearly are unsuitable, which you occasionally get in both areas, have exactly the same experience. We back that up with a whole range of tours and open days where we communicate that approach.

In terms of the Indigenous students, we traditionally have used the Wilin Centre at the Victorian College of the Arts as a way of helping Indigenous children access not only their programs there but they access our programs as well. There can be financial support put in place for some preparation as well but there is — it is very important to have a fairly open hearted approach to the Indigenous communities so that they feel they are being welcomed and there are no hurdles put in place for them. That is certainly something we have not only built into our school approaches because we worked with the Wilin Centre but the Wannik Strategy of the Department of Education too is very, very clear about making sure there are no hurdles in the way of Indigenous children to seek success and that is certainly what we have here.

Ms TIERNEY — In your submission it refers to concerns about the term of ‘talented’ as it has been suggested that this term does not reflect the work that is required to achieve highly in a discipline. You also said that you are reasonably comfortable with the terminology of ‘gifted’ and ‘talented’ because that’s essentially what is known in the education system, so to speak. What did you actually mean about the term ‘talented’ and not necessarily reflecting what’s needed?

Mr SIMPSON — Michael might jump in here too. We sent through our school review process, the formal departmental review, last year. Because we are a successful school we manage ourselves and then we have the dance and music reviews that occur each year. Professor Gary McPherson, a music educationalist from the University of Melbourne, helped us with our review last year and he raised the issue of the word ‘talented’ and how it might best be used in a school like ours because the general feeling around this 10 000 hours that it takes for a student to get really good at these things, he raised with us the issue of whether talented devalued the quotient of work that was required to achieve that. He asked us as part of our thinking to reflect on that. I think what you said is exactly true, the word’s useful — the word ‘talented’ is useful because it helps encapsulate things, but he was concerned we don’t use it in a way that didn’t represent that the kids have to work hard to do that.

Mr SARGEANT — To excel at a musical level there needs to be a really solid amount of work that goes on side by side with the talent so therefore you will see in this school students who work really hard, they work on their practise routines and have really good support from their teachers and apply all the knowledge and training they get here. So to have a really exponential pathway, they really develop all of a sudden very quickly and they could easily pass — in inverted commas, pass a student who is more talented but doesn’t work as hard. What you will see in this school is the value-adding — probably you look at the school and say what we do really, really well is those students in the middle area that really embrace the school and work really hard end up with — they surpass their expectations so that it’s that talent.

Ms BLAND — A really talented student can be lazy and there’s so much research that has been done that says you naturally can get to here but then to get to here, to just do that jump, you actually have to do the work and you have to have the mentoring and have to have the technical training. The same thing in the dance program — Tim would have so many students in that area.

Mr STOREY — We are in this audition process at the moment. Auditions are really important. What we haven’t mentioned yet is that talent is about the physiology and that is where the music and the dance programs are quite similar in this school. The reason we exist in some ways is because it’s the physiological aspect of the training of the young bodies that’s really important from an early age in both dance and music. So it’s how their bodies are put together and training those bodies and educating those children from a young age that’s actually going to develop the talent that we see. I think that’s a really important aspect too.

Ms BLAND — We see that in the sporting world, don’t we? If you don’t get the correct technical training...

Mr STOREY — From early on...

Ms BLAND — The habits that your body will get into will mean it is virtually impossible to move you.

Mr SARGEANT — Gary gave this presentation a few nights ago and he spoke about that it was just the fact — it is interesting, it is a bit controversial actually, he was saying it is just the 10 000 hours that Mozart, yes, he was a prodigiously talented musician and composer, but the amount of work he'd been subjected to and the amount of work he did and the amount of training and was involved in really was — equated to someone who has done a PhD or something by the time he was 10 or 12 or something like that. Yes, he was incredibly talented, but an enormous amount of work. Hilary and Colin and I had this discussion about there are obviously students who have a real music talent, just like someone can hit a ball or catch a ball and some people can't but — so there is a real predisposition.

Ms BLAND — Perfect pitch.

Mr SARGEANT — There is a real talent shown in music but it is then how that is applied in the three-way partnership of student, teacher and home support — family.

Mr STOREY — There is a lot of research on the body now and the brain and how the two connect and the student's make up and how you develop that and it is really important that in a specialist school we are really current with what is going on. I tend to think that the sports have been ahead of all of us in terms of their research and development and we are trying to come and study with that as best we can.

Mr ELASMAR — Can you outline how the academic programs and other programs at the school operate?

Mr SIMPSON — I will ask the other senior staff to jump in as appropriate. We structure the day, for want of describing the great detail of it, they have half a day — a long half day in academic and a long half day in their specialist area. That keeps them at school from anywhere from 8 in the morning until close to 6 in the evening. We basically flip through those two activities. So the way the school is structured Paul runs our academic program and it is distinct from what is happening in the dance and music programs and the children flip flop through those over the course of the day. We have found that that is a really good way of developing both areas. It's also been a particularly good way of outsourcing our standing academic program to others as well.

Mr STOREY — I have been in schools all over the world where they have timetables that really don't work for specialist students and I haven't seen one that is better than the model that we have and the few that I have seen that are good tend to reflect the same model that we have where we have large blocks of time on the specialist area followed by a large block of time on the academic programs. I know that's really what our timetable does. It works very well for us.

Ms BLAND — Just to explain it in a really simple way, if you take 9 o'clock this morning from, say, for example, 9 to 10 there might have been a year 8 maths class that had students that were in our dance program in it, in our music program. They might be students also that we provide the academic program for. Halfway through the day those students will all separate and go into their training and the students that were in training in the morning would then be in the afternoon doing their English class together or their science class together.

Mr NUCCI — And in terms of the academic we deliver a curriculum or a program that places the learner at the very centre of learning. A curriculum that takes into consideration our vision and values and of our community. So therefore our vision and values are that we are an arts-based community and a curriculum that prepares students for change, to become leaders in their own field and to change and lifelong learning. So basically when we deliver the academic subjects it is within this understanding of our shared vision and values.

Mr SIMPSON — If you look at the type of qualifications that the children are achieving, all of our year 7 to 10 students are doing the Victoria Essential Learning Standards. They are doing VCE and VET studies.

VET in dance and music. We also have what is essentially our arts certificate on top of that. Our students also leave with a very highly sought after VCASS dance and VCASS music certificate as well which is transportable in those fields. Our students are essentially extremely well qualified when they do VCE. We teach VCE music — I like to say we teach VCE music on steroids. So it's a very deep and detailed program that easily meets the requirement of VCE, as you want to, because you want the children to get the final school certificate, but it has so much added in it to program them for those pathways as well.

Mr SARGEANT — The feedback from students going on to tertiary is that there are parts of their tertiary program, or lots of the tertiary program, that actually is not at the standard of what we provide here. So it's a significantly developed specialist program.

Mr SIMPSON — To contextualise that, when the school was first set up our students used to go straight into second year. So they would skip first year after they went through our school.

Mr STOREY — There are still a number of universities still offering that interstate.

Mr SARGEANT — I disagree with that simply because of socialisation. I think in terms of giftedness and talented it is better off to develop a broader study over that same period of time and so in other words get the most out of your time at secondary school and tertiary education and so therefore you develop — you have a formal structured program for as long as you can. Obviously there are exceptions.

Mr STOREY — It depends on the child too.

Mr ADAM — One of the things we haven't said is that we're also giving the students the chance to change their minds about what their direction might be. If they come in, of course, with the idea that they want to be professional dancers and musicians when they leave and what do we know about teenagers; they may or may not stick with that. They wouldn't be human to go through the years in our program and not once think, "I could be a physiotherapist. Am I sure I want to do this?" So we have those conversations.

Mr STOREY — Good background for a physiotherapist I reckon.

Mr ADAM — There is lots of ways to carry music through your life.

Mr SARGEANT — I think to support Neil in what we do here and the discipline required to get through this program successfully will set work habits up — lifelong work habits so they can transfer those work habits to be successful in other fields. There is no doubt about that.

Mr ELASMAR — Do you have many students who are gifted academically in addition to their abilities in addition to dance and music and if so how do you provide for the students and do you provide individual learning plans for each student?

Mr NUCCI — As I said earlier, we place the learner at the centre. Earlier Colin mentioned that we see ourselves as a high performance school. What we mean by that is we see ourselves as significantly embracing these standards, the learning outcomes of each student. What is difficult is it is difficult to measure this data alone. You have to look at what research tells us. What we find is that if we target the quality of teaching — that's what we do, we target the quality of teaching for our students and make it student-centred — what we do is we find that that has a direct impact on the level of their learning. So basically it is — in teaching and learning — we target this in three areas: teaching and learning; performance and development amongst our teaching staff; and the third one is the leadership. Colin was mentioning some of the routine things we do in distributing leadership. We are on the floor, we are being seen and we listen and hear and we take advice but in terms of teaching and learning a big one is that differentiated instruction. We push differentiated instruction. To do that we push formative assessment more so than summative assessment. In other words we use assessment to inform, the multiple forms of feedback to inform the teacher how well they are teaching and how well — so we're not just data driven.

It is hard to measure a lot of our success. Our successful students get called up into performing art groups

before the actual results come through and sometimes they're hard to measure. Equally our academic program, we service the needs of the Australian Ballet School and a lot of other external providers. So that what we can mention is our quality of teaching and if we target differentiated learning and use formative assessment as a form of informing us, that's where we start increasing and therefore then we can target the learner in the middle. We make programs available for the differentiated instruction.

Ms BLAND — We accelerate our VCE so everyone in year 10 can do a higher unit so all those students have got that opportunity but we've also got literacy and numeracy support for students that need extra support in terms of individual tutorials. So there's that. The use of technology — the staff regularly use technology. They email the students all the time and I've found that has actually really helped students have individual targeting.

Mr NUCCI — The other point I would like to make is that leadership part, there is one very strong aspect of our leadership at the moment under Colin's direction is a term of collective efficacy. We all feel — everyone gets the feeling that they have a say in the direction of the school and they become really a part of the school community and want to push that feeling of being part of this school. So that helps a tremendous amount. When you are looking at targeting the quality of teaching and putting the learner in the centre of it all, having that collective efficacy, aiming for high results, using multiple forms of feedback and using formative assessment practices all help. We champion all of that.

The CHAIR — I might just keep things moving if I could. In terms of the early years we received a number of submissions talking about the need for more support at the primary school level; do you agree with this, that there should be some programs directed at the primary school and how would you go about doing that in the areas of music and dance?

Mr SARGEANT — Music should be — I would direct the committee to Richard Kiel. It is really important — the state of music education in the primary school — in the primary schooling in the government system at the moment is very poor. The only reason that a school will have a good music program is if that school council has deemed that it is of high enough importance and therefore will either put funds — collect funds or put a program together to have a teacher there. I think if it is something that this committee could do in terms of making a real impact on music education in the primary levels it's very, very important. The state of that education in the government sector is poor.

Mr ADAM — We're auditioning today 50 kids from all over the state and the city for the places in the vocal singing program. The ones who are auditioning for year 7 have either been to primary schools where there is a fantastic program and they come extremely well prepared by the teachers inside the school and are well looked after or come from schools where there are almost no music program and the parents have had to go out seeking on the open market what is there. What is on the open market is very variable. The extent to which those kids have been prepared, you can pick it by the suburb.

Ms BLAND — One of the things we have talked a lot about is how can we, as an organisation, be able to provide effective teacher training for people out there. Can we be providing, as a centre of excellence, some certificates for the primary school teachers out there who are having to do it?

Mr SARGEANT — Did you see the program on singing last week on the ABC? This woman from Lake Boga — it was a very inspirational piece of television — and both Gary McPherson and Richard Kiel — a woman in higher education and music in Queensland were involved in their comments on the sort of teaching that was going on way back in the '50s, I think it was, and the reaction and the reflections of the people who were involved in that. It was just very strong television.

Ms TIERNEY — That is interesting the point you have just made about other capacity potentially in terms of this being an opportunity for primary school teachers. Colin mentioned when we were going around having a tour of the school that there is some issues about attracting teachers and teachers that have got experience and qualifications that are really needed by the school. I think it is important that we actually get that on transcript now in terms of what those issues are. Also, what are the specific characteristics that a teacher of gifted and talented students, you believe, needs to have?

Mr SIMPSON — I think it is worth repeating that certainly we, as a select entry specialist school who are dealing with children who have great capacities in dance and music, who also happen to be highly academic, because there is a great parallel between their talent in dance and music and their academic level, and that is something we have been able to harness for huge success but it has always been there, dancers and musicians are also mostly highly academic people as well. The ability of the Victorian Institute of Teaching to provide flexibility in the hiring of teachers is so important to a school like ours. Typically dance educators who will have outstanding dance careers and great abilities as dance teachers will not have teaching degrees and our view would be they shouldn't have and shouldn't need to because they have been pursuing very active careers and schools like ours need to be able, in a fairly flexible way, to hire dance and music staff that don't typically meet the norms we expect in other schools. You will find in schools like ours, whether it is Maribyrnong and the sports component of what they are doing, it is fairly high on our agenda we can achieve those hirings. If the system got too strict on hiring and locked those individuals out of schools it would only be to schools like ours loss.

In terms of the type of people in a school like ours, we attract — interestingly our academic staff tend to have all of their strengths as academic staff but tend to have a love of the arts and that is why they are attracted to a school like this one. You will find the most exciting part of the dance and music teaching is where those people genuinely love the craft and love working with young people to help them develop in that direction.

Mr STOREY — If I could come in there and say what we are actually training here isn't just bodies, it is artists. There is something really special about putting an artist into our school, someone who has had a fabulous career as a ballerina internationally or in Australia and also who's worked and choreographed and done all those sorts of things and about putting a person like that with our children and seeing what happens. I think that's really important and we should never undervalue it. I think our school has always, and I hope will always, continue to actually help those people who come from the industry to make that transfer over into teaching kids. So we do have a mentoring program for some younger people who actually continue to still dance — to still work in the industry and also to come in and teach our kids. We actually give them experience in working alongside of older, more experienced teachers. In a specialist school one always needs the opportunity to bring in the artist to work with the children and I think that really is vital.

The CHAIR — In terms of sort of carrying on from that, in terms of the qualifications side, what kind of qualifications do teachers have here and what sort of training should be provided for pre-service teachers to ensure teachers can effectively cater for gifted and talented kids?

Ms BLAND — It's interesting, isn't it? It is quite different in this whole debate about what is gifted and talented and in terms of what — if we listen carefully to what Michael and Tim are saying they say it is extremely important for our own musicians and dancers to have the opportunity to be taught by professional musicians and dancers and their actual qualification in terms of a piece of paper is not relevant. What's relevant is their industry appearance and their high level technical training and experience. Obviously they need to be able to communicate and teach...

Mr STOREY — Could I give an example? We have a young teacher — his name is Tim Harbour. He had a fabulous career with the Australian Ballet — he was one of our alumni. He went to the Australian Ballet School and was in the company for many years. He's just retired. Once he retired he went into choreography and since then has choreographed a work with the Australia Ballet Company and started teaching — he has been teaching for quite a number of years. He went to the Victorian College of the Arts and he got himself a teaching diploma, which was like a year-long course in which he looked at things like adolescent health and training methodology and things like that.

Ms BLAND — Planning lessons and planning training.

Mr STOREY — He has now been teaching with us for a couple of years and is now almost on full-time with us. He is still working in the industry. He has a work to choreograph with the Australia Ballet Company next year. It is that kind of person that we need to teach our kids, who has all of that. That's really what we're looking for.

Ms BLAND — We have the same in music. What our job as leaders in the school to do is make sure we have the quality assurance. Make sure we help them with the areas that they're not so great in. Neil will help them with how to deal with an adolescent angst issue or how to deal with parents, those things. We are almost going back to that, sort of, master-apprentice model if you look all those years ago.

Mr ELASMAR — Does your school, Colin, run professional development programs for staff members about gifted and talented children?

Mr SIMPSON — We have as part of our normal professional development. We haven't focused on that, no, but in terms of the range of things we do with our staff and by the nature of our school we work those issues with our staff. However, we've been working on particularly — Tim might add to this as well — we have been actively challenging ourselves about the way we teach. Paul has spoken about the academic program where we are trying to use the best thinking in terms of instructional practices coming through our academic program. Neil thinks about the best type of way of delivering contemporary services to students but I think in these two areas, the dance and music areas, there has been incredible initiatives to really challenge what does contemporary dance training look like for these young, gifted children. We actually think that this is validated by our benchmarking. Our dance and music programs and the type of instruction we are using and the type of people we are using to teach it, is actually the forefront of what's being done in the world.

Mr STOREY — If I could answer with a current example. Myself and my head of ballet are going over to Washington DC in October to the International Association of Dance, Medicine and Science and the dancers — because we think it is important for our professional development. I don't think there is a more current and cutting edge way of looking at dancers.

Ms BLAND — In music, for instance, when they have done some work on Kardi, which is seen as a cutting edge program, you have run a full PD program for the staff on the Kardi method.

Mr SARGEANT — Next year one of our staff members has said there is a woman coming over from Hungary to visit Australia next year and I am very keen to get her into the school to have a day with staff only, like, just — of course run sessions with students but to run sessions with staff.

Ms TIERNEY — What are the challenges that teachers face in teaching talented and gifted students?

Mr STOREY — One of the things is high expectations. We want high expectations of our kids and these are talented and gifted kids so we need to really push them, we need to challenge them. That means we have to be up there and really good. If we are not the kids will know. We have to have the best people.

Mr SARGEANT — The challenge is as well that you have these expectations and students work really hard in the school. As Colin said, it is easy to say they do half academic and half specialist but it is really hard and to make sure that those students have got a balance in their lives which remain — they're maintaining healthy balances within their lives, is really important. If I talk to them about what they did on the weekend and they say, "All I've done is practise.", I'm concerned.

Ms BLAND — Keeping the health and welfare program that we have as well for these young people and actually giving them the opportunity to think outside of their art form too. Also realising that they are part of a community.

Mr STOREY — That's what's so wonderful about having dancers and musicians, and not just that but since we got the gym students and the circus students. It is such a rich environment for our kids.

Ms BLAND — So our job is to also think about our curriculum provision in terms of what can we do to keep these students on track but also keep them and provide — give them the opportunity to be healthier members of our community when they leave school as well. That is really important for all of us. It is actually not just about the whole gifted and talented, it is also about them leaving school to be healthy members of the community.

Mr ELASMAR — So supporting students. How does the school support the emotional and welfare needs for the gifted and talented students?

Mr SIMPSON — I have been thinking about this a lot lately. I'm starting to think of our school a bit differently, not just focussing on the outcomes academically or the outcomes dance or music pathways. We have attended to a lot of that. Our school, like all schools, works really hard to make sure we are delivering the best we can to students. I am trying to think about the experience a child has everyday. We are focussing on what a gifted and talented child needs every day. I think the fundamental is that we want those young people to have a really outstanding experience every day. They want to be challenged and have high expectations but they also want to be happy, healthy and feel they are connected with the adults in their life. I have started thinking about it much more broadly than that. It is about the context that schools can create. I think that probably in this age we have lost that a little bit. I think we could focus a lot more about what is a school as an institution in our community? What are our expectations of it? What are our demands of it as an instrument to make this a better place to live in? That part of that in our school is about supporting the dance and music programs so they can be outstanding and we just let them off the leash and they go. Then it is up to people like Neil, who is in charge of our student services, to work with them and say, "We are off the leash here but how do we keep this a healthy, happy school." And it is up to Paul to say, "You people are muscling in on my territory and Colin demands great academic results as does our community." It is orchestrating the whole thing together. We don't think enough about schools in their entirety. We obsess about what the Good schools' web page says and all of those things. We can afford to think of schools much more broadly than that. If we do that then the needs of the kids in that school can be met whether you plug in gifted and talented kids or whether you plug in lower socioeconomic kids. It is irrelevant if all of those parameters are right.

Mr ELASMAR — Supporting parents, many Victorian parents have told the committee that they receive very little support or guidance and nurturing in supporting their gifted child.

Ms BLAND — They haven't interviewed our parents then, have they?

Mr ELASMAR — What sort of support?

Mr SIMPSON — We supply a great service to the parents in terms of induction to the school and working here. This could be useful the type of advice that you can start to generate. I still think that there is a real misunderstanding of giftedness and talent in the community and how you can actually get a child defined and supported and get them in the right educational setting. How many of us have had conversations when people just loosely define their kids as gifted and talented. I think what I would be looking for, which would be very helpful for us, is a bit more of a construct so we can understand what that looks like. That's how we then develop advice for parents. I have been running meetings here where parents will say, "My child is incredibly gifted and talented, Colin, what are you going to do for them?" I think schools can talk about what we do generally, the work we do with a broad range of students, but it's in part helping parents understand what does gifted and talented look like. As I said, where it fits into the autism spectrum, all those elements that are in play as well.

Ms BLAND — Sometimes our parents need to be told to stop putting pressure on their child and we are actually the adults that have to tell the parents that at times.

Mr STOREY — It's true.

Ms BLAND — We have to say to them, "Enough is enough" and, "Your child needs to make some choices here because otherwise they will get burnt out."

Ms MILLER — The committee understands that VCASS has a Memorandum of Understanding with the Victorian College of the Arts. What benefits or opportunities does this relationship provide to the students?

Mr SIMPSON — That is a supremely big question. We were born out of that institution and we, through decision of government — and it was a fantastic decision — it is modelled on schools around the world but

I have been saying to people lately, schools like ours only make sense in terms of the partnerships that follow. So the best partnerships that any school is dealing with gifted and talented children can have is with tertiary institutions and trainers and that's where the value in that is. We have a memorandum of understanding now because it kind of maps out the relationship for the future but the relationship has been there because we used to provide all of our students to them. Now we have a lot of competition for our students. I think the simple answer to the detailed one is that schools like these, whether it is us or Mac.Rob or Melbourne High or any school dealing with these kids, they make more sense when they have a partnership in education and training to follow because they are not done at year 12. They are ready to go to some really big challenges when they leave us. So what do those tertiary challenges look like for them?

The CHAIR — We've come to the end of our part of the hearing for all of you. So thank you very much for your input today. Certainly you'll be kept up-to-date with how we go and hopefully we'll have a final report at some point...

Mr SIMPSON — Into the new year sometime.

The CHAIR — Yes.

Mr SIMPSON — I think we should hand over our students to you.

Mr STOREY — I think it's interesting you are here when we are actually auditioning.

Witnesses withdrew.