Victorian Affiliated Network of Gifted Support Groups

- **What programs do you currently provide for gifted students?**

VANGSG is not a support group in an individual sense and therefore we do not provide 'programs', such as information seminars or children's workshops. The Network covers the whole state and is run by volunteers. We do support the individual area groups and we do assist families in need to access these groups and to start their own groups, particularly in rural areas. We provide parents or teachers who contact us, access with other gifted families or teachers working in the gifted field; referral to counselling and assessment; access to experts in the field both here in Australia and overseas; information and resources, such as curriculum and program development; and access to advocates. We also supply information about the gifted provision in individual schools across the state.

Currently we are unaware of any school in the state that provides for individual differentiated curriculum for gifted students in the classroom as recommended by the Victorian State Education system. We will be very interested to read any submissions from schools who purport to provide for the "individual needs" of gifted children.

In 2001, VANGSG wrote it's submission to the Senate Inquiry on behalf of the six existing gifted support groups in Victoria. They were:

- Yarra Plenty Gifted Support Group (YPGSG)
- Parents for Gifted Children (PFGC)
- Maroondah Gifted Children's Parents Association (MGCPA)
- Bayside Young Active Minds (YAMS)
- Parents Association for Children of Special Ability (PACSA)
- Western Information Network for Gifted Students (WINGS)

Of those six groups, only two still exist, MGCPA and YAMS, now named Gifted Support Network (GSN). Both of these groups are intending to write submissions of their own.

Currently, there are also several informal groups that meet for support or provide information for gifted families. They are "The Big Bang Coffee Club" in Moonee Ponds; the Casterton and District area group; the Casey/Cardinia group and a private gifted playgroup. There is also a group that is run as part of the CHIP Foundation in Geelong.

From 2001 to 2011 there were several other groups that started in Victoria and are now no longer operating. They were in:

1. Ballarat
2. Swan Hill
3. Mildura
4. Romsey
5. La Trobe Valley
6. Warnambool

These groups all provided family support, information seminars and children's activities. They are no longer operating due to the huge demands placed on the volunteer group coordinators by the needs of the members and the conflicting demands of the needs of their own gifted children. The amount of stress in a gifted family is often equated with the amount of stress in a family of a disabled or chronically ill child. However, there is one important difference. In a gifted family, it is most likely that all the children will be affected by this condition. It is therefore most unlikely that gifted groups can continue operating if the management workload is not able to be passed on to other families as required.

As a part of the networking of VANGSG, we have remained in contact with families from those groups that are no longer operating and with individuals in various areas across the state. This is partly to support those families and to keep in touch with news about gifted issues and partly to provide a contact person in an area for new families who contact VANGSG. This is especially important in regional and rural areas because there are no formal gifted support groups except in Melbourne.

- Your experiences and issues surrounding these programs (including for example responding to negative attitudes towards giftedness)
- The experiences of students participating in these programs

Our experience (through our network groups) in running programs is that it is extremely beneficial for the gifted students who attend. However, these programs are run on a shoestring budget by volunteers and often against strong opposition. Please see report on the Daedalus Program attached.

These programs are worth the effort but are no substitute for differentiated curriculum in schools. Anything that we have been able to do, schools could do as well as part of their study design. They just don't want to do anything different.

The Daedalus Program was axed and the "Able Learners" Program was substituted. This is not a program for gifted students but a holiday program for anyone who wants to attend. Partly as a result of the behaviour of the coordinator of this program, the PACSA group was forced to disband. The Committee of this group was not prepared to run any programs where the coordinator could attend and cause upsets or political or public liability problems. The PACSA group is in recess until the coordinator moves on.

"Responding" to the negative attitudes towards giftedness usually means leaving the school or workplace; keeping your mouth shut and trying to cope with it; moving away or becoming physically and/or mentally ill.
Your views about how the concepts of 'giftedness' and 'talent' should be defined

Please see Gifted Education Essay 1 attached.

Mechanisms to improve the capacity of teachers to identify and adequately respond to gifted students

Teachers cannot identify gifted students even if they are trained because they are looking at the gifted student through the lenses of the education system. Parents can and do identify their gifted children from early age and are very accurate in their assessment.

If you want to find gifted children, ask the Infant Welfare nurses, doctors, psychologists and welfare workers to nominate them.

"Adequate" response requires teachers to be trained and willing to change the system, that is, to change what they normally do all day. It also requires a system that can identify "anti-gifted" teachers and make sure that no gifted students are in their care. The mechanism to do this is very simple. Start talking with the parents of gifted children. They know the problems for their own child. There is no one-size-fits-all program but there is a one-size-fits-all action plan: LISTEN, LEARN AND CHANGE.

A Bright Future?

In 1996 the Department of Education wrote the Bright Futures Policy. This Policy set out the framework for gifted education in Victoria. I was on both the Working Party for Program Development and the Working Party for Professional Development. While the Policy that resulted was a political document, it clearly states a definition of giftedness that recognises the differences and special needs of gifted children. The policy also defines the reason for differentiated curriculum and gives specific examples for teachers to use, such as enrichment, extension, acceleration and mentor programs. The problem has been an ongoing lack of understanding of those working in the field, combined with a misinterpretation, either by accident or intent, of the terminology and definitions of gifted education. If the definition of gifted moves from an exclusion model as defined by the DOE (1996) and Gagné (1997) to an inclusion model as defined by Braggett (1992) and Morelock (1997) because of some fear of elitism or misunderstanding of giftedness, then provision for those generally defined as gifted will become merely some sort of enriched environment for all, using methods such Bloom’s Taxonomy of Educational Objectives (1964) and de Bono’s Six Thinking Hats (1985) and Gardner's Multiple Intelligences. (See Attachments Multiple Intelligences and Theories of Intelligence) There are signs that the inclusion concept is fostering the scrapping of the term gifted in favour of the term talented, then directing efforts towards talent development - ‘a sort of create your own gifted child model’. (Ronvik, 1993) There needs to be some agreement on the definitions of major constructs, the terms giftedness and talent, and goals and principles as a starting point for a foundation of a good conceptual framework. (Gagné, 1997)
‘The students who should be in gifted programs are those whose mental abilities are advanced to such a degree that the regular school program simply does not meet their needs; anything else is politics... **We must require every workshop consultant, every conference presenter, every journal contributor to distinguish more carefully between that which is good teaching for all students and that which is uniquely suited to the gifted and is both unnecessary for and impossible of accomplishment by students of lesser ability.**’ (Ronvik, 1993) As one enlightened man once wrote, ‘Recognition of inequality, of human diversity, only refers to specific traits, abilities, behaviour patterns; its does not imply general superiority or inferiority.’ (Eysenck, 1975, p23) The recognition of giftedness as such an inequality is necessary before any provisions can be made that are relevant to those gifted children who, by the extent of their differentiation from the normal population, require gifted education.

**References:**


- **Any broader implications for school communities arising from the education of gifted students**

We can only say that if the education system changes to include providing for the needs of our gifted students, we will all be richer for the experience. You must do this simply because it is the right thing to do.