26 June 2011

Education and Training Committee
Parliament of Victoria

Inquiry into the Education of Gifted and Talented Students

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this Inquiry.

I have two daughters, one of whom has separately made a submission to the Inquiry. Both have been assessed as gifted.

I will not try to address all of the areas being considered by this inquiry but rather will focus on one issue: early entry to school in appropriate circumstances.

Our family’s experience suggests that early entry can be a wonderful way to ensure equity of access to quality educational choices for gifted students. However the current process for seeking early entry in Victoria appears to be ill-defined and not advertised to parents. I recommend that clear guidelines for early school entry be set and made public on the Department’s website.

Current Situation

- While early age entry is listed as an option on the Department’s website [www.education.vic.gov.au/studentlearning/programs/gifted/schooloptions/earlyentry.htm](http://www.education.vic.gov.au/studentlearning/programs/gifted/schooloptions/earlyentry.htm) information is not included on the procedure for applying for early age entry.
- Our family’s experience suggests that there is a danger that eligibility for early age entry may be arbitrarily applied, for example by restricting it to children who turn five by a defined date (before 30 June) rather than focusing on the key criterion which is the potential for long-term educational disadvantage to the child if early entry is not allowed.
- Again, in our experience, there seems at times to be a strong bias against early entry among officers of the Department which conflicts with the statements on the Department’s website that:
Researchers have found that as a group, students who enter school early, show no evidence of being more at risk for adjustment difficulties than students who enter at the ‘usual’ age.

Gifted and high potential children who are allowed early entrance display academic gains on average six months ahead in their achievement as compared to their age-peers. In addition, both the socialisation and self-esteem of the children improve slightly.

Case Study

The possibility of early entry is at least better advertised than when I commenced the process in June 2006 when my daughter’s kindergarten advised me to look at the possibility of early school entry (this was put forcefully in terms that she really shouldn’t return back to kinder the following year!). At that point I couldn’t find any guidance on the procedure for early entry on the Department’s website.

I went to meet the principal of the local primary school to get her advice on any options or enrichment activities she might be aware of. After meeting my daughter, the principal suggested that early school entry should be pursued. I also had an informal assessment from an educational psychologist recommending that early school entry explored given that my daughter was performing at up to three years ahead of her age level.

I thus wrote to the Department (Northern Metropolitan Region) to inquire about the procedure for seeking early entry, specifically asking the Department to review an independent psychologist’s assessment in Term 4 to see what would be the best course of action for my daughter.

The response I received was a letter stating that requests for early age entry to school would only be considered for children who turned five before 30 June (which my daughter didn’t).

I followed up with a letter expressing concern that such an inflexible application of policy was not fulfilling the Department’s duty to consider each individual child and asking the Department to consider an independent psychologist’s report. I also expressed our desperation at the lack of options (by that time I’d contacted eight other pre-schools in the area and none of them seemed likely to be able to meet my daughter’s needs, even if she could get a place).
Again I received a rejection from the Department stating that there was no evidence of long-term educational disadvantage.

If I’d had any other options I probably would have given up then, but I went ahead and obtained an independent psychologist’s report and sent it to the Department. It contained an unequivocal recommendation that not allowing early school entry would result in my daughter suffering long-term educational disadvantage. In November the Department granted approval for her to start school.

This was a stressful and upsetting process that could have been avoided by a clear procedure made available to parents.

Thankfully the story has a happy ending. My daughter fitted into school extremely well – despite her young age – and is now a happy, well-adjusted student. At times it’s still been a challenge to work with the school to meet her needs, particularly in maths – but it would be so much more difficult if she’d been held back when she was intellectually ready to start school in order to stay with her age peers. She’s found her own solutions – for example, tending to socialise at playtime with children her age or younger but working with older children on school work in class. Early entry has been very much the right decision for her.

I couldn’t help but consider what it might have been like when, at the age she was ‘supposed’ to start school, my daughter was reading long fantasy novels and working on her times tables. I wondered how she – or her teacher – would have coped with such disparity in the class.

Gifted children are children first and foremost. They deserve the chance to learn and develop. Being trapped in an environment where they are not provided with the opportunity to learn is nothing less than soul-destroying.

For children who need it, early entry should be a clear, well-advertised process administered with the single guideline of the best interests of the child.

Yours Sincerely,