24th May 2011

Parliament of Victoria

Inquiry into the education of gifted and talented students

Submission by Wayne and Meredith Burton

Introduction

Our son is a 7 year old student currently studying at a public primary school in East Gippsland. He is blessed with an exceptional intellect that has been independently tested as placing him in the top 1% of the population.

It is our experience that gifted education in Victoria is at best ad hoc, and that our son is presently underachieving at school.

Consequently, we would like to submit the following for consideration by the committee in accordance with the inquiries terms of reference.

a) the effectiveness of current policies and programs for gifted and talented students, with particular consideration of, but not limited to:

1) identification of gifted and talented students.

There is no clear process for the identification of gifted and talented students and it is clearly dependent on the views and experience of individual teachers and parents.

Our son stood out at an early age being able to recite his alphabet at 18 months and could read coherently by age 3. In this environment, we were advised by his pre school teacher at the time her implied belief that he was suffering from autism/aspergers syndrome because he would sit and look at books for an hour at a time.

What is concerning is that she was completely unaware that he was reading, even after she was told that this was the case. It appeared to be completely out of her realm of experience.
Such views obviously hold significant repercussions in the classroom for students who are gifted. For those gifted students who do not significantly standout but who could flourish intellectually in a supportive environment the implication is obvious.

We were then put into a position where we felt we had no choice but to have his reading independently assessed by a speech therapist and later had his IQ tested in Melbourne by a Psychologist who specialised in identifying gifted and talented students.

Had we not been aware and proactive, the outcomes for our son could have been quite different.

2) equity of access to quality educational choices for gifted and talented students and their families.

There is no equity of access to quality educational choices for gifted and talented students and their families.

We live East Gippsland which limits the number of schools we can choose to send our children to and also our ability to access cultural and educational facilities’ such as libraries, museums as well as professional services such as specialist psychologists.

Even if we accept that regional services will not be able to keep pace with metropolitan services, please consider the following gifted schooling options currently proposed by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development on their website.

- **Early entry into school.** An outcome we achieved but only because at significant expense and on our initiative we went to Melbourne and paid to have his giftedness proven and then suggested this outcome to the school.
- **Single Subject Acceleration.** Not offered or suggested by his current school. May not be relevant to primary school students.
- **Curriculum Compacting.** Not offered or suggested by his current school.
- **Telescoping.** Not offered or suggested by his current school.
- **Year Level Advancement.** Has been suggested by his current teacher as a possible option, concern about implications for social development are not clear to us.
• **Concurrent Enrolment.** Not offered or suggested by his current school.
• **Mentoring.** Not offered or suggested by his current school.
• **Virtual Mentoring.** Not offered or suggested by his current school.
• **VCE Extension.** Not relevant to primary school students.
• **Early Admission into Tertiary Education.** Not relevant.
• **Select Entry Accelerated Learning Program.** Applicable to secondary students only, NOT primary aged students.

Based on the initiative of the current school we do access.

• 45 minutes per week social program for gifted students at the school. *(Please Note - Department of education and early childhood development advise on their website the following. “A pull out program of one or two sessions a week is not the schools gifted program, but rather a form of enrichment which may be implemented with other differentiated educational offerings.”)*
• Currently enrolled in grade 2 but doing grade 3 work only because he is a member of a composite class. (Still too easy, recently scored 100% in a sample grade 3 Naplan test).
• Worksheets from other grades when deemed appropriate. (Subject to ability of teacher to organise in lieu of demands of other students in the class).
• VCAA testing has now been recommended to determine level at which he is working. (We are presently into the month of May and well into the school year. Jack has been a student of the school for 18 months and this is the first time this testing has been recommended / organised.)

3) **impact on the learning, development and well being of gifted and talented students;**

Our son frequently complains about being bored at school and has at times indicated a preference to stay at home rather than attend school.

Our current school clearly endeavours to meet the social needs of its students and it does so well. However, it is our view that this boredom reflects a lack of engagement by our son and is a failure of the schooling system to adequately extend his intellectual abilities.
As a family we work hard to ensure that we have access to materials and facilities that enable him to pursue his interests in the detail he needs to satisfy his intellectual needs. On this point it is important to recognise that:

- His home learning is largely self-directed by his interests and what he wants to learn. Consequently, areas of study that he finds more challenging he tends to shy away from and it is difficult for us to engage him on. Development of his intellect may not be uniform and therefore will not reflect his true potential.
- School is for learning. As a 7 year old boy his time spent at home should not be for extension of his schooling but pursuit of his own interests and time spent with family and friends.
- We are yet to see application of school work that indicates a standard where he is failing in any disciplines. Our primary concern here is that:
  - He will lose interest and respect for educational institutions.
  - When he needs to apply himself later in life, he will not have learnt the discipline to persevere in fields he may find difficult.
  - He creates mischief in the class for other students.
- What happens to those gifted students whose families do not make available learning materials and opportunities, whose families do not advocate for them at the school and whose abilities are not recognised by teachers and schools?

It is our view that such students will only reach their potential in spite of the schooling system.

b) the scope, coverage and effectiveness of current policies and programs for students from both metropolitan and regional school communities, school leaders, teachers and parents and carers to support gifted and talented students.

I think this point has been answered in part by the preceding questions. However we will state that there is no effective policy that we have experienced.

Whilst we all support feel good statements about all children reaching their potential, there are presently no formal goal oriented programs or
resources applied to the teaching of gifted students at a primary school level in regional Victoria.

What is offered currently to us appears totally dependant on the goodwill of his current school. Lifting the bar for gifted students in our experience is largely the responsibility of parents advocating through teachers and principals.

Who advocates for these children within the department of education and resources and enforces the departmental policy?

At our current school there is no teacher with any formal qualifications in teaching gifted and talented students. Further, it is our view that his current access to 45 minutes per week of social interaction does not constitute a gifted education program.

There appears to be no impetus on individual schools to do anything to extend these children. It appears that when the minimum amount of learning has been achieved, then it is okay for these students to mark time in the class room until the next benchmark is reached.

It is evident that there is a lack of a coherent plan for intellectual and social development to work together. If our son jumps grades, what does that mean if he is 10 years old and attending high school?

The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development on their website identify that children 3 standard deviations from the mean (IQ 55 -) or (IQ 145 +) do not benefit from co-operative learning within a heterogeneous classroom.

How does the department of education deal with those kids like our son who function at this level?

We are unsure where these children fit into the current school system.

   c) opportunities and strategies for enhancing support for gifted and talented students, their parents and carers, teachers and school leaders; and

   In our experience we recommend the following requirements to help gifted students reach their potential.
• Establish a specialist school within an existing public school to service regional or metropolitan areas. This would serve to pool specialist resources such as post graduate qualified teachers in gifted education, materials etc. It would also assist with the grouping of like minded students across grades and from across the region. As a model it is suggested that the East Gippsland Specialist School or grouping deaf children at Bairnsdale West Primary School be considered by the committee.

• Require schools that run gifted education programs to have a teacher on staff, to be formally trained in gifted and talented education. This individual must be responsible and resourced to implement government policy and advocate for students in the school setting.

• Explore video streaming and internet based programs as an option to extend students of like abilities and interests. This would enable the implementation of state based learning for all gifted children wherever they live.

• Implement programs to ensure the early identification of gifted students by all schools.

• Align timetabling across grades at school where practicable. For example, all students study maths from 8:30 am to 10:30 am. Students can then attend classes where they are able to perform academically. A grade 3 student who has grade 5 maths ability does maths with grade 5 students and vice versa.

• Application of individual learning goals. Earmark students for extension and then make resources available for students to be extended. This cannot be the occasional worksheet, it must be disciplined in its application, goal oriented, resourced and measurable.

• Group like minded kids within the grade and across the school generally. By working together on topics, students can extend themselves through collaboration and debate.

• Greater recognition of academic and artistic excellence within the school system.

• Setting benchmarks for identification of gifted students, this will assist collaboration across local schools so that students of a particular interest and ability can be grouped together for special events, for example a field trip by retired geologist.

\[ \text{d) opportunities for improved educational offerings for gifted and talented students through collaboration across all school sectors and with community, business and industry.} \]
Within all communities there are individuals who are able through their work and knowledge to contribute to the development of gifted students. For this point we should consider:

- Recognition / list of retired teachers, academics and working professionals who may be able to mentor and work with groups of like minded students. Eg chemists, doctors etc.
- Recognition of local students i.e. primary, secondary and tertiary level who are able to be brought together for extension purposes for specific local events.

We would like to take the opportunity to thank the committee for considering our application and encourage the members to contact us should they wish to discuss our submission in greater detail.

For and on behalf of

Wayne and Meredith Burton