Ms Kerryn Riseley, Executive Officer
Education and Training Committee
Parliament House
Spring Street
EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002

Dear Ms Riseley

Thank you for the invitation provided in the letter of 22 March 2011, from Mr David Southwick MP, Chair of the Education and Training Committee (ETC), to make a submission to the Victorian Parliament’s ETC Inquiry into the Education of Gifted and Talented Students.

The ACT Education and Training Directorate is committed to ensuring that the needs of gifted and talented students are met in all ACT public schools.

The implementation of the Gifted and Talented Students Policy (Attachment A), which incorporates the Procedures for Early Entry (Attachment B), was a 2008 ACT Government budget initiative. The Directorate established a four-year strategy, commencing in late 2009, to support ACT public schools with the implementation of this policy.

In response to your invitation, attached is information about the strategy and its key achievements to date (Attachment C).

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide information to the inquiry.

Yours sincerely

Dr Jim Watterston
Director General

24 May 2011
1. POLICY STATEMENT

1.1 All ACT public schools will have in place explicit documentation and clear, transparent processes for meeting the needs of all gifted and talented students.

1.2 School principals, in consultation with their school community, will ensure that there are effective and equitable procedures for the identification and provision of developmentally appropriate programs for all gifted and talented students.

1.3 School principals are responsible for fostering collaborative home-school partnerships to support gifted and talented students.

1.4 Students identified as exceptionally or profoundly gifted, as identified by Feldhusen (1993) and those being accelerated will require an Individual Learning Plan (ILP). Those gifted students who are underachieving, have disabilities or specific learning difficulties will also have an ILP.

1.5 Teachers, with appropriate support, are responsible for selecting and implementing appropriate teaching strategies to meet the educational needs and interests of gifted and talented students in their classes.

1.6 Schools and school districts have a responsibility to coordinate provision for gifted and talented students when it is feasible and more effective to share programs and activities across schools.

1.7 Central office and schools have a joint responsibility to provide opportunities for professional development for teaching staff in the education of gifted and talented students.

2. RATIONALE

2.1 Students in ACT public schools who are gifted and talented must be recognised as having unique educational needs and be catered for in order that their learning outcomes are optimised. This policy sets out responsibilities and procedures for the provision of gifted and talented education in respect of:

- identification
- grouping
- differentiation of the curriculum
- acceleration
- early entry
- other educational strategies and programs.
3. DEFINITIONS

3.1 Acceleration

Acceleration is a placement process in which a student is placed with an age cohort ahead of his or her chronological age or school year in one subject, several subjects or across a whole learning year. Such progression should be professionally assessed and regularly monitored, as the student’s intellectual, social and emotional adjustments also need careful and ongoing evaluation, so that a study-life balance is maintained.

3.2 Curriculum

Curriculum is all learning planned, guided and implemented by the school.

3.3 Curriculum compacting

Curriculum compacting is a form of curriculum differentiation where the student’s program is compacted by removing any content or processes where mastery is demonstrated.

3.4 Curriculum differentiation

Curriculum differentiation provides a planned and documented curriculum that is adapted to take into account the needs and abilities of groups of students with particular educational needs. Curriculum differentiation results in slight to major modifications of the curriculum, at the school or classroom level, through adjustments to content, processes, products and learning environment. Curriculum differentiation for gifted and talented students will include enrichment and extension activities (see definitions below).

3.5 Early entry

Early entry refers to eligibility for early enrolment to preschool or kindergarten for gifted and talented students. Early entry is a placement process, not an educational program. Schools should ensure that, where gifted students are granted early entry to preschool or kindergarten, they have a developmentally appropriate differentiated curriculum.

3.6 Enrichment

Enrichment (broadening) is a curriculum differentiation strategy applied where the student's learning pace is faster than that of their cohort. The student’s learning is broadened by additional individual inquiry that goes beyond what is expected of the class in terms of level and degree of abstraction, but is related to the content area.
3.7 Extension

Extension (deepening) is a curriculum differentiation strategy in which additional tasks such as portfolios, projects or research questions are given to gifted and talented students in specific areas so that their knowledge and understanding is extended or deepened.

3.8 Giftedness

Giftedness refers to a student’s outstanding, innate ability in one or more of the following domains: intellectual, creative, socioaffective or sensorimotor (Gagné, 2007). Feldhusen (1993) identifies five levels of giftedness: mild, moderate, high, exceptional and profound. A student may display particular abilities at any stage or point in their schooling.

3.9 Grouping

Grouping is the placing of gifted and talented students either in a dedicated class or a group within a class to more easily provide appropriately differentiated curriculum, learning opportunities, intellectual endeavours and social opportunities. Grouping models catering for the needs of gifted and talented students include one or a combination of the following:

- class performance grouping where students are grouped by topic or subject
- regrouping by achievement for subject instruction
- withdrawal programs for students gifted and talented in a specific area
- ability grouping or separate streaming of students
- regular supplementary workshops, classes or sessions independent of the school timetable.

3.10 Individual Learning Plan (ILP)

An individual learning plan is a document that lists the agreed personalised learning goals and strategies that will be put in place to provide a quality educational program for a student. It is a strategy for tailoring a program or curriculum that can be used for gifted and talented students.

3.11 Talent

Talent refers to outstanding performance in one or more of the following fields: academic, the arts, business, leisure, social action, sports and technology (Gagné, 2003). Talent emerges from giftedness as a consequence of the student’s learning experiences.

4. PROCEDURES

4.1 Identification

4.1.1 Schools will use a variety of strategies and consider a range of evidence to ensure all gifted and talented students are identified. The flow chart in Attachment 1 outlines the key steps and strategies in the ongoing process of identifying and monitoring gifted and talented students. Identifying gifted and talented students should be a systematic, inclusive, equitable and culturally fair process.
4.1.2 Gifted and talented students may not be readily identifiable. Schools must recognise that many factors may inhibit the expression of giftedness or talent, and that gifted and talented students are found in all communities regardless of their socio-economic, cultural or ethnic background. Gifted and talented students can also include students who are underachieving, those with disabilities and those with specific learning difficulties.

4.1.3 Schools will develop an ILP for those small number of students identified as exceptionally or profoundly gifted.

4.2 Grouping

4.2.1 Principals in consultation with their staff, school board and communities are responsible for deciding the best models of grouping and placement process appropriate to meet the needs of their gifted and talented students.

4.2.2 Principals and their teachers should regularly monitor and evaluate the grouping opportunities offered at the school to ensure an appropriately differentiated curriculum.

4.3 Curriculum differentiation

4.3.1 A key success factor in catering for the needs of gifted and talented students is the provision of developmentally appropriate learning opportunities through differentiating the curriculum. Teachers should select and implement appropriate teaching strategies for the range of gifted and talented students in their classes through curriculum differentiation.

4.3.2 Teachers should allow for groups of students and individual students to work in a way that matches their preferred learning style. There should be a learning environment that sets high expectations for each student. They should also create opportunities where students demonstrate mastery and progress at their own pace by negotiating with their teacher what, when and how they learn.

4.3.3 Schools and teachers should provide appropriate enrichment and extension activities consistent with the dimensions of good pedagogy described in the ACT's Quality Teaching Model.

4.4 Acceleration

4.4.1 Principals are responsible for deciding when any form of accelerated progression is appropriate to meet the needs of individual gifted and talented students in their care. Decisions about whether to accelerate a gifted and talented student for an entire year will be made by the principal after consideration of the child’s educational, social and emotional needs. This should follow consultation with the school director, the student, the students’ parents or caregivers, teachers and the school counsellor.

4.4.2 Before any accelerative practice is recommended, school decision-making teams must use a variety of strategies and consider a range of evidence. The flow chart in Attachment 1 outlines these key steps and strategies. Where a form of acceleration is recommended by the school decision-making team, any acceleration should be targeted acceleration, that is, it must have a clear attainable objective stated in the ILP.

4.4.3 Accelerated progression is a placement process, not an educational program. Schools should ensure that, whether gifted and talented students are accelerated, or left with age peers, they have a developmentally appropriate curriculum.
4.4.4 Accelerative practices do not immediately require the placement of a student ahead of their age cohort for all of their learning, that is, ahead of an entire year. Indeed, it is more common to find that giftedness relates to one or some areas of cognitive development, relatively rarely across an entire spectrum or age cohort of learning. Accelerative practices through individualised programs can offer enrichment options, while out of school opportunities also provide additional alternatives for the education of a specifically gifted student.

4.5 Early entry

4.5.1 To gain approval for early entry into preschool or kindergarten the Director responsible for early learning first considers the written evidence presented. This may include subjective and objective indicators, teacher/parent nomination/checklists, interview transcripts, anecdotal evidence and student work.

4.5.2 From this evidence the Director decides if early entry into either preschool or kindergarten, is an option to be considered. An educational and psychological assessment conducted by a registered psychologist may be required before a final decision can be made.

4.5.3 The final decision about whether to grant early entry into preschool or kindergarten will be made after consideration of the child’s intellectual capacity, academic readiness and socio-emotional maturity.

4.6 Other programs and strategies for gifted and talented students

4.6.1 Schools and school clusters should also consider strategies for meeting the needs of gifted and talented students outside the school. These strategies include programs where students engage in extra-curricular and supplementary learning activities such as: working with a mentor; working with a visual or performance artist to encourage performing or artistic giftedness; seminars; excursions; camps and programs at tertiary institutions.

5 POLICY RESPONSIBILITIES

5.1 Parents or caregivers are encouraged to:
- support their child to pursue excellence, develop mastery and become an independent learner
- provide a supportive learning environment at home that complements the school curriculum
- liaise with teachers, principals and other members of the school’s decision-making team to identify the student’s giftedness and ensure that the student has appropriate and ongoing educational opportunities.

5.2 Teachers have responsibility for nominating students for identification as gifted, matching the program to meet the needs of the students and providing an appropriately differentiated curriculum.

5.3 School Counsellors and/or psychologists have responsibility to assist the school principal, as part of a team, with the identification, planning and support for gifted and talented students.
5.4 Principals with the support of their school staff have responsibility for encouraging gifted students to pursue excellence, become independent learners and develop talent in their domains of giftedness. Principals have responsibility through their school boards to their school communities for the accountability, transparency and implementation of this policy. This includes implementing and monitoring the policy, providing a supportive learning environment, fostering collaborative home-school partnerships and evaluating programs employed within the school.

5.5 Central office, together with principals is responsible for strengthening the capacity of staff and collecting ongoing data to ensure all students, including gifted and talented students, achieve to their potential.

5.6 School Network Leaders have responsibility for ensuring that schools adequately and appropriately provide for gifted and talented students. In consultation with school principals, School Network Leaders have final responsibility for the acceleration of gifted and talented students between sectors (i.e. primary to high, or high school to college).

5.7 The Director responsible for early learning considers applications for early entry to preschool or kindergarten for gifted students.

5.8 Central office provides advice, support and professional learning opportunities for teachers and principals to support schools to implement this policy. Central office also ensures currency of the policy within the context of national and international practices for gifted and talented education.

6 POLICY OWNER

Director, Learning and Teaching

7 RELATED POLICIES

Enrolment in ACT Public Schools (Preschool to Year 12)
Teacher/parent nomination of a potentially gifted student is provided to the principal.

School policy identifies process including gifted and talented decision-making team consisting of (for example) Principal, GAT coordinator, School Counsellor, Present/Past Teacher.

Evidence collected using one or more indicators that may include:
- Teacher/parent nomination/checklists
- Counsellor testing
- Self identification
- Interviews
- Anecdotal evidence
- Student work
- Assessment and reporting

Principal reviews evidence for the identified gifted student and consults with parents or caregivers and the school counsellor. Possible options include:
- extension/enrichment options within or outside of school and/or
- psychological testing with a view to possible acceleration.

A selection is made from the range of gifted program options available.

Acceleration option is determined in consultation with student, teachers, counsellor, parents and Principal. When into a different school sector, consultation includes the relevant School Network Leader.

Where required, (see 1.4) an ILP is developed and regularly reviewed by the team.

The student begins the identified educational program that is regularly reviewed.
PROCEDURES FOR EARLY ENTRY

1. Extended Definitions

Early Entry

Early entry refers to eligibility for early enrolment to preschool or kindergarten for gifted and talented students. Early entry is a placement process, not an educational program.

The information used in identifying a young child’s advanced abilities, should come from a variety of sources, such as checklists, anecdotal records and testing, so that children will have multiple opportunities to demonstrate their more advanced skills. Useful information can be obtained from parents and teachers and by noticing the child’s performance on different types of tests. Information from these various sources should be combined in such a way that extraordinary performance can be acknowledged even if it is not documented by all sources of information.

Characteristics of a gifted child

To identify giftedness in a preschool aged child is complex and multifaceted. Early entry is determined by a child being identified as gifted, through a universally accepted diagnostic tool, and who achieves a “Very Superior” rating across all assessments in cognitive functioning. In addition, the child will have many of the personal characteristics, learning preferences and interests outlined below:

- is processing and achieving well above age peers
  - shows readiness for reading and good mathematical reasoning, or is already reading and calculating
- is independent and motivated
  - wants to start school
  - is highly motivated to learn
  - is comfortable with older children
  - has a longer attention span than age peers
  - is socially mature, emotionally stable, perceptive, confident
  - is independent in action
- Enjoys visual and small motor activities
  - has a preference for reading and/or mathematical activities
  - demonstrates consistent participation in small motor activities and close-range visual tasks
  - likes being challenged and perceives school as a place to learn
- Likes academic work and has exhausted what preschool can offer
  - likes reading activities
  - likes mathematical activities
  - has demonstrated wide-ranging interests in previous situations
Observations of the strategies and approaches being used by the child can also give indications of giftedness. Aspects such as fluency of expression, maturity of expression, fine motor skills, posture, restlessness, sense of humour, poise and mood are all observable during the administration of tests to individual children.

Social development

In terms of social development and occupational health and safety, there should be clear evidence that a potentially gifted student can interact with older students and should be relatively free of attachment anxiety. Social skills should include the ability to self regulate (e.g., the ability to toilet and feed themselves) or self-sooth in a manner comparable to their one year older peers. Similarly, that gross motor skills are such that they will be safe in an environment of older children and their play equipment.

Schools should ensure that, where gifted students are granted early entry, they have a developmentally appropriate differentiated program and are frequently monitored.

Early Entry Application Process

Applications are processed by the Early Childhood Education team, in consultation with senior counsellors, for final consideration by the Director responsible for Early Childhood Education, as per the ACT Gifted and Talented Policy (2008).

Preschool

The ACT Department of Education and Training provides a minimum of 12 hours per week of non-compulsory education to ACT resident children who turn four before 30 April in the year prior to attending primary school. Children participating in preschool programs are engaged in play-based learning experiences which nurture the development of their social, emotional, intellectual and physical wellbeing.

ACT Government Preschools offer early learning experiences which engage young minds and enhance the holistic development of each individual; they facilitate opportunities to learn through play, thus creating an atmosphere for learning that is natural, effortless and free from academic pressure.

Because ACT Government Preschools are non-compulsory, and programs are play-based, it would be a very rare situation where a preschool child would be definitively identified as gifted and talented. Therefore, early entry guidelines prioritize an approach into kindergarten or later.
Elements of the Policy Implementation Strategy

Implementation of the Gifted and Talented Students Policy was a 2008 ACT Government budget initiative. Commencing in late 2009, it has the following elements:

- **increased support to schools** – which funds
  - a consultant for gifted and talented education, to provide assistance to schools in implementing the Policy and to provide increased support in the development of resources for schools and school clusters; and
  - assistance to schools to identify gifted and talented students and provide for their education through differentiated curriculum, extension, enrichment or acceleration

- **professional development** – which facilitates
  - a centrally coordinated professional learning program for classroom teachers and a strengthening of the provision of gifted and talented programs in schools through professional development and increased support for teachers

- **support to parents** – which allocates
  - an amount per annum to supplement the costs of educational and psychological testing, where required, to identify gifted and talented students for early entry to kindergarten; and
  - provides for a one-off Deed of Grant to the ACT Gifted Support Group.

Underpinning pedagogy

- **identification** - effective and equitable identification procedures need to be employed as a fundamental part of gifted and talented education in the ACT. To ensure that as a system cater to the needs of gifted students successfully, procedures need to be in place to accurately identify and support them.

- **school communities** - need to implement gifted programs that are inclusive of intellectual, creative, socio-emotional and sensorimotor domains. Programs need to be flexible enough to accommodate the individual learning needs of different students and provide equity, recognition of difference, educational excellence, partnerships, ongoing evaluation and improvement. It is also essential that they are developmentally appropriate programs. School communities need to foster collaborative home-school partnerships to support gifted and talented students. Parents/carers not only need to be educated in the needs of their gifted and/or talented student they need to be coached on how best to support their gifts and nurture their talents.

- **curriculum differentiation** needs to be defined and elements of best practice identified and shared at a system level. If a school makes an informed decision to have this as their only means of catering for gifted and talented students or as a part of a coordinated collection of strategies they need to be supported in ensuring they deliver quality differentiation that is based on evidence and is successful in meeting its goal.
The ACT Education and Training Directorate
Information about the implementation of the ACT Gifted and Talented Students Policy (2008)

- **all gifted and talented students**, regardless of ethnic, cultural, socioeconomic, gender, location, (dis)ability, social or behavioural difficulties have a right to have their gifts nurtured and developed. Gifted and talented students are at risk of not achieving to their full potential due to factors such as motivational, physical, emotional, social or learning difficulties. Student abilities are multi-faceted and often developmentally asynchronous. Gifted and talented students need acknowledgement, self-confidence, intellectual challenge, richness of experience, high level of support, and interactions with students of similar interests. Gifted and talented students deserve equality of educational opportunities including access to counselling and vocational services.

- **acceleration** is appropriate for a small percentage of the gifted and talented population. It acknowledges that acceleration is a strategy that allows a student to progress through school at a faster than usual rate and/or younger than typical age; it acknowledges that schools are allowing students to progress at something closer to their natural or preferred rate of learning.

- **program evaluation** needs to be regular, ongoing and authentic. If a program is in place but it is not meeting the needs of identified gifted and talented students or facilitating their development then it is a waste of resources.

**Current Key Achievements**

Key achievements to date include:

- ongoing consultancy and professional development in:
  - effective implementation of the Gifted and Talented Students Policy (2008) in ACT public schools;
  - effective identification methods for identifying gifted students;
  - differentiating the curriculum to meet the needs of gifted students; and
  - access to resources for gifted and talented students such as *Jacob’s Ladder Reading Comprehension* and differentiated programs such as the *JASON Project*.

- establishing a Teacher Scholarship in the Certificate Of Gifted Education (COGE) through the University of New South Wales and a support group for teachers undertaking this post graduate study

- providing registration and travel costs for ACT teacher delegates from each of the four ACT public school networks to attend the 11th Asia Pacific Conference on Giftedness in Sydney in 2010

- establishing a Gifted and Talented Liaison Officers (GaTLO) Network across the ACT public school system

- the continuation of ‘Leading Practice Exemplar’ workshops by subject and gifted and talented experts which provide authentic curriculum for students in the moderately gifted domain and above and professional coaching opportunities for ACT teachers.
The ACT Education and Training Directorate
Information about the implementation of the ACT Gifted and Talented Students Policy (2008)

In addition to continuing the above, further planned initiatives include the establishment of:
- effective identification tools in each network for access by schools
- grants to support the implementation of gifted and talented initiatives in ACT public schools
- additional programs such as Canstruction®, a trademarked design/build competition for year 5-10 gifted and talented students in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) with authentic connections and mentoring relationships
- a virtual learning academy, to provide curriculum innovation through more advanced content, accelerated pathways and specialised mentoring with experts within the context of mainstream education for years 7-10.

Long-Term Goal

The long-term goal is to consolidate those initiatives that have been introduced and to further embed a school-based concept of giftedness which is inclusive, equitable and comprehensive. There are many support structures that are necessary for gifted education, but there are three fundamental structures that underpin this initiative for all schools:
- Effective identification, as an ongoing process with an educational purpose, that uses a range of subjective and objective measures, including those best suited to disadvantaged and culturally diverse populations, to provide:
  - evidence of both student potential (ability) and current performance
  - pointers to underachievement
  - information that initiates appropriate curriculum and programs
- Standards for teacher preparation and professional development through a standards-based approach, ensure that teachers and school leaders are well-versed in relevant theory, research, instructional approaches, program development and evaluation that sustain best practices in the classroom (DEEWR Professional Development Package for Teachers, 2005)
- Differentiated curriculum that offers students multiple and varied avenues to learning in order to provide equity and excellence in the classroom: to reach and teach all learners.

At all stages of development, gifted learners need educational experiences that match their rate and level of learning. Research suggests that gifted students need an accelerated and complex curriculum that is content-specific for their development in the domains in which they demonstrate capacity for high levels of achievement.

As the ACT begins to implement the new Australian Curriculum, it is appropriate to focus on research-based differentiated curriculum and instructional approaches which require a supportive system of ongoing assessment, professional development (including training on the materials developed for use in classrooms) and leadership. The establishment of ten ‘lead schools’ across the ACT public school system will provide models for all: a climate of experimentation can facilitate the institutionalisation of current innovation.