



VASSP Submission to the Parliamentary Enquiry into the Education of Gifted and Talented Students

a) The effectiveness of current policies and programs for gifted and talented students:

1. Identification of gifted and talented students:

- There are two issues in relation to identification of gifted and talented students: how to select the most gifted students and what areas of student expertise to value.
- In Victoria, “gifted and talented” tends to be very narrowly defined. Most alternative settings or programs designed to cater for “gifted and talented” students focus on students’ giftedness in academic areas, identified through pen and paper ability tests of students’ skills in literacy, numeracy and problem-solving. Only a few “gifted” programs cater for students with talents in a specific skill area, and even so, the coverage is very selective: e.g. select entry schools cater for students with talents in performing arts (Victorian College for the Arts) but not painting and drawing or sculpture; for Maths/Science (John Monash Science School) but not humanities or creative writing; tennis and football, but not hockey or gymnastics.
- Most select entry programs for the gifted and talented in Victoria are in fact programs for students of high academic ability as identified by intelligence testing. We believe that the definition of giftedness needs to be expanded to embrace the full range of areas in which students can excel, including creative, vocational and social skills. Because providing specialist facilities for students in all of these areas would be impracticable and prohibitively expensive, we believe that all schools should be resourced to enable all students to fulfill their potential.

2. The key benefits and issues surrounding programs for gifted and talented students:

- Selective schools and programs for gifted students may be beneficial for the individual to some limited extent but are certainly detrimental to the education system as a whole, as they remove some of the best students from local schools and segregate them in specialized settings. Selecting and segregating the most

academically capable students depletes local high schools of potential high achievers and role models.

- It can also result in de facto “streaming” within schools where “gifted” programs are offered, with students in the “gifted” program often attracting better resourcing and teaching than do students in the mainstream program.
- In addition, because of strong demand for such programs as a result of the hype around the programs and the ‘exclusive’ aura created, many highly capable students miss out on a place, which in itself can be a disincentive to their achieving their full potential.
- In the absence of a clearly enunciated policy in relation to gifted education, a number of ad hoc “solutions” have evolved within the Victorian government school system. Alongside the selective “showcase” schools (Melbourne Boys’ and MacRobertson Girls’ and now others) which draw students from both local government schools and private schools and for which entry is highly competitive, there are also schools offering the SEAL (Select Entry Accelerated Learning) program, selective schools for students with specific talents like music, sport or science, and a number of individual schools which have developed their own selective “advanced learning” or “gifted” programs in an effort to retain academically talented students, to meet parent demand for programs which will recognize and extend their child’s educational talents and to build a reputation for high academic achievement.
- Many schools block Yr. 10 classes with VCE classes to allow talented students to be “accelerated” into VCE.
- Access of gifted students to specialist programs like the “Tournament of Minds” is also ad hoc and dependent on whether or not there is a strong proponent of gifted education amongst a school’s staff.
- Rather than a policy, we need a set of guidelines and resources to develop programs to support gifted and talented students within each school.

3. Equity of access to quality educational choices for gifted and talented students and their families:

- Access to selective programs for gifted and talented students is inequitable, with rural students especially often missing out. Access to specialist schools and programs is largely dependent on geography, with most of these being located in metropolitan areas or in the larger regional centres.
- Inequity is also inherent in the voluntary nature of selective “gifted” programs, as parents of students from certain backgrounds are less likely to apply for places in programs that they perceive as elitist or exclusive. Similarly, some are reluctant to apply for programs that will separate their child from his/her peers or local neighbourhood.

- Access to specialist facilities or programs might be addressed through exchange programs or through homestays for rural students to attend metropolitan schools.
- Programs for gifted students could also be delivered online, e.g. the Florida Virtual School, which provides personalized online programs for students at all achievement levels.
- There is also inequality in the resources and facilities provided for gifted students: most schools get no special resources to support their “gifted” programs but the “showcase” schools are relatively well resourced.

4. Impact on the learning, development and wellbeing of gifted and talented students

- In some schools, there can be a stigma attached to being in a gifted program, with students being reluctant to participate in any program that identifies them as being different or separating them from their friends. Finding ways of encouraging students to acknowledge and extend their gifts and talents remains a challenge. Some students deliberately underplay their ability or “cruise” to avoid, being identified as “gifted”.
- Acceleration of gifted students is also contentious. While Hattie’s meta-analysis of education studies includes “acceleration of gifted students” as among the top 20 influences on student achievement, it is in only 17th position, with a .60 effect size, far less than for factors like “quality of teaching” and specific teaching strategies like “reciprocal teaching” and “feedback” (See pp. 11-12, S. Dinham, “How to Get Your School Moving and Improving”, ACER, 2009).
- There are also concerns about the welfare of students in acceleration programs who are undertaking VCE units at a much younger age than other VCE students.
- Selecting “gifted” students based on their cognitive abilities does not guarantee that they will have superior social skills or emotional intelligence. This may explain why some “gifted” students do not perform as well as expected at VCE level, when time management and ability to deal with pressure are as important as cognitive skills in contributing to students’ success.
- As for the impact of “ability grouping”, Hattie has identified it as having an effect size of only 0.18, that is, a weak or insignificant effect on student achievement. Other studies of the impact of “streaming” have also found that, though it has a small positive effect on the achievement of students in the highest streams, this is outweighed by the negative effect on students who are assigned to the lower streams.

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

- The select entry schools and SEAL schools cannot meet the current demand for places so many gifted students miss out on a place. Even with the additional select entry schools that have recently opened, there is far more potential demand for places than can possibly be met, as the existence of so many unofficial “gifted” programs all around the state testifies.
- The benefits of segregating gifted students are dependent on their talents being extended through an enriched curriculum program and highly skilled teachers. Even within the select entry schools and the SEAL program, many teachers haven’t had adequate training to cater for the needs of gifted students. The curriculum that is studied and the teaching strategies employed are often not qualitatively different from the regular curriculum program, with “extension and enrichment” occurring primarily through acceleration to a higher year level.

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

- Proponents of acceleration as an effective strategy for catering for academically gifted students argue that “SEAL” should be renamed as “Acceleration Victoria” and the program vastly expanded, with the expectation that most secondary schools will have at least one acceleration/SEAL class. Only in this way could we meet the demand for “advanced” classes in an equitable way.
- With an official statewide program for gifted students, online programs could be developed which could be accessed all over the state. Video streaming of classes by expert practitioners could also provide teachers with professional learning in how to meet the needs of gifted students.
- We also need to provide more detailed MIPS counseling and support for gifted and talented students, beginning earlier than for other students.
- More importantly, we need to develop enrichment/extension activities for all mainstream students as a regular part of curriculum differentiation, rather than relying on acceleration as the primary strategy for gifted students.
- We also need funding to provide time release for co-ordination of programs and, most importantly, training of teachers to differentiate the curriculum to extend the skills of all students.

d) Opportunities for improved educational offerings for gifted and talented students through collaboration across all school sectors and with community, business and industry.

- Another option for catering for gifted students is to develop centrally located specialist schools where no students are enrolled but every student within the surrounding area can have access for a term or semester on a rotating basis, similar to the way the Alpine School operates.

- While enlisting the support and involvement of business and industry in the education of all students is desirable, there are issues around finding ways to get business, industry and community groups involved with schools in an ongoing, sustainable basis:
- Some areas have greater local access to business/industry than others.
- Sometimes other organisations want to focus on an area that is not the school's priority.
- Career education and Work Experience programs in most secondary schools already make use of real life "business" experiences to develop students' talents, so we could build upon this expertise. We could also make links with business/industry groups through Trade Training Centre programs.
- The Duke of Edinburgh Program and Alpine School provide leadership training/opportunities for students in Years 9 and 10.
- Schools could also develop partnerships with tertiary institutions to provide extension/enrichment programs for talented students.
- Finally, teachers could undertake internships at specialist schools to develop their expertise in catering for gifted students.

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Attachment: VASSP position paper regarding Specialist Schools