Subject: Specialist Schools

Background:

The number and variety of government secondary schools which restrict entry in some way is very large, as provision of specialist programs has evolved in an ad hoc manner under a succession of governments. Specialist facilities include:

2. Selective entry schools for students in Years 9—12: Melbourne High (boys only), MacRobertson Girls' High (girls only), Nossal High School (co-educational) and Suzanne Cory High School (co-educational)
3. Trade Training Centres – established to “address national skills shortages in traditional trades and emerging industries”
4. Residential schools for leadership (Alpine School) or outdoor education (Bogong, Rubicon, Somers)
5. Schools with special facilities which are accessible by groups from other schools – e.g. the Gene Technology Access Centre
6. Schools with specialist sport programs; e.g. Maribyrnong and Box Hill Senior Secondary
7. Girls’ schools – e.g. Canterbury Girls’ High, Mentone Girls’ High
8. Schools for students with special needs – e.g. Travancore, Croydon Community School, Distance Ed.

In addition, many schools offer selective specialist programs, mainly catering for academically able students: DEECD has the SEAL program and there are many schools who have developed their own select entry program - for example, there are 12 schools which use Edutest to test students for scholarship or advanced program entry.

What isn’t working well? (what are the issues around this?)

1. The rationale for government support for specialist schools is not clear. Is it:
   - to address access and equity issues;
   - to maintain market share against non-government schools by creating showcase schools; or
   - economically driven, providing a concentration of specialist facilities, resources or funds?
2. There is no clear evidence that select entry specialist schools actually improve outcomes for the students in them: British research suggests that they do not “add value”.
3. Specialist schools and programs (particularly select-entry ones) have a serious impact on neighbouring, non-specialist schools, in terms of enrolments and achievement data like NAPLAN and VCE results.
4. This impact reflects the tension in the system between competition and co-operation: While schools are judged primarily according to academic results (NAPLAN, VCE) and resources (including the principal’s salary) are tied to the size of the school, it is inevitable that there will be competition between schools to enrol the academically advanced students. This is at odds with both the espoused policy of co-operation between schools within local networks and the philosophy that all schools within the government system should cater for the full range of student abilities and needs.

5. Specialist schools are “urban-centric”: without regional specialist schools, there is a lack of opportunity for country students to access specialist programs.

What does the VASSP need to advocate to fix it? (what would we like to see in place?)

- An audit of specialist programs in schools be conducted. Much of this data should already be available, as part of the annual school census data.
- A task force be set up to develop system-wide guidelines for specialism in schools. The focus of the task force should be:
  - How can all students’ interests and abilities best be catered for within the government system?
  - What are the different requirements in city and regional/country areas?
- Development of a Residential School Unit within DEECD to co-ordinate the activities of the various residential schools that already exist, including selection of students and staff; health & safety compliance; curriculum programs and marketing.
- Policy development regarding all government school students being able to attend a residential school during their P-12 education.
- Development of additional residential and non-residential schools to address the needs of students with severe emotional or behaviour management issues.
- Development of online “virtual schools” using podcasts and online delivery to address the needs of country students and students in metropolitan regions without access to specialist schools. Regional meetings of students once a term could supplement this.

Key words/phrases?

- Opportunities for every student everywhere in the state to pursue a passion and/or develop a talent
- No “winners and losers”
- Impact of specialist select-entry schools on surrounding schools
- Opportunities for gifted students to stay in their home school through “virtual schools”

Further Action? (suggestions for action to further this VASSP position)

VASSP to advocate:

- a policy of dual enrolments for specialist schools, whereby students remain enrolled in their home school and all results are attributed to that school.
- a more collaborative model for home schools to work with specialist schools: powerful professional learning could come from staff from the home school working with and developing programs with staff in the specialist setting.