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

28 May 2011

SUBMISSION BY PARENT'S OF AN INTELLECTUALLY GIFTED CHILD,  
STUDYING AT A VICTORIAN PUBLIC PRIMARY SCHOOL

Our submission comes from the perspective of parents of a gifted child who is currently studying in a public primary school. It is a honest portrayal of the challenges we have faced from the initial identification of our daughter as gifted up to the present day and the obstacles we face with her education.

Our submission is based on the ‘Terms of Reference’ as outlined by Victorian Parliament and Education and Training Committee.

Terms of Reference

Consider the:

(a) the effectiveness of current policies and programs for gifted and talented students

(i) identification of gifted and talented students;

The identification of our child occurred over a period of time. She began speaking in clear, concise sentences with an advanced vocabulary at an early age and we knew she was different to her age peers. Throughout her pre-school years her language continued to be a standout and we continually received comments about this from her preschool teachers, maternal child care nurse, other parents and our family members. Combined with her language skills, she loved to be read to and would memorise books she heard. However, she did not exhibit an interest in reading until the commencement of school.

When she started school, our daughter began to learn to read, write, spell and do basic maths. It quickly became obvious that she learned more rapidly than her age peers. As she was progressing so quickly we asked her grade teacher if we should have her tested for giftedness but she did not feel it was necessary. We felt as though the teacher thought it would be a waste of time and money and that it would not provide any information we could use practically. As time passed, it became somewhat of a struggle to continue to get her teacher to give new learning opportunities to our daughter. Mid-way through the year, our daughter had progressed so far that the set curriculum was not enough to keep her learning for remainder of the year. At this point, we felt some doubt about whether we should continue to ask her teacher to provide extension work or whether we should leave things as they were. But our daughter was hungry to learn and we could not ignore this very important need. We therefore decided we needed some concrete evidence to prove extension work was justified for our daughter. We felt the best way we could do this was by getting her assessed.

We researched and found a private, well recognised child psychologist in inner Melbourne. The testing was not cheap at $750 and we had to weigh up whether this cost would be justified by the chance it could provide us with some helpful insights into our daughters learning styles and capabilities. We were lucky we were able to afford this testing and it saddens us to think of the many other students whose parents may not be able to afford the testing thus will remain unidentified by the system.

The results of the testing confirmed our suspicions that our daughter was gifted. Having an official report by a respected and qualified professional in the field helped us realise that we needed to make some changes for her
long term benefit. The assessment was very helpful, making the clear point that “she will have special learning needs which must be addressed to ensure she performs at a level more commensurate with her abilities”. It recommended grade advancement and that in subsequent years, she be placed in the lower part of a composite grade so she will be “naturally” exposed to higher curriculum. It also advised she would require an ongoing individual education plan in certain subjects as grade advancement may not be sufficient to meet her needs.

We shared the results with her grade teacher and Principal. They fully accepted and supported the recommendations of the report including grade advancement which was a big relief to us as we had spoken to a number of parents of gifted children who faced an uphill battle with the schools regarding grade acceleration.

It should be noted that our school had no recent experience in grade acceleration. They also said that without the report they would not have recommended such a course of action. In fact, no course of action would have been recommended if we did not go ahead and this saddens us greatly.

Key learning for consideration:

- Despite early demonstrated rapid learning, further assessment was not recommended and therefore not funded by education department
- Cost of testing is prohibitive for lower income earners. This will exclude gifted and talented identification from lower socio-economic backgrounds
- Parents are often the best identifiers of giftedness yet the system may unrightfully label these parents as “pushy”
- Teachers are most likely not aware of options available for further assessment, or have an ideological bias which prevents them from recognising gifted and talented students and their different needs.

Effectiveness of current policy and programs

In light of the background above, we feel there appears to be no systematically implemented programs addressing the area of gifted or talented education in primary schools with regards to identification. As a result, the Government and schools have no way to measure their success with gifted or talented students.

To improve this situation, we think the government should put into place;

- A clear policy for gifted and talented identification including the important role identification plays as this group of students have different needs
- A published measure of effectiveness of the policy as well as a clearly stated target e.g. Number of currently identified gifted or talented students. Example target 3-5% of entire state school population.
- Funding to identify the gifted and talented students through independent psychological assessment

(ii) Equity of access to quality educational choices for gifted and talented students and their families.

Today most schools espouse they aim to provide equal opportunity for all students. They would agree that they need to help all students achieve their highest potential. Unfortunately, when it comes to the gifted and talented population of students in the Primary school setting, our view is that these lofty goals are not backed up with adequate execution.

We are aware of two primary schools in Victoria that identify themselves as having a focussed gifted and talented program in their schools. While this is wonderful for the families who live near those schools, it is not enough to serve the needs of the gifted and talented students of our state. If one of these schools was closer to us, we would most certainly enrol our child there but distance prevents us from doing so.
When we talk about equity of access to educational choices, we relate that to the element of time. From our experiences at our school, time is not typically distributed equally among students. We can demonstrate this by providing an example from not just our child’s education but our own as well. It is also an example we hear other parents of “bright” students cite very often. We use the word “bright”, because these children may be gifted and talented but are not identified as such by the school system. On a typical day our “bright” children are asked to do work they already know how to do. They have learnt it before and have already revised it. When they finish their work, in half or less of the time than the other students, they are made to sit quietly or occupy themselves drawing, reading a book, or doing something that doesn’t distract other students. This is repeated hour after hour, day after day, year after year. Can we rightly consider this equity of access to quality educational choices? We think not. Are there any programs to advance these students at their own pace in the existing setting? The answer varies. In our experience, our daughter is placed in a group or stream of students similar to her ‘level’. However, truly gifted and talented students will outgrow these groups just as rapidly as they outgrow their class subject matter and require subject level grade advancement. This has not happened in our daughter’s classroom even though she – and quite a few other students – are beyond the material offered by the class curriculum.

From what we can tell by attending school tours across several schools, each school has a lot of flexibility for how they structure themselves to achieve their educational goals. We feel that if each student is given equal access to teaching time at their own level that would solve many of the problems encountered with gifted and talented education. We believe that most gifted students would benefit greatly from having equal teaching time directed at them at their current level. By way of example; our daughter spent a whole term in a subject where she did not learn one new important point. By her own account, she spent the whole term revising what she already knew.

Our daughter should be able to learn something new each day in each subject and be given equal access to teaching time. If a subject is taught 3 hours per week, 10 weeks per term, that equates to 30 hours or 1800 minutes on that subject. If we divide that among 23 students, there should be 78 minutes of teaching per student per term on the subject which is between 7-8 minutes per week. Given that many gifted and talented students already know what is being taught for a good amount of that time, we believe they are not getting equal access to teaching time. Parents have no choice about whether a teacher spends time teaching our children at a pace appropriate to their abilities.

We could spend a lot of tax payer dollars on, for example, establishing a new gifted curriculum. However these avenues may not be required if each teacher could ensure each student has equal teaching time, helping students learn something new at their level, whatever that level may be. We do not feel this would require an exorbitant amount of extra resources or funding particularly based on the calculations we made above.

Many parents of gifted children love the schools they are at even though the curriculum is not suitable to their needs. Their children – like our daughter – have made strong, valuable friendships and enjoy the social aspects of the school. However, if there were a school which clearly catered for gifted student close to us, we would strongly consider moving our child. Good friendships are extremely important however years of happiness in the classroom with like minds is paramount. We recently spoke to a teenager who had gained entry to a select entry high school and she conveyed such joy in being in a classroom with like minds. The long term impact on success and wellbeing by being amongst like minds should not be underestimated.

**Key learning for consideration:**

- Our opinion is that gifted or talented students spend too much time “filling in time” while others catch up. It is unfathomable to us that our best and brightest students are forced to endure this, day in and day out. We have raised the very valuable question here in that do our talented and gifted students get equal teaching, thus learning time? Our experience thus far tells us they do not.
- There are existing primary schools such as Camelot Rise PS and Glendal PS which appear to have implemented Gifted and Talented programs, presumably within the existing system. Best practice should be sought from schools such as these and implemented across a wider range of schools in the community.

**Effectiveness of current policy and programs**

We can only speak of primary education at this point. There are no real choices for different primary schools which cater for our child’s gifted needs. Currently, the primary public education sector appears to operate on a ‘one size fits all’ system.

It is possible that some schools offer better choices and opportunities within their schools. However, there is no way to tell unless you are a part of that school. As a parent, there is no methodical way to know which schools are doing this and to what extent they are successful. We have reviewed the government-based ‘Myschools’ website data and this does provide some information about which schools are producing the best results in testing. However, we must question these results in relation to gifted and talented students. Many such students – particularly if they are bored and disengaged from school – may underperform on such tests. Therefore, it is very difficult to give much value to these test results as they may not paint a true picture. That being said, the schools mentioned above are doing exceptionally well with their NAPLAN test results.

**(iii) impact on the learning, development and wellbeing of gifted and talented students:**

We are early in our daughter’s journey through the education system. The long term impact on her development remains to be seen. We have already experienced enough to be able to share some thoughts and observations which reflect upon the policies and programs, or lack thereof, as they have impacted her journey thus far.

The practice of teaching a fixed curriculum, closely guided by age, at a “typical” learning speed is a critical shortcoming in the system. It slows our daughter’s potential progress and in the process frustrates her significantly. On-going frustration by being stuck in this process can lead to rejecting the system and becoming disengaged. Recently, our daughter’s school established groups or streaming within the class for certain subjects. We welcome grouping of students on the basis of them operating at a similar level and how they can be taught more effectively this way. It appears many schools do this, however we have already experienced difficulties when the group of children begin to require curriculum at the next grade level or beyond. Once this level is attained, children are ‘held there’ by teachers as it is too time consuming to organise further extension as they already have their hands full. Despite having the best interests for these children at heart, teachers may not have sufficient time or resources available to adequately cater for individual needs that extend far beyond grade level.

Gifted and talented students are effectively held back and bound within the realms of the grade level which cannot be the best thing for them. In order to satisfy our daughter’s hunger to learn, we have worked with her outside school hours on subjects such as maths, reading, comprehension and so on. Upon discussing this with the school we were discouraged to continue doing this as they suggested it may only compound her boredom and frustration at school. How hard it is for a parent to hear the school wants you to stop teaching your child for fear of her advancing too much? Imagine the pain you feel as a parent when your six year old asks you to learn their time tables but you feel the need to say ‘no’ as the school would prefer she gets to that when they are ready.

We need a system in place which ensures gifted children, together with all children, have the opportunity to learn something new during the six hours they spend at school each day. We would love it if she came home tired from all the learning but currently, this is not the case. Our daughter takes music lessons outside of school hours.
and has done so since she was in kinder. It was her desire to learn an instrument and we have supported her. We say this to make it clear we did not “push” her into it. She practices daily because she wants to. As a music student, she has become accustomed to learning new things at home every day through her daily musical practice and she desires for that to happen at school too. Just last week she told us that she wished she could learn as much at school each day as she does when practicing her instrument each day. In the 40 minutes of daily practice on her instrument, she only spends 5 minutes learning her “new” pieces or techniques. Surely we can do better than this in the six hours our children spend at school each day?

As guided by the report we received after our daughter’s assessment, we are well aware that she needs to be challenged and to work for results. If she does not, she will inevitably develop a poor work habit or disengage. We have become accustomed to being advocates for our daughter at the school to ensure she is being challenged. But what happens to children whose parents don’t make the commitment to follow up with school teachers because they don’t want to be labelled ‘pushy’ or don’t want to ‘rock the boat’? Will these children be left to flounder on their own with a system that does not work for them? Schools have a responsibility to ensure gifted and talented students’ are appropriately challenged because their present and future wellbeing is closely connected to whether they are learning or not.

We are at the stage with our daughter’s school now where they are open to a dialogue about giftedness. Her first year was a rocky one with us continually advocating for extension and eventually having to get her assessed on our own. However, the school have been wonderful in agreeing to her acceleration and our daughter is doing very well and is happy. She has made friends with some of her class peers who – even though are older - seem to think and behave at the same level as she does. These friends also appear to be quite advanced in their capabilities. They have not been assessed, but may well also be intellectually gifted.

The struggles to continue subject acceleration within her classroom occur on a weekly basis. Things have improved but there is a long way to go at her school.

Key learning for consideration:

- Gifted or talented students need to be challenged and have high expectations set.
- Gifted or talented students learn at a rapid rate and need the curriculum to move at a pace faster than normal. If they are not learning, their wellbeing is impacted.

Effectiveness of current policy and programs

Whether it is by policy or practice, the current “streaming” in classes is effective - to an extent - to help many students who are talented. We are not aware of the current policy on acceleration. Full grade acceleration has been an effective intervention for our daughter thus far. We believe there are many forms of acceleration which would benefit a great number of students at the primary level including single subject acceleration, curriculum compacting and self-paced instruction. These, however, are not the norm and would require a change of policy and practice from today.

(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:

To our knowledge, there are no effective policies or specific programs endorsed or supported by government which address the needs of schools, teachers, parents or carers of gifted and talented primary school aged children. There does appear to be an awareness of the needs of gifted children by the Victorian Department of Education, but we do not know of any specific funding, either by the department State Government, for programs in schools. Other than providing links to some useful websites, we believe the Department of Education could
provide teachers and schools with a thorough and useful framework to cater for gifted and talented students. This would help guide schools to better cater for the needs of these children. Such a framework should help schools identify – which is the key – and then cater for gifted and talented students using shared best practice.

By way of comparison, we have students in our daughter’s class with learning difficulties, sometimes disabilities. They have very apparent and specific needs. These needs are recognised, systematically addressed and funded by government, as they should be. Like this group of students, gifted and talented students have needs which are beyond the norm and are in some cases, quite exceptional. These students at the primary level are not systematically recognised, addressed or funded by governments programs.

Gifted and talented children begin their educational journey at primary school. They do not just suddenly appear in secondary school. As the system stands, there are seven years of primary school and six in secondary. If between 5 - 10% of all students are gifted or talented – which is what research into gifted education supports - then there are more of these students in primary school than in secondary school. Amazingly, there are NO clear government policies or funded programs for primary aged children who are gifted or talented. Furthermore, as primary education is the start point for this group of students, their learning experiences in this setting will shape their future education at a secondary level. Habits are formed at a young age and if these gifted students do not receive an education that takes into account their specific needs, real problems can arise as we have already outlined earlier. It is not hard to draw the conclusion that many of the children who exhibitive disruptive or disengagement behaviours at secondary school are these same gifted children who missed out on the right support at primary level. On this basis, Primary Schools must be considered within the scope of policy and programs.

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

There are a great many opportunities that stand before the Department of Education which can be used to enhance support for gifted and talented students, their support networks and their schools.

Attitudes need to change. Giftedness and talent are not about elitism. One of our key society values is that everyone should get a ‘fair go’. We believe a great many gifted students are not being given a fair go at learning when they may have a demonstrated talent or ‘gift’ for it. Changing attitudes can be supported immensely by clear policy from government. It can help compel teachers, schools, parents and the community to reconsider their pre-conceptions about gifted and talented education and provide a platform for altering them.

Appropriate professional identification and assessment, which can be accessed by all members of society, is required. One strategy could be to provide further funding of Education Department based school psychologists who are capable of assessing children. We have read that there are shortened versions of various popular cognitive function assessment tools which can be administered at a fraction of the cost compared to the full assessment that we paid for. If not executed by Government, such assessments could be administered by registered 3rd party child psychologists.

As mentioned above, support could be enhanced by establishing a differentiated curriculum at the primary level for gifted and talented students. This curriculum should not be age based and allow children to progress at a pace commensurate to their capabilities. The pace should not be connected to the pace of the rest of the class on the subject. There also needs to be a way to track how the differentiated curriculum is actually being used otherwise it will never become part of standard practice.

There is a culture among students in schools to demonise intellectual ability. We believe that all gifts and talents should be celebrated and encouraged. We believe that clubs and societies in schools which nurture interests, talents and gifts are a helpful way for schools to support gifted students. It should be another item in the tool box, together with differentiated curriculum to allow schools to better support our students.
(d) Opportunities for improved educational offerings for gifted and talented students through collaboration across all school sectors and with community, business and industry.

With our focus on Primary schools, we believe that much could be learned from Secondary schools that have implemented SEAL or selective entry programs. Similar structures may be put into place in primary schools. As we mentioned in section a(ii), there are some Primary schools who have already established programs and policies themselves about gifted and talented students. They have also operated with these programs over a period of years. We hope the enquiry can reach out to such schools to better understand what they are doing, what is working and establish best practices for all. As leaders in this area, these schools could help other Primary schools on this important subject.

Yours sincerely

Parents of 'J'.