PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY INTO GIFTED AND TALENTED STUDENTS
RESPONSE AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL OF STATE SCHOOL ORGANISATIONS

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ABOUT ACSSO
The Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO) is the peak national organisation representing the interests of the parents, families and school communities of more than two million children attending government schools throughout Australia. ACSSOs formal structure currently comprises comprises nine State and Territory peak government school organisations and their membership networks.

ACSSO provides research and information material to affiliates on issues relating to its policies. It maintains contact with other organisations on matters of common concern and ensures that its policies and those of its affiliates are made known as widely as possible to policy makers, to parents, students and the general public.

ACSSO believes that it is the responsibility of schools and the school system to ensure equity of access to an appropriate range of opportunities for all students. All children have the right to schooling which gives them independent access to knowledge as well as the skills and understanding necessary to shape their own lives and to participate in shaping the society in which they live.

ACSSO is committed to the principles of access, equality, equity of outcomes, excellence and participatory democracy.

- **Access** means a public education system available to all, irrespective of their age, capacity to pay, class, culture, gender, level of ability, location, religion / belief, or sexual orientation.
- **Equality** is dependent on recognition that all children have a capacity to learn. Learning is the construction of meaning from experience. School practices must acknowledge and build on the culture and experiences children bring to school. Children have a right to develop their skills, knowledge and aptitudes in challenging but personally successful and fulfilling ways.
- **Equity** in educational outcomes means all social groups should, as a result of schooling, have comparable distributions of educational outcomes.
- **Excellence** means that the public school system must provide the highest quality education for all.
- **Participatory democracy** means a partnership of students, parents and teachers in school and system decision making. It also means that students should, as a result of schooling, have the knowledge, skills and understandings necessary to shape their own lives and to participate effectively in shaping society. This will enable students to learn how to learn throughout their lives for the benefit of themselves and others. Public education must develop among all students a sense of justice as well as respect and concern for others.

ACSSO believes that public education must remain secular and be fully funded by government.

ACSSO policy states:

**E.5 CHILDREN WITH EXCEPTIONAL ABILITIES**
**E.5 PREMISE**

**E.5.1** It is the right of every child to be educated and all children should have the opportunity to benefit from a general education to the maximum extent to which they are capable.

**E.5.2** It is the responsibility of governments to provide, within the state/territory systems of education, resources and opportunities to facilitate the development of such children.

**E.5.3** Every school should provide for children with exceptional abilities

**POLICY**

**E.5.1** Schools and teachers should provide a challenging and enriched curriculum to enable the gifts and talents of all children to emerge, be recognised and be developed within regular classrooms;

**E.5.2** Sufficient resources should be provided to schools and families to enable the identification, encouragement and support of all children with exceptional abilities;

**E.5.3** Enrichment and extension activities in all relevant ability areas should be accessible through both selection and self-nomination;

**E.5.4** Unless it is in the interests of the child, such children should not be segregated from others.

**HOW THE CONCEPT OF ‘GIFTEDNESS’ AND ‘TALENT’ SHOULD BE DEFINED**

It can sometimes be difficult to determine how you define giftedness and talent. For some, the former relates to a natural ability a student has in an area while the latter involves a student having the ability to perform well in an area because they have been able to practice and achieve a level of skill. There are a number of assessments used and the choice of assessment relates to what type of skills are being investigated, is it for giftedness or talent.

The problem also stems from the assumption that talent often relates to sport or art and it is this which society tends to support for a student. Giftedness tends to be assumed to relate to intellect and academic areas. Although, people talk about a talented sportsperson but a gifted musician so the labels can be overlapping. This may relate to the physical achievements as against the intellectual. People can be judged by their taste in music.

In developing this definition, by default, it needs to be broad and comprehensive. It needs to speak of talent, which includes all areas of a child’s life, - academic, artistic, athletic, and social. Most definitions of gifted and talented appear to limit their definition to academics, but it is important to realise on performing and accomplishment. In developing a definition it should be recognised that it is not enough to just have the talent, but you must be using that talent to achieve at remarkably high levels. Additionally, this definition must recognise that not all very talented students have the potential to achieve at high levels but have not realised that potential. These are the classic underachievers. Finally this definition must be a comparative one, clearly identifying that these students achieve or have the potential to achieve at levels way above their peers.

**THE KEY BENEFITS AND ISSUES SURROUNDING PROGRAMS FOR GIFTED AND TALENTED STUDENTS, INCLUDING ANY GAPS IDENTIFIED IN CURRENT PROGRAMS**

The benefits of available programs is that it allows students to extend themselves in their particular area of expertise as well as reduce the level of boredom experienced by some students who find mainstream lessons limiting. When a child is able to complete a task
easily, they need to be challenged. The level of challenge will determine the engagement of the child in the learning experience.

A child who completes a task quickly is often given more of the same to do so that they do not get bored in the class while waiting for peers to catch up. However, this teaches the child that finishing a task rapidly only results in more work that they already know they can do. It does not encourage the student to extend themselves in their understanding of the concept.

**ANY RELEVANT PROJECTS CURRENTLY UNDER WAY SPECIFIC TO THE EDUCATION OF GIFTED AND TALENTE D STUDENTS**

**This question is specific to Victoria**

**EQUITY OF ACCESS TO PROGRAMS FOR ALL GIFTED AND TALENTE D STUDENTS IN VICTORIA**

The question of equity of access to programs is usually related to geographical location. For rural and regional students, the access is usually restricted by distance or by the lack of initiative on the part of local and regional personnel.

The age of technology has opened up the opportunity for school staff to engage students and to link them to programs which may be available virtually. This would mean that a student has access to learning experiences within their achievement level regardless of where they are geographically located.

Timetabling in schools can restrict a student’s access to programs and particularly where the attitude of the school staff does not support some innovative practices within a school. Acceleration of a child through learning stages so that they are completing work which offers them some challenge is often restricted by staff who feel that the student is not able to cope with the older peer group, may be too immature to cope with the class expectations in an older grade or are concerned about the younger student ‘showing up’ the older students.

In terms of talented sportsmen, the need for funding to allow them to have contact with skilled coaching opportunities as well as competitive practice would provide an equity of access to similar skilled peers. This can be done by regular contact sessions, camps, workshops or similar dependent upon the perceived activity which will benefit the extension of their skill base.

**ADDRESSING THE ISSUES OF UNDERPERFORMANCE AMONG GIFTED AND TALENTE D STUDENTS**

It is usually easy to identify sporting talent in boys due to the motivation and feelings of self worth that they gain from their participation in a chosen sport. Boys are, however, less likely to be identified as being academically gifted. A male student’s frustration with not being challenged may show itself through behavioural difficulties in the classroom. These students are seen as non-compliant, ‘smart mouths’, underachievers or incapable of succeeding
within a subject area. They are often missed in being identified as gifted by school staff, who look more at their behaviour than at the underlying reasons for this behaviour.

Young girls may be identified with a sporting talent in the early years of their sport but unless it is a mainstream sport such as netball, basketball, softball or swimming, they are unlikely to be provided with opportunities to excel. If a student is lucky enough to gain support through family or a dedicated interest group for their skills in other areas ie soccer, cricket then they may move forward and display their talent. This is however, an exception and students are often restricted by the financial burden of allowing them access to the coaching and experiences they need to improve and display their talent in an arena which will enable them to move to the next level.

In terms of musical and artistic giftedness/talent, there are similar opportunities for both boys and girls to display their talents but funding which allows access to competent and experienced tutors/mentors can be prohibitive. This is especially a problem in some smaller rural and regional areas where the added burden of lack of tutors exacerbates the problems.

**OVERCOMING NEGATIVE ATTITUDES AND MISCONCEPTIONS SURROUNDING GIFTEDNESS AND TALENT**

Unfortunately Australia often suffers from the ‘tall poppy’ syndrome whereby students who are high achievers are not always recognised for their ability. They are seen as working hard or even, at times, as cheating to achieve a good result but not as possessing a natural ability to understand concepts/develop skills. What is not respected is the students ability and their need to be challenged in order to stay motivated, engaged and working at the level of which they are capable.

There can be a fear by some teaching staff that students who are allowed to perform at their true academic level, which may involve accelerating them beyond the grade appropriate to their chronological age, will soon out perform their teachers. Some teaching staff believe they must ‘stay ahead’ of their student in knowledge instead of recognising that their role is to instill in the student the love of learning and the skills to question, problem solve, investigate and strive to learn more.

**MECHANISMS TO IMPROVE THE CAPACITY OF TEACHERS TO IDENTIFY AND ADEQUATELY RESPOND TO GIFTED AND TALENTED STUDENTS**

In order to improve the capacity of teachers to identify and adequately respond to gifted and talented students it is important to instill in the staff an appreciation of the value that this role will have on these students. While staff remain closed to the possibilities of providing innovative options for all students, they are not going to be open to changing their teaching to cater for the needs of these students.

It is important to recognise that a gifted and talented child experiences similar problems as other students. They can have learning difficulties, they can have disabilities which mask their abilities and they can experience behavioural problems due to their frustrations, lack of motivation or boredom in a classroom which is not catering to their individual needs.
Identification of a student needs to involve more than a test. It must involve a discussion with a number of individuals in many settings who are able to identify the range of skills a student may show.

**ANY BROADER IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL COMMUNITIES ARISING FROM THE EDUCATION OF GIFTED AND TALENTED STUDENTS**

There are a number of positive social implications around providing for the needs of gifted and talented students. One would naturally be motivating and engaging these students in the learning environment so that they are able to achieve to their potential within the school community.

There is obviously a place for showing the improvement in their academic progress in the data provided on the school on the MySchool website which indicates that the school has provided strategies that are working in catering for these students. School are able to showcase to the wider community the achievements of their innovative and targeted programming.

Every school should have access to a specialist Teacher for Gifted and Talented Education. These teachers may work across a small cluster of schools. The Teacher would work with the principal and senior staff to improve provision across the school(s). They should also work closely with other teachers to ensure that teaching and learning approaches ensure work is sufficiently challenging to meet the needs of all gifted and talented pupils on a day-to-day basis.