Inquiry into the Education of Gifted and Talented Students by the Victorian Parliament’s Education and Training Committee (ETC).

**School name:** Brunswick Secondary College  
**Region:** Northern Metropolitan Region  
**Principal:** Vivienne Tellefson

**School description**
Brunswick Secondary College is a 7-12 college. Our 900 students come from 48 different cultural backgrounds. They are also very educationally diverse.
Programs currently provided to gifted and talented students at BSC

Brunswick Secondary College received support from the DOE to establish a SEALP and introduced this program in 2000.

The SEALP provides students with challenge and enrichment within an academic peer group. The program is suited to students who:

- are academically above average and who will excel across most of the Key Learning Areas
- have a strong and positive self-concept
- have a high level of creativity
- have a high level of maturity and commitment
- are capable of independent learning

Students in this program complete Years 7-10 in 3 years and then undertake either a two or three year VCE. Students may complete their secondary schooling in 5 years, however it is recommended that most students complete VCE over 3 years.

Students are selected for the program on the basis of ability and achievement testing, interviews and teacher reporting. Students entering this course do not necessarily have to currently be achieving outstanding results.

That aim of the SEALP is to offer more than acceleration and provide students with:

- Proficiency in the basic curriculum
- A more challenging learning environment
- The opportunity to pursue topics at a broader and deeper level
- The opportunity to work independently and cooperatively with students of similar interests and abilities
- Opportunities for study in areas of interest.

The program also focuses on developing research skills, critical and creative thinking skills and social skills.
BSC’s experiences and issues surrounding these programs (including for example negative attitudes towards giftedness)

The egalitarian principles that stem from the era when Brunswick was a working class suburb still remain very strong within the community. Whilst there was initial concern amongst some staff and parents that SEALP would diminish opportunities and resources in mainstream education, this sentiment has decreased as the program has become established. In particular, professional development has allowed staff to better understand gifted education and obtain a sense of ownership in relation to the program. Additionally, parents have increasingly been able to recognise the flow-on benefits to all students of the program.

In order to try to allay these initial concerns, we at BSC have tried as much as is possible to treat the SEALP students in the same way as all other students to avoid an elitist mentality. Students in SEALP are integrated with mainstream students as much as possible, mixing with such students in LOTE, Sport, extended pastorals and elective subjects, as well as on sports days and camps.

The SEALP has impacted on the school in a number of positive ways:

Staff
- Changes to teaching practice have meant that teachers have become more innovative in respect of all of their classes
- Staff have access to a broader range of resources
- Teachers have become aware of the needs of more capable students in the mainstream
- Teachers now have increased expectations of all students
- There is an improved standard of pedagogical discourse
- There is greater curriculum differentiation within the mainstream

School culture
- New initiatives and extra-curricular activities have been introduced. These are available to all students and the SEALP students have been the catalyst for other students to become involved.
- There has been a positive impact on the educational culture in terms of the aspirations and achievement of students, within both the SEALP and the mainstream.
- There are a greater breadth and variety of subjects offered in VCE.
- Students’ VCE results have substantially improved.
- There is greater participation in academic competitions, music, sport, performing arts, leadership and extra-curricular activities, as the program has been a catalyst for other students to take part.

Community
- There is an enhanced public perception of the school – the program has helped to make BSC a viable choice for some parents who would otherwise have bypassed the school for the private system. Many of these parents have become advocates for the school, promoting both BSC and the program to others.
- The SEALP program has brought an academic almost imprimatur to Brunswick and to the state system. This is evident in attracting 'private school enrolments' into the program itself but also into the school or system more generally.

Negative attitudes towards SEALP

Some staff initially had unrealistic expectations about the program and therefore assumed that SEALP students would be model students in every way.
The experiences of students participating in these programs

Positive experiences for students

Greater enjoyment of school and learning, as a result of the following:

- Improved academic and intellectual challenge.
- Greater confidence and less fear of ridicule for expressing ideas.
- Improved social and emotional well-being. Most students enjoy being at school and have a strong bond with their group. Many students did not enjoy their primary schooling because the work was not challenging and they did not have close friendships. In the SEALP, they are able to find “like-minded” students.

Increased self-esteem due to:

- A strong peer group. There is very little resentment of the SEALP students by the mainstream because of the school size and the fact that all students know each other. Friendships extend beyond the SEALP - students mix for LOTE and electives, and participate in activities together.

Increased opportunities and experiences

- The program provides opportunities and experiences that students may not otherwise have access to. Many students have had very limited experiences because of their cultural or socio-economic backgrounds.

Negative experiences for students

- Stress and workload, due to the fact that these students are often also high achievers in other areas, often music and sport.
BSC views about how the concepts of “giftedness” and “talent” should be defined

In the Bright Futures Resource Book – Education of Gifted Students, published by the Department of Victoria in 1996, the difficulties associated with defining the concepts of “gifts’ and “talents” are discussed in detail. In particular, the book states that “it would be extremely difficult to devise a single definition that encompassed the broad spectrum of human abilities we now believe make up giftedness, and which accounts for important aspects of culture, class, gender and domain” (page 7).

At BSC, we recognise the difficulty in defining the concepts of “giftedness” and “talent.” Rather than ascribing a fixed definition to the ideas “giftedness” and “talent,” therefore, we view such ideas as being fluid concepts that encompass the following components, as outlined in the Bright Futures Resource Book (page 8):

- A broad definition rather than the traditional intelligence factor measures by on an IQ test
- Potential as well as actual performance
- Multiple facets, domains or intelligences, rather than a single intelligence
- A range creative areas as well as academic areas
- A difference from, but a significant correlation with academic achievement
- A dynamic and developing concept rather than a relatively static and stable measure
- Individual personal factors, such as personality characteristics, motivation and work habits, can influence the extent of development of the abilities
- Highlighting the interaction between innate and environmental factors
- The importance of a stimulating and supportive environment characterised, in particular, by extra educational provision in order to be fully developed.
Mechanisms to improve the capacity of teachers to identify and adequately respond to gifted and talented students

Professional development and training
As the attitude and preparedness of teachers has a substantial impact on the quality of education that high ability students receive, it is submitted that the implementation of formal training and/or professional development programs would be of great benefit to SEALP teachers. In particular, teachers need to understand that the cognitive, emotional and physical development of a gifted child can occur at different rates, that students have different learning styles and that there are likely to be discrepancies in student ability, both between and within subjects. Likewise, teachers need to understand that giftedness does not automatically ensure academic success. This can be due to a range of factors including perfectionism, poor work habits and lack of motivation. It is also important to recognise the need for flexibility with students’ programs and cater for different pathways for students.

Communication
To help teachers cater for the individual learning needs of students, it is important to develop a strong relationship between students, teachers and parents. Having a teacher responsible for overseeing the SEALP and communicating and meeting regularly with staff allows teachers to be aware of the needs of individual students.
Any broader implications for school communities arising from the education of gifted and talented students

A focus on gifted and talented students within the government system is important in arresting the trend of these students to move to the private system.

While SEALP programs within government schools attract students who may not remain in the Government school system, having government selective schools, as opposed to programs, substantially increases the number of high achieving students taken out of the government school system and can have a major impact on surrounding schools.

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