INQUIRY INTO THE EDUCATION OF GIFTED AND TALENTED STUDENTS

- What programs you currently provide to gifted and talented students

We have offered the Select Entry Accelerated Learning (SEAL) program at Lilydale High School since 1994. We were the second school in Victoria to do so. Currently, of a Year 7 intake of 450, there are two SEALP classes of maximum twenty-five students. The number of Year 7 classes may vary each year depending on the calibre of the students applying for a place in the SEAL program.

The SEAL program aims to address the learning needs of gifted and high-potential students who are capable of working at a significantly faster pace, and in greater depth, than their age peers. Learning in core subjects is accelerated for students in these programs, and opportunities for in-depth study are provided. Until three years ago students at LHS completed Years 7-10 in three years; however, research in the last few years has concluded that if students are more mature they are better equipped for the VCE years. Consequently, we extended our program to six years in 2010. Students will still work at an accelerated rate, allowing them to select VCE subjects at Year 10, thus enabling them to accrue a greater breadth of subjects at this level. Furthermore, some students undertake VCE extension studies, which allow them to complete university subjects as part of their VCE.

In order to be accepted into the program, students are required to sit an entrance exam testing: non-verbal reasoning, numerical reasoning, reading comprehension, mathematics, and writing. Students who successfully complete the exam are recalled for an interview to further assess their suitability for the program; this also allows students and parents to ascertain whether the program meets their personal needs.

Students who are not part of the SEAL program may be given enrichment activities within their mainstream classes. Classroom curriculum is differentiated to meet the needs of the students. Students are encouraged to participate in activities such as the University of NSW Mathematics competition, Science Quest, various writing competitions, specialist sport clinics and creative art competitions.
When the SEAL program was first established, there was some negativity expressed by a small number of students and staff towards the program. Some parents of potential SEAL students expressed nervousness, concerned that their child would be ostracised by the mainstream cohort. As the program has been running for fifteen years, it has become an accepted facet of the school program and these concerns are no longer an issue.

SEAL students generally establish a close and supportive unit as they remain in the one class for Years 7 and 8, moving into the mainstream for electives in Year 9 and 10, whilst staying with their group for core subjects. This gives them the opportunity to be challenged and to develop to their potential alongside like minded peers. This familiarity with one another allows them to be confident without the fear of being ridiculed because of their giftedness.

There is no obvious mainstream bullying or negativity towards the gifted classes. The mainstream tends to feel they cannot compete with accelerated, but are not vindictive as a result. SEAL students are encouraged to join the mainstream in extracurricular activities such camps to establish bonds with those outside of their program. Many students benefit and enjoy these experiences.

Some SEAL students move seamlessly into the mainstream at VCE; however others find the transition difficult and may hide their giftedness. Their self confidence can also suffer as they sometimes feel more ‘lost’ without the gifted group around them, as the class is dissipated into the mainstream according to their subject choice. This is despite participating in sports teams and other school activities as well as their electives at Years 9 and 10. Others find the expectations of VCE greater than they had anticipated and do not have the organisational capacity to manage the workload without a degree of undue stress. As high achievers, this added stress can be a real concern for these students. It is believed the extra year LHS SEAL students will now have in the pre VCE years might alleviate some of the anxiety these students experience.

Sometimes there is also an expectation by teachers that these students will not display ‘normal’ teenage behaviours such as disorganisation, moodiness or defiance. Teachers are reminded that these students are indeed capable of the usual misbehaviours and insecurities most teenagers are likely to experience!

Very occasionally students who enter the SEAL program are required to move into the mainstream; the decision to move students is problematic as it may impact on the perceived veracity of the program. Nevertheless, the decision is made with the best interests of the class as a whole taken into account. The removal of a student from the SEAL program can occur for myriad reasons, usually associated with academic or social concerns. After extensive consultation with teachers, the parents or guardians and the student regarding the reasons for and the
consequences of such a decision, this change may occur. Likewise, it is possible for mainstream students who are deemed eligible to benefit from the SEAL program, to join the accelerated group. This becomes more difficult at the higher levels, however, as students in the SEAL program will have progressed beyond the expected mainstream levels.

- **The experiences of students participating in these programs**

The experiences of these students have been extremely varied over the years. Some have achieved remarkable results in their VCE and have successfully completed University education. Other students have begun their University studies whilst at LHS. Indeed, a number of students have been accepted into the Kwong Lee Dow Young Scholar’s Program. Other students, however, have not achieved as well as expected. This might be attributed to factors similar to those experienced by all teenagers, such as family issues, commitment to study and maturity. Again, this may be curtailed somewhat, with the introduction of the six year program, allowing students to develop a more mature approach to their studies.

- **Your views about how the concepts of ‘giftedness’ and ‘talent’ should be defined**

At Lilydale High School we are of the view that:

*Giftedness* refers to a student's outstanding potential and ability in one or more domains.

Whilst,

*Talent* refers to outstanding performance in one or more fields of human activity. Talent emerges from ability as a consequence of the student's learning experience (Gagné, 1991).

Whilst there is no doubt many students may be gifted in the creative arts or in the sporting arena, our students at LHS are primarily gifted academically as our resources do not extend to the elite requirements of these gifted students.

- **Mechanisms to improve the capacity of teachers to identify and adequately respond to gifted and talented students**

It is important teachers are given the opportunity to attend professional development seminars. Time must be allocated within schools for class teachers to meet and discuss the needs of their students. It is important that teachers are given Departmental support through the provision of professional development seminars. This enables teachers to not only develop valuable networks with colleagues from other schools, but to ascertain the latest teaching and learning strategies required to assist gifted and talented students to develop to their full potential.
- Any broader implications for school communities arising from the education of gifted and talented students

A concern in the past has been the loss of students to selective schools at Year 9. Moreover, other schools are offering gifted programs that are not accredited SEAL programs and this too has had a diluting effect on SEAL schools.

Nevertheless, the inclusion of the SEAL program has been and is beneficial for the culture of the wider school community, as it demonstrates a commitment and expectation of academic excellence. This, in turn has a positive effect on the rest of the school’s population.

At Lilydale High School we acknowledge the importance of all students from every facet of the school community working together in a harmonious and constructive manner; that each and every student treats the other with respect whilst recognising the right of all to learn in a safe and productive environment. Students in the SEAL program are encouraged to join their mainstream peers in many activities such as camps, excursions, sports and the school production. This allows all students the opportunity to interact and develop relationships with in a positive manner with people they may not otherwise meet.

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