Parents of two Highly Gifted children aged 4 and 6

We respond to the request for submissions from the public in particular regard to “Supporting gifted and talented students to shine”.

Terms of Reference

(a) the effectiveness of current policies and programs for gifted and talented students, with particular consideration of, but not limited to:

   (i) identification of gifted and talented students;

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

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

(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;

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

(d) opportunities for improved educational offerings for gifted and talented students through collaboration across all school sectors and with community, business and industry.

Response

Our children are not unusual within the subset of highly gifted children, but by their nature, being 1/1000, they stand out at a regular school. Having said this, neither child was identified by a nurse, doctor, kindergarten teacher or a school teacher. There seems to be a focus on picking up delays or medical problems (and even that is not done very well). Family Daycare Providers have mentioned to us they thought our daughter was gifted, but our son was not picked up. Rather, he was labelled as borderline ADHD. Then last year we had a very excited phone conversation with a Wise Ones program area coordinator after our son was tested as his result was outstanding, even by their standards. That inspired us to find a psychologist who specialises in gifted children, and paid about $600 to have a formal assessment and report for him. We have since had our daughter assessed and a report done, to arm us for school entry. This is well beyond the means of many families, and we are aware how lucky our children are that we are able to do this for them.

At the start of our son’s Prep year every day was ‘the best day ever’ because he was going to school. At the end of the Prep year, our son was so bored and disillusioned with school that he was almost out of control. It was so distressing for us, as parents, to see that light and
excitement that started his school experience, be extinguished. By the end of the year he actually began to show signs of anxiety and depression at the age of six.

The assessment and report process was excellent, because we used a psychologist who specialises in giftedness, understands the needs of these children and knows how to get the best out of them. She was recommended by a wide range of people, including the President of the Maroondah Gifted Parents Association, who said she had referred close to a hundred families and had bad reports from no one. The report gave a range of results and recommendations, and this report was provided to the school. A meeting with the Principal was scheduled and took place on March 10th, and the actions were recorded and distributed. To date, very little has been done, but we are lucky in having an excellent, experienced and skilled teacher in the classroom, who has been able to bring in a bit extra to some of the activities for him.

In order to provide our son with the extension and challenge he requires we have enrolled him in user-pays programs. Currently our son is participating in Wise Ones (one hour per week provided during school time on school grounds), Brainwaves (a GATEWays program on Saturdays) and CHIP holiday programs. These programs have cost us $1058 (not including travel) so far this year. Whilst we don’t mind paying this, it stands out as absolutely impossible for many families to do this for their children. It is also awkward due to the travelling and timing for the programs, except Wise Ones. The benefits, however, are clearly showing in how well our son is settling down. The experience of being extended and challenged, and being around other kids like him, has been invaluable, and this is where GATEWays and CHIP are essential. These programs are only for gifted children, whereas Wise Ones is for clever kids. This may sound elitist, but the fact is that gifted kids know they are different, and that they don’t ‘fit in’ very early. Being around others like him means he doesn’t feel like a freak. He is becoming a better student, easier to manage in the classroom and at home, and, most importantly his spark is starting to return.

There seems to be very little in place in primary schools in terms of policy or programs for gifted students. We were shocked to discover this prior to our son’s entry to school, as there had been something in place in WA back in the eighties, which Kate attended. How well a student is catered for seems to be entirely dependent on the disposition of the staff of the school they attend, as well as how much resource and staff time is available (i.e. very little), and this is almost impossible to ascertain prior to starting there.

Our experience seems to be a cut above the standard, as the Principal does have at least some understanding of what giftedness is, the school allows Wise Ones to provide an ‘opt out’ test during Prep, and provides the Wise Ones program with a room to work from. However, as previously stated, it has been uphill work trying to get the school to act on the recommendations from the psychologist. When our son started school, he was already well ahead in maths. He has learned almost nothing of maths at school to date. In order to provide him with extension in this, his favourite subject, the Principal has said she needs to test him. This has still not happened, and I don’t know what that actually means in practice. For example, if he doesn’t know fractions, does that mean he won’t be provided with any grade 3 work, or does it mean he’ll be exposed to those concepts? There doesn’t seem to be a way to access to the mathematical curriculum at faster rate. Skipping sections doesn’t work, because the concepts need to be taught, and waiting for the classroom pace would bore our son into misbehaviour. Already he has shown signs of going backwards earlier this year, given the pace of instruction. This then was counterpoised by CHIP maths activities that he
couldn’t do, because he’d never had some of the concepts explained. Once explained, he could proceed, but his confidence in his maths was shaken. If he had been allowed to work at his own pace at school, this mis-match wouldn’t have happened.

Our son is only one example, but it is clear from our experience that the school had no real mechanism to identify and assist giftedness. For example, in one class he was clearly bored, 1 minute into the 15 minute explanation of the task at hand. He understood it in that first minute, and then he had to wait 14 minutes to start. At least with our son, by his personality type, he acted up and thus disrupted the class (was labelled naughty) and it triggered action. Quieter personality types would be easily ignored and left to wither in boredom, so it seems you have the choice of withering or being labelled a ‘bad kid’. We have had to deal with the focus on ‘social adjustment’ courses for a boy who’s primary social issue is that he cannot possibly develop meaningful friendships with his age peers, and ultimately the focus on negative behaviours (symptoms) rather than fixing the cause i.e. his boredom and disillusionment with school work.

Having been through all this, and having now opened up a network of families who are experiencing similar things, we are better armed for our daughter’s entry into school next year. She is even more outgoing and ‘difficult’ in many ways, and she is already learning to read. Prep offers nothing for her, academically. Our big hope is that the school will offer a prep/grade1 composite, and include her in that class. Hopefully she will be allowed to slide across to the grade 1 work without much disruption. Currently she is showing distinct signs of boredom as kindergarten does not provide enough hours for her. Her birthday being in December, we had no option of early entry to school – another way that gifted young children are boxed in, and have the brakes forced on.

One final note is just to point out that anything our children have learned outside of school is merely through their own eagerness to learn. As parents who work, we are not homeschooling in any formal sense, but when the children ask or show interest, we provide them with the information wherever possible.

Thoughts for improvements:

- Education of Early Childhood workers (carers, teachers etc) on signs and support for parents. (An addendum could be education of parents in general to reduce their negative responses to the gifted children and their parents.)
- All schools should be required to have a policy in place on how to support gifted students
- Universal screening in Prep
- Funding or subsidies available for families unable to pay for extension programs (particularly the gifted programs)
- More flexibility in the curriculum allowing for broadening and acceleration, and training for teachers in how to apply this in practice
- Consideration should be given to ability grouping of children, rather than automatically, universally grouping by age. (There is a lot of evidence that this helps everyone, not just those who are gifted.)
- Selective entry programs in primary school
- Selective entry high schools