Submission to the Education and Training Committee of the Parliament of Victoria Review of Gifted and Talented Education

**Belgrave Parent Support Group for Gifted and Talented Students.**

We are a Support Group for parents of Gifted Students located in and around Belgrave in the Dandenong Ranges. Our students mainly attend local primary schools although some of our members have children now at Secondary School. Our membership is open to all, including those whose children attend State, Catholic or other Private Schools as well as those who homeschool. We also have members who live outside the local area but find valuable support in talking with like-minded people about issues that affect all of our children's education.

Our group has discussed the issues around Gifted and Talented (G&T) education and have the following comments to submit to your Inquiry.

**General Summary**

We believe that overall, G&T students are not adequately catered for in our current educational system. Our schools, when they actually have a G&T policy do not live by it. A clear example of this is Upwey South Primary School. A policy exists, but parents do not know it exists. Furthermore, the school's processes do not follow the policy. Students are not taught 'above the level'. Streaming does not take place.

We believe the only way to improve this state of affairs is to provide adequate training for all staff to identify and accept G&T as a concept, let alone dealing with individual students. Naturally adequate training requires funding.

**Identification of Gifted and Talented Students.**

As a group we feel there needs to be a clear and consistent Government policy which could be used by the schools in order to identify G&T students. Who is in? How are they identified? Teachers and Parents need to understand this. Ideally there should be a checklist and it should be used.

For most of our schools the identification (for what it is worth) of G&T students is mostly teacher dependent. Generally this is based on classroom work and often also behaviour. For this to be adequate it is vital that teachers have an adequate understanding of what G&T is. Again, this requires training.

If a parent believes their child is gifted and the child is not achieving their full potential in class, (switching off, coasting or being actively disruptive) they find it difficult to argue with the school for more appropriate teaching. We have found that so much is based on a classroom teacher’s individual attitude.
Some parents are considered trouble makers or pushy parents and we have the impression that anything the school does for the children, such as giving extension work or producing some sort of Individual Learning Plan, is just to ‘appease’ the parents. We are often told that our children will ‘plateau’, when what often happens is that the gap increases exponentially, but the school will only measure this as far as its own policies allow. We have heard the arguments that Grade 4 children should not be working on Grade 6 level maths because then there would be nothing to teach them in Grade 6. Government policy needs to be clear and the schools need to understand that children have the right to achieve their full potential.

**External Programs and Issues that have arisen:**

**Gateways.**
Gateways programs are excellent extension programs in specific topics and areas, designed to inspire children and get them thinking more creatively. Unfortunately, schools have not always used them appropriately. In the past it was left to the classroom teacher’s discretion as to who was offered Gateways programs. Often staff just passed them onto the ‘good’ students, or they asked ‘Who wants to do one?’ As a result, children have done these programs as a reward for being good, or simply because they wanted to ‘have a go’. The current G&T Coordinator now has control of the programs and decides who will receive the offers. Yet, because of the lack of communication with parents, and the part time nature of her school attendance, children miss out.

**Thinking Outside the Box.**
In our local area we were fortunate enough to have a targeted G&T program initially based at Tecoma Primary School. It spread to include a number of local State Schools. This program was popular with parents and students and has been running for several years, providing not just extension work, but an ongoing small group program for students who often needed something more challenging than what was happening in the classroom. The ongoing nature of the program benefited students in ways that the one-off Gateways program could not. Parents received regular feedback and developed a relationship with the teacher and found support with each other. Our Support Group actually came about through this program.
Unfortunately, this program too suffered major difficulties mainly because of the attitudes of the schools involved. The program was seen as elitist, by staff and by some other parents. Upwey South Primary School in particular put many hurdles in its way.

**User Pays**
All G&T extension programs outside the classroom, and many of the ones provided in school are paid for by parents. This raises equity issues. Not everyone can afford for their child to attend such programs. This makes it vital to have schools implementing strategies to adequately cater for students within the school program.
Internal Programs and Issues that have arisen

Most schools offer some sort of internal means of supporting G&T students, at least on paper.

Streaming
Tecoma Primary School has recently introduced streaming for its Maths program. Other local schools do not. If such methods are introduced they are haphazard and seem entirely dependent on the School leadership.

ILPs (Individual Learning Plans)
Some schools provide them yet there is no clarity for parents as to which children should have them. Some parents are unaware that such a thing exists and would not even know to ask for one. For those that have them, there is often limited scope to see how this improves the child’s education. Some teachers will set a deeper level of work, particularly homework activities, but we feel this puts the onus on parents to do the work of educating their children at the appropriate level.

Chess Club
Some schools have a Chess Club which basically forms the entire G&T offering. Chess is a user pays activity.

Clustering
As a group we feel that clustering of G&T students in a smaller number of classes is beneficial. This is easier in larger schools and we feel it was attempted last year at Upwey South. This year however, apparently due to staff complaints, ‘Mrs X has the ‘clever’ class’, it has been dropped. Again, we feel this all comes back to adequate training of staff.

Our Suggestions

As a parent group we suggest that schools could have access to training particularly to see how other schools deal with G&T programs and issues. We also feel there need to be stronger G&T networks established between schools. We suggest that there could be some funding allocated to this.

We would like all schools to establish program support groups involving G&T students, their parents and staff and that their suggestions are acted upon.

We feel that each school should have an active and well informed G&T Coordinator, who is an advocate for G&T students and by extension their parents. One school has recently appointed a G&T Co-ordinator who provides little if any support to parents. She has been openly hostile to some outside G&T programs and has minimal experience or knowledge of the field. In addition, she is a part time member of staff and does not have the time to adequately deal with the issues. The teaching staff as a whole has similar issues.
We would like to see all G&T students given ILPs which indicate forms of truly differentiated learning and that these ILPs are put into practice.

We would like to see a mentoring program established, for example, exposing students to programs within the local High School, or getting advanced students to work with younger students in areas such as Maths. This happens across many primary schools in regard to average or below average students, but not for those at the top end. They may be helping out weaker students, but rarely are they exposed to higher learning.

We believe that if Government Policy actively supported these ideas, the improvements in all our systems would be more readily achievable.

Thank you for this opportunity to comment. We hope some positive actions come from this review. We can be contacted by telephone (Heike Reich, Kim Dingfelder, Kirstie Calder) or postally (Heike Reich, Kim Dingfelder, Kirstie Calder) (on behalf of the Belgrave Parent Support Group for Gifted and Talented Students).

Sincerely,

Heike Reich
Kim Dingfelder
Kirstie Calder
(on behalf of the Belgrave Parent Support Group for Gifted and Talented Students).