Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry. If I may, I would like to share my experiences as the parent of a child whose abilities fall within the scope of your inquiry. I hope my story may help to illustrate the impact of the current lack of resources for these children. My son is eleven, this year he is in Grade Five.

From a very early age I knew he learned differently to his peers. At age three he was frustrated and angry at himself because he could not read a supermarket catalogue he picked up. Before he turned nine he had read (and understood) the entire Harry Potter series.

I was fortunate in that I was able to send him to a Montessori kindergarten. For three years he blossomed under this philosophy which focussed on meeting each individual child’s needs, and extending their capabilities. Excellence and high achievement were treated as normal.

I sent my son to the same government primary school his older sister attended. His abilities were quickly recognised by his Prep teacher, and I had high hopes for his education. His teacher could not find any reading material to challenge him. He discovered non-fiction.

Each year after that I found myself having the same conversation with his teachers - he was not being challenged, and was capable of much more than was being asked of him. They assured me they would provide more suitable work for him.

Very little changed. To it’s credit, the school suggested he skip Grade Three. Academically he was managing easily, but socially it was a disaster. He was not accepted by his new class mates. One commented “What a pity you are so young”. He was also missing his friends. After six months of watching my usually exuberant child become a sad little boy, I knew I could not allow the situation to continue. I felt I had to make a choice between his education and his happiness. I chose his happiness and asked for him to be moved back with his original cohort, knowing full well that there would be very little academic stimulation.
By the following year he had started to “dumb himself down” to fit in with his mates. He didn’t want to stand out. While he had some friends visiting at home, I overheard the following conversation, which I will never forget:

Child 1 - I hate being smart.
Child 2 - Yeah.
Child 1 - It’s really boring. I just do my maths really slow now. ‘Cos if I get it finished early I just have to sit there and do nothing.

Around this time my child was being sent home with maths homework several years below his ability level. He would ask “Mum, do I have to do this?” I was at a loss to justify his teacher’s request. I concluded that while the school had gone some way towards identifying my son’s abilities, they did not know how to educate him. I feared that if I left him at that school any longer he would end up denying his wonderful abilities. *(I have included a copy of the letter I sent to the school, advising of the reasons why he was leaving. I have deleted his name.)*

I began looking for another school, but found the other local primary schools unable to offer any plan of how they would educate my child. I chose an Independent school, that while not perfect, my son and I are both very happy with the decision. Within a few weeks he had been invited to join the accelerated maths class, and he learns a language which he acquires at a frightening pace.

I am very relieved to know that he still has his desire to learn. My worry was that if he had stayed at his old school, and never been exposed to challenging and difficult ideas and concepts, he would never learn how to learn. It is so important for bright children, just like everyone else, to learn how to struggle and persevere with work that is hard.

I had never intended to send my child to an Independent school. As a single parent who works part time, the cost of this education is a huge financial burden, but I felt it was the only choice I had. I know many other parents who have agonised over the same decision. Many move to private schools, some just hope the “problem” will resolve itself, or just go away. It is heartbreaking to think that these children with the most wonderful, amazing intellects, have become a “problem” to our education system.

From my experiences as a parent, I would like to make the following points:

- Children need to be assessed and identified as gifted or talented in primary school, by individual teacher assessments, not “NAPLAN” style “one size fits all” type of test. These tests are not an accurate assessment of ability, as many children are finishing them in a fraction of the time allocated.
Teachers need the training to make these assessments, and then know what to do with the information.

Academic excellence should be celebrated all through school - not just Year 12. Children should be allowed to get A’s on their report and be proud of it.

School awards should include the essentials like maths and reading, not just sports and “great helper” awards. Our sporting champions are in the news all the time - when will our brilliant scientists be publicly acknowledged in the popular media? Why is it that our world renowned Synchrotron is in financial difficulty, yet our government supports the Grand Prix, AFL Grand Final, and the Melbourne Cup?

Gifted and talented children are as entitled to special resources and funding as those who struggle.

Individual learning plans for ALL children.

All schools need to offer in house programs for gifted and talented students. External programs, such as GATEways only offer extension work for a few days, and are extremely expensive. $200 per day is not unusual.

Creation of select entry primary schools. Currently students must wait until Year Nine to access Melbourne four select entry schools. By Year Nine some of these gifted and talented students risk becoming bored, underachieving troublemakers.

Improve teacher training to include identification of underachievers.

SEAL programs offered by some schools vary greatly in quality. They need to be consistent, with a clear path through all of secondary school, not just the early secondary years.

Aside from the Classics, there is a lack of fiction material available for advanced, younger readers. My child now reads as well as most adults, but the content of these books in inappropriate for his age.

I am encouraged and heartened by this Inquiry. It is my sincere wish that changes can be made to the delivery of education to Victoria’s Gifted and Talented students. I know many other parents who share my concerns - most change schools in an attempt to find something better, often opting for expensive private schooling. We often hear that private schools “snap up” the brightest students away from government schools. I believe the opposite is true. The public system is abandoning these gifted and talented students, and driving them away.

Regards,

Kim Steere.
Dear [Name],

It is with some sadness that I wish to advise that XXXXXXX will be leaving Primary School at the end of the year. For some time I have been concerned with the school's ability to support and challenge his talents, and foster his particular interests. While there does seem to have been some positive changes in recent weeks, I feel it is too little, too late; and I have no confidence that these improvements will continue in 2011 or 2012. I have come to believe that Primary School cannot cater to my child's needs.

XXXXX has long expressed a fascination and aptitude for maths, science (physics in particular) and all things mechanical. This area of science is largely ignored by the school, with its excessive focus on biology - gardening in particular. The lack of extension opportunities is an area where the school has let XXXXX down. The school has been aware of his abilities yet had done little to nurture them, other than the sporadic offering of Gateways programs. These programs are extremely expensive, inconvenient, and inconsistent in quality. One was little more than a marketing opportunity for a computer program. Primary School has in the past offered extension classes, Tournament of the Minds, and chess groups.

I feel the school has not only failed XXXXX, but the other academically minded students as well. Their achievements and abilities are not celebrated or lauded as something to which other students might aspire. It has been made very clear to students and parents that gardening, music and art are the areas valued by the school. This direction has become known by the hills community, where Primary School has gained a reputation as a place to send your children for gardening, instead of learning.

I had hoped that the school's review recommendation of Individual Learning Plans for all students would address XXXXX's needs. I was very disappointed to learn that this suggestion was not to be implemented.

The decision to leave was not made lightly. XXXXX's leaving will end our family's 12 year association with Primary School. I was very happy with my
daughter’s time at XXXXX which is why I did not question the school as a choice for XXXXX. However, leaving left me feeling that there was no one left to champion the high achievers. That was the “final straw” and I made the decision to leave the following week.

Other aspects of XXXXX Primary School which have made the decision to leave easier are the ridiculously late lunch time with inconsistent opportunities for the children to eat between breakfast and lunch; and the removal of the traditional fete (a highlight of the year and much loved by the children) and its replacement with yet another gardening activity.

I have visited and made enquiries at several local primary schools over the past months, and have found that like XXXXX Primary School, none are brave enough to let the smart kids shine. We have chosen College in XXXXX because they explicitly promote and celebrate, through various awards, the academic achievements of students, and offer in-house extension programs.

XXXXX is looking forward to his new school and the challenges it will bring. He will be attending orientation days as they occur later this year.

Regards,

Kim Steere.