Submission on behalf of Principals’ Association of Victorian Catholic Secondary Schools (PAVCSS) into the Parliamentary Inquiry into Gifted and Talented students

How should the concepts of 'giftedness' and 'talent' be defined?

The starting point should be agreeing on a definition of ‘giftedness” and “talented”. Gagne’s Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent (DMGT) serve as a widely recognised and respected model for understanding the two different terms:

‘GIFTEDNESS’ designates the possession and use of outstanding natural abilities, called aptitudes, in at least one ability domain

‘TALENT’ designates the outstanding mastery of systematically developed abilities, called competencies (knowledge and skills), in at least one field of human activity

Further information from the research of Howard Gardner, Martha Morelock or Joseph Renzulli can assist schools in determining what would best suit their environment and philosophy on education.

There are many diverse conceptualizations of ‘giftedness’, however, the research suggests that a school’s definition of ‘gifted and talented’ students should grow out of its philosophy on teaching and learning. In Victoria, the Catholic Education Office Melbourne (CEOM) promotes differentiation of the curriculum in the regular classroom as the ‘preferred way’ of meeting the learning needs of most students, including the gifted and talented and highly able.

In most Catholic schools across Victoria, the DMGT developed by Francoys Gagne is generally accepted as the most useful way of understanding exceptionality or giftedness in students.

Gagne’s model defines gifts as ‘untrained abilities’ that become developed into ‘measurable talents’ via learning and practice. Gifts break down into intellectual, creative, socio-affective, and sensorimotor domains; talents into academics, arts, business, leisure, social action, sports and technology. The transformation from gifts to talents involves three types of catalysts, which positively or negatively impact learning: intrapersonal (e.g. physical, motivational, and personality factors), environmental (e.g. persons, events, and one’s social milieu), and chance (one’s genetic and family circumstances).
From most to least impact on talent development, Gagne lists chance; the innate gifts themselves: intrapersonal catalysts: learning practice, and lastly environmental catalysts.

What are the key benefits and issues surrounding programs for gifted and talented students, including any gaps identified in current programs?

Gifted and talented or high ability students require and benefit from instruction that includes a faster pace of learning, greater independence in study and thought and increased complexity and depth in subject content. It is the right of each student to have his or her potential fulfilled; to be able to give back to the community or make an outstanding contribution to the world in their particular field.

Benefits:

- We are helping all students reach their full potential by recognising individual learning styles, special abilities and catering for particular learning needs. Grouping gifted and talented students together enhances, challenges
and extends their learning experiences and provides a rewarding learning environment for otherwise underperforming or bored students.

- An articulated program for “Gifted and Talented Students” embeds and enhances a culture of high expectation and excellence in learning within the school. It enables the community to recognise, celebrate and most importantly encourage the brightest and most motivated students. It can inspire others to seek such levels of achievement.

- Students identified as gifted and talented benefit both academically and socially from specific programs designed to meet their needs. Vialle and Rogers (2009) cite findings from research conducted by The National Research Centre on the Gifted and Talented to support their promotion of grouping within school settings. They are as follows:
  - Over one school year, high ability students who are grouped together but do not receive modified curricular experiences outperform similar students who have not been grouped by about one month
  - Students who are grouped within a class by ability and are provided tailored instruction outperform similar students from mixed classes who are not grouped by three or more month
  - High ability students from enrichment classes outperform similar students from conventional classes by four to five months
  - Talented students from accelerated classes outperform students of the same age and IQ who have not been accelerated by almost one full year
  - Students who are not in high ability groups are not harmed academically by ability grouping and may gain academic ground in some cases
  - **Ability grouping does not have negative effects on students’ self-esteem and appears to be slightly positive for lower achieving students**

**Issues:**

Some of the obstacles that may prevent schools doing more for Gifted and Talented and Highly Able students are:

- Lack of whole school policy, requiring strategic planning which best meets the needs of Gifted and Talented Students

- Lack of sufficient funds to ensure effective provision in all school settings
Underdeveloped or inappropriate identification processes for Gifted and Highly Able students, including high performing, underperforming and students with disabilities, e.g. Asperger’s Syndrome

Inconsistent curriculum differentiation provision and assessment across all regular programs

Insufficient Professional Learning to ensure all teaching staff are appropriately informed and trained to meet the individual learning needs of all students

Embedded antagonism towards educating elite groups within the school context

Societal attitudes towards academic giftedness – embedded antagonism towards educating elite groups within a school context

High achieving female students facing hostile learning environments in co-educational settings

Cultural differences in manifestations of giftedness

Poor support structures for gifted and highly able students (consultants, auxiliary personnel)

Teacher Training Programs need to ensure courses equip future teachers with the skills necessary to meet the needs of talented and gifted students.

Gaps:

Schools often lack clear policy in the area of “gifted and talented students’ learning needs” and hence do not offer an effective differentiated curriculum and/or individualised learning plans which may include acceleration, extension and enrichment learning opportunities and regular access to an effective network of support associations.

Schools in remote, some regional and rural areas experience significant difficulties regarding access to identification support services, networking and enrichment learning opportunities.

Students identified as ‘gifted and talented’ may receive positive affirmation in terms of academic learning, but can lack support or be misunderstood by peers, parents and teachers in regards to their social and emotional well-being.

Networking between schools can be limited by geographic, social, marketing and/or sectoral boundaries.

Gifted can be specific to one area of learning – therefore simply accelerating a year level may not be appropriate.
Gifted can be at risk for isolation and loneliness or they can become arrogant about their abilities, which can make them a target for teasing.

Unrecognised gifted and talented students can also be at risk of being bored, leading to loss of realising potential, underachievement and discipline problems.

Gifted programs face negative connotations associated with elitism but this is unfair because these students simply possess skills to a higher level than most people in their class, just like top athletes or musicians etc. They should be able to realise their full potential in the same way that we encourage Olympic athletes.

Problem of differentiating the curriculum, that is, moving students beyond VELS year-level standards is that it creates extra work for the teacher who needs to adapt, modify or replace the existing school curriculum to provide a stimulating and thought-provoking curriculum for the gifted student. Differentiated curriculum needs to be open-ended, inquiry-based and interdisciplinary, providing space for students to work independently and in small groups.

Identify relevant projects currently underway specific to the education of gifted and talented students?

Many schools offer a range of different programs and programming options which can include ability groupings, curriculum differentiation and acceleration, cluster groupings, interdisciplinary projects and extracurricular activities (here schools work often in partnership with local, university and industry organisations and subject associations).

Most subject areas have challenges and competitions that allow gifted and talented students to shine. They include poetry writing, story writing, music, athletics, debating, mathematic, scientific, artistic and problem solving challenges and community involvement.

Several schools provide an Individual Learning Plan for ‘gifted and talented’ students. Some schools ensure that the needs of gifted and talented students are provided in the articulation of curriculum leadership responsibilities.

Some schools provide gifted and talented students with three broad curricular options: acceleration, enrichment and extension, yet within an otherwise regular program.
**Acceleration** may involve early entry, year level acceleration or subject acceleration. Year level acceleration involves the gifted or highly able student accelerating a whole year level and can happen at any stage of schooling.

**Subject based Acceleration** is appropriate for those students who demonstrate ‘giftedness’ or high academic ability in a particular academic area, for example Mathematics, Music or Languages. These students remain in their regular classroom for the majority of their lessons and attend another classroom in their strength area.

**Enrichment** opportunities are delivered in a variety of forms. They may be timetabled into the school day or ‘one-off’ experiences designed to challenge the learner and delivered off campus. Subject specific enrichment activities and lectures are also offered across the curriculum and in some areas as Cluster Enrichment days where highly able students are selected for participation.

**Extension** activities take place in the regular classroom or in “pull-out” grouping option. Rather than giving highly able or gifted students more of the same work, the class teachers are encouraged to design subject tasks/projects that are open-ended and encourage a deeper level of understanding by these students. In senior levels, students are encouraged to undertake certain subjects ahead of their year level. This includes an option for select students to undertake a first year University subject while completing Year 12.

In the “pull-out” grouping option, students from different classes meet as one on a regular basis when effective acceleration practices can be employed to meet their learning needs in literacy and/or numeracy.

**Cluster Grouping**- this type of option groups a small number of students in a class where they access a differentiated curriculum. This arrangement allows gifted or highly able students to work together thus avoiding being isolated in a permanent grouping situation with lower ability students. The literature on this type of strategy reports that teachers have noted “a general improvement in achievement for the whole class.” Discussion also suggests that this may be due to the improvement in the teacher’s knowledge of how to cater more effectively for the highly able student having a flow on effect for the rest of the class and thereby raising their overall achievement level.
There are other opportunities for students to have access to gifted programs outside of the school hours. These can be discovered through an internet search or through local networks, such as Victorian Association for Gifted and Talented Children (VAGTC) and Children of High Intellectual Potential (CHIP).

**What is your view of the equity of access to programs for all gifted and talented students in Victoria?**

Gifted and talented programs are needed within all school settings.

As a matter of justice, and as for all with special learning needs (including those with disabilities), gifted and talented students have the same right as all students to have their learning needs addressed in order to fulfil their highest potential. Without an appropriate and challenging learning environment, gifted and talented students can move quickly into a negative learning mode, frequently experiencing frustration, boredom and social rejection.

However, although there is an increased awareness of the needs of gifted and talented students and a greater focus on personalising learning, there is still great divergence in how this plays out across all school settings.

Access to the full range of options (acceleration, extension and enrichment) relies extensively on funding, staffing and resourcing priorities. Greater equity for gifted and talented students is needed across all sectors, especially to ensure access to relevant support networks.

As a profession, we have not come to terms with the fact that these students need support and guidance in order to be able to make the best possible use of their abilities. As we all know, a high IQ or a special gift or talent in itself does not guarantee success and happiness. Many of these children burn out at an early age or redirect their talents in negative ways because they have not had the support and encouragement they need.

Gifted and talented students if encouraged and challenged in regular school settings, inspire all students to achieve across the full range of learning areas. Specialist schools narrow opportunities for all students to be enriched and motivated by the successful learning achievements of gifted and talented peers.
Giftedness is regarded as being equally represented across all races, cultures, and economic groupings. The following points need to be considered in any discussion about equity of access to Gifted and Talented programs whether in Victoria or throughout Australia:

- The development of systematic, comprehensive, and objective identification procedures that include **English Language Learners** “even when their majority language development is not quite there” (Vialle and Rogers, 2009) and **culturally diverse (e.g. Indigenous Australians)** gifted learners

- The provision of a ‘more individualised or small group service’ initially for both English Language Learners and culturally diverse gifted learners, rather than gifted classes so that the teacher can work with their exhibited strengths and/or provide remediation for areas of weakness

- General professional development for all teachers regarding cultural sensitivities of both the gifted English language Learner’s background and that of the culturally diverse gifted learner – “the under-representation of the culturally diverse in gifted programs must be regarded as ignorance on the part of the majority culture to understand the idiosyncratic behaviours, traits, and characteristics of other cultures than their own” (Vialle and Rogers, 2009)

- Research indicates that at this point in time, “we cannot say that there is a truly culturally fair instrument” (Vialle and Rogers) to test the aptitude of culturally diverse learners. Many of them measure just one aspect of general intelligence through a specific mode which may not be the modality strength of every student from every culture

- The fostering of parent involvement, for both groups, at school in order to maintain effective and open communication

- Should gifted students from an ELL, culturally diverse (e.g., Australian Indigenous), or economically disadvantaged background be placed in a mainstream gifted program for which they have no prior experience expectation? Schools should consider another level of service that ensures that these students will gain the knowledge and skills (e.g. how to take tests, to organise and plan, to set realistic goals, to know how to study, and how to communicate fluently both orally and in written forms) they need to succeed in a regular gifted program
What is your view on the issue of underperformance among gifted and talented students?

It is essential that all schools are supported to develop and provide appropriate programs that ensure that the learning challenges and achievements of gifted and talented students reach their potential.

When students are unchallenged by the school curriculum they quickly become disengaged with schooling. If a curriculum is not differentiated to provide different levels of challenge it will most likely only serve the needs of the ‘middle’ group of learners, leaving both students with higher and lower levels of ability frustrated, powerless, unmotivated and lazy.

The issue of unidentified gifted underachievers has become more evident in recent years as the use of more sophisticated and varied measures of intelligence and achievement has increased in schools. Teachers and parents therefore need more information, training and professional support to both recognise and redress such behaviours in gifted and talented students.

Emotional development for gifted and talented students requires that schools make available professional support services, such as psychologists and specialist teachers. Many gifted students struggle with their giftedness because they have a difficult time developing a sense of self or identity. College psychologists, counsellors and specialist teachers who may be trained in recognising this struggle can provide vital support for these students, devising interventions and strategies that explore and strengthen the identity formation and resilience of gifted students.

Comment on ways of overcoming negative attitudes and misconceptions surrounding giftedness and talent?

There needs to be quality and essential teacher professional development in this area for both experienced and pre-service teachers. While it is always preferable for teachers who enjoy working with this type of student to do so, other teachers should be encouraged to get involved in team teaching in this area in order to expand their understanding of the needs and issues of gifted and talented learners. It is through the education of teachers and parents that we will best address prevailing negative attitudes towards giftedness and talent and provide a better school experience for these students.
Schools need to develop both the capacity to identify those who are gifted and talented as also to celebrate their learning achievements in the context of embedding a culture of excellence in learning which will motivate and inspire all students to achieve of their best.

All schools must not only recognise that there are students who are gifted and talented, but that students can exhibit their giftedness and talent in a variety of ways and these may not necessarily be across all learning areas. Schools need to learn that as with all students, within those who are gifted and talented there can be those who are underachieving gifted or gifted in one area and struggling in another. Hence schools need to provide a range of programs that provide extension options for gifted and talented students in specific subjects as well as through cross-disciplinary and/or co-curricular projects.

What mechanisms would improve the capacity of teachers to identify and adequately respond to gifted and talented students?

The provision of quality professional development from both outside ‘experts’ and leaders within schools would provide teachers with a theoretical knowledge base to understand gifted and talented students and also support them to identify and cater for them in classrooms through differentiated curriculum and/or individual learning plans. In addition to regular models of professional learning opportunities, it is recommended that a designated leadership position be prescribed to support teachers in this area of curriculum provision.

A variety of mechanisms is needed within schools to help teachers identify students who are gifted and talented. Any testing that takes place must be capable of assessing a range of student abilities. Teachers should also have the skills to adequately interpret the results of such testing so that the appropriate students are being selected for gifted and talented programs. Other mechanisms such as peer assessment, observation of students using a checklist of characteristics and behaviours of gifted and talented students, parent input and sharing of data from school to school would also help teachers to develop an appropriate program for gifted and talented students.

More broadly, schools need to be encouraged to ensure a learning environment that is open-ended, creative, problem-solving, well-resourced, student-centred, offering a variety of interactive settings enabling group and independent work, and including learning through interdisciplinary approaches.
Opportunities are needed for professional networking across schools, subject associations and business enterprises so as to enhance the capacity of teachers to provide quality learning experiences for all gifted and talented students within their school settings.

Are there other broader implications for school communities arising from the education of gifted and talented students?

Education is a right for all students. Providing a meaningful and challenging learning program for gifted and talented students is a logical extension of this right as that of providing for students who have other learning disabilities.

Many schools are unable to provide quality programs in this area of gifted and talented due to funding constraints and a lack of appropriately trained teachers and specialist support staff. Across the general community, it needs to be made clear that ‘equality’ means that all students are challenged at a level commensurate with their ability and that this is not to be confused with ‘sameness’. All schools therefore need to develop a gifted and talented education policy.

Many schools are under increasing pressure to provide individualised programs for students and in some instances may lose enrolments as parents press for specific programs. In some instances, well-meaning advice from primary schools for students entering secondary education may not only be misguided and without agreed measures of giftedness and talent; unrealistic expectations can impact negatively on a student’s development and sow the seeds for disengagement and other learning difficulties.

Students demonstrate their individual learning potential at different stages in their development. The withdrawal of gifted and talented students in early years of secondary education into cluster groups and/or specialist schools seriously diminishes the capacity of all students to be motivated, inspired and coached by their peers. John Hattie’s most recent research of fifteen years relating to student achievement highlights the powerful effect of peer influences and of adapting curricula to be more appropriately challenging, especially through acceleration or differential curricular for gifted students. *(Visible Learning, A Synthesis of over 800 Meta-Analyses relating to achievement, John A.C. Hattie, Routledge 2009, pp 107)* Furthermore it is noted that there is an almost zero effect from ability grouping.
Schools should ensure that gifted and talented programs provide students diverse opportunities to develop and apply their talents. These programs should be regularly reviewed and evaluated to ensure students learning needs are being met. Teachers should have a variety of teaching strategies that can be included in their core programs to support the learning needs of their gifted and talented students. They should also be able to identify students with such needs within their classes.

As teachers require a range of skills and support to do this effectively, schools should provide professional learning opportunities for staff in the areas mentioned above to ensure their gifted and talented students are given every chance to succeed.

This submission is representative of the responses from several Catholic secondary schools and has been collated on behalf of the PAVCSS Curriculum Reference Team by:

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