30 May 2011
Ms Kerryn Riseley, Executive Officer
Education and Training Committee
Parliament House
Spring Street
EAST MELBOURNE  3002

By e-mail etc@parliament.vic.gov.au

Submission to the inquiry into the education of gifted and talented students

The CHIP Foundation commends the Senate in calling for submissions in what we see as a vitally important educational issue for Australia.

The structure of this submission is a brief statement about our Foundation and its aims, an overview statement and a commentary under what we see as key issues.

Representatives of the CHIP Foundation will be available to elaborate further if required, either directly to the Committee, in person or by other electronic means.

Signed the Board of Management – CHIP Foundation

Dr Gail R Byrne, (Chair), Psychologist in Private Practice, Teacher
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The CHIP Foundation

The CHIP Foundation is the oldest independent Victorian advisory service specialising in the needs of CHIP and their families. The CHIP Foundation was established to encourage the development and education of Children of High Intellectual Potential and to support their needs and those of their parents and teachers.

Established in 1987 we have almost 25 years expertise in working with CHIP and their families and have worked with in excess of 2500 families in this time. Many of these 2500 families are from traditionally under-served populations: those who were geographically remote, those disadvantaged socio-economically and those who struggled to reverse underachievement in their children.

The CHIP Foundation receives no government funding.

Ten years ago we offered specialist assessment, counselling and support services on a fee-for-service basis however the fees charged for assessments, counselling and programs were heavily subsidised to meet those in financial need. We held up to four annual public forums on areas of interest to parents and teachers; many of which attracted over 100 participants.

Without Government funding and offering heavily subsidised services our costs outstripped our capital: charging less than $5 per person to attend a public forum did not increase our finances. Ultimately our increasing insurance and business compliance costs meant that we had to reconsider our ‘street front’ and our range of services.

From about five years ago we changed our services significantly.

The CHIP Foundation today exists as a web presence – www.chipfoundation.org.au. Our website provides extensive information free of charge to the general public about intellectually able children. In a view to becoming ‘self-funding’ we have produced for purchase a series of guides which will shortly be available on specific areas relevant to parents of intellectually able children. Our aim will be to offer these at a price within reach of all families including disadvantaged families.

Members of our Board as well, on a voluntary basis, take emails and calls from parents and schools who are seeking different or more detailed information about gifted children and services which may be available for them. Whilst most are handled in a voluntary (ie free) capacity – some services will attract a fee-for-service.

The CHIP Foundation’s Mission Statement

To provide a quality service and support system to serve the needs of children of high intellectual potential, their families and their teachers

To work to place the educational needs of these children high on the political and bureaucratic agenda in Victoria
To foster research on the development of children of high intellectual potential

And, to raise the level of community awareness of these children and their families.

The CHIP Foundation has always engaged in extensive informal and unpaid liaison with schools, teachers, the pre-school sector, Children’s Services (Health and Community Services), local government, private psychologists and psychiatrists. We continue to build links with schools, school systems, Gifted Education Units in universities, other Gifted Associations and Parent Groups.

Why ‘CHIP’ and not ‘gifted’.

The acronym CHIP (Children of High Intellectual Potential) was created by Emeritus Professor K Brian Start in 1987 to separate his work with Australian children of high intellectual potential from the implied elitism inextricably linked to the use of the term ‘gifted’. As the original Chairman and driving force behind the Foundation we acknowledge the important work of Professor Start in the Australian arena.

Over the years, acceptance of the term CHIP appears to have grown in Australia and overseas. In the context of intellectual ability, ‘gifted’ still exists as a pejorative and ‘elitism’ as something to be discouraged in our classrooms and schools (Senate Select Committee, 1988, 2001). Indeed, the Foundation believes that the difficulties faced in working with and researching ‘gifted’ children in an Australian, and especially a Victorian, context seem in no small part to be rooted in the discomfort of many Australians with the term ‘gifted’.

The CHIP Foundation continues to be concerned that there is a belief by many persons holding influential positions in schools that ‘giftedness’ is a middle class phenomenon. In reality, high intellectual potential exists in a population regardless of where one lives, one’s gender, one’s wealth or one’s ethnicity. A ‘gift’ suggests something given and perhaps not deserved. Children of high intellectual potential have special educational needs – through no fault of their own – just as there are students who are struggling with meeting the demands of the mainstream curriculum – also through no fault of their own. We continue to work to breakdown the myths and inaccuracies which exist about Australia’s brightest students.

Unashamedly, the CHIP Foundation is concerned with high intellectual potential, defined, by us, as being in the top five-percent (i.e. one child in twenty). This one in twenty child is likely to experience classroom learning differently from others. Whilst many such children are A+ students, talented musicians, artists and athletes, many too, are underachieving and unrecognised for the intellectual potential they possess. It is their potential which we seek to have recognised and developed.

Despite some changes since the two Senate Select Committee Reports in 1988 and 2001, at both of which we gave evidence, the CHIP Foundation continues to have concerns about the education of this most “disadvantaged of special needs students” – as the intellectually gifted were identified in the Reports.
(a) Staff and schools must be trained in the preliminary identification of CHIP and in meeting their special educational requirements. Schools and personnel must offer parents more than rhetoric. If teachers are not to be trained through pre-service then in-service programs must be put in place.

(b) Psychologists and guidance officers must be trained in formal identification procedures. They need to acquire knowledge through either under- or post-graduate training about CHIP. By their very nature some CHIP respond in beyond-the-ordinary ways on assessment procedures. Just as with their teaching colleagues, Psychologists at the present time must complete no compulsory units on CHIP in degree courses.

(c) CHIP behaviour and social interactions may be ‘different’ from chronological-age peers and misdiagnoses of ADD, ADHD and Asperger’s Syndrome appear to be on the increase.

(d) Whilst we welcome the interest in trying different approaches to teaching and learning it is imperative to realise that models such as Gardner’s Multiple Intelligences do not necessarily ensure that the curriculum is appropriately challenging for CHIP. Accompanying the increasing use of a variety of school-based models must be an understanding of the principles of a truly CHIP-appropriate education.

(e) The CHIP Foundation is concerned by the lack of research – and lack of research funding – allocated to the CHIP area.

(f) The CHIP Foundation continues to lobby for mandated educational programs for children identified as CHIP. As is appropriate, children under 70 IQ have individual Educational Programs (IEPs) written. We await educational mandates for children over 130 IQ.

Generally,

It is unfortunate that no Commonwealth government since 1988 has made a clear policy statement on the special educational requirements of CHIP. Unless clearly mandated, Australian parents will continue to be faced with a range of ad hoc provisions for their intellectually gifted children. These provisions will not be embedded into the curriculum as are the Key Learning Areas but will be subjected to the vagaries of sympathetic staff, out-of-load extra curricula activities and budgetary restraints. Indeed, many of our parents have reported changing schools on the basis of the new school’s “good ‘gifted’ programs” only to find the ‘program’ was really a ‘provision’ which changes in staff, new attitudes or budgetary challenges closed down all too swiftly.

The CHIP Foundation is disappointed that whilst some University faculties offer optional units in CHIP studies in some undergraduate degrees, at present it is our belief that no compulsory unit of study is required of any graduating teacher in Victoria. If one takes the rule-of-thumb that the top 5% of a population are “high intellectual potential” approximately 35,000 students in Victorian schools are being educated by teachers who have received no pre-service training into their needs.
Surely this number of students is not inconsiderable and warrants some obligatory study for all teachers. Neither can it fully be suggested that in-service training is adequately addressing teacher-training needs across Victoria.

We are unaware of any Commonwealth funding for any CHIP related research project and certainly not for a national centre for research as recommended by the 1988 Senate Committee report and supported in the 2001 report.

**The means of identifying gifted and talented children**

Although there appears to be more interest in CHIP today it is perhaps surprising that interest has not necessarily driven policy and protocols for accurate identification. Parents report current policies on the identification of CHIP to be confusing and ambiguous. There does not appear to be a set of accepted criteria as to what constitutes a CHIP even within schools in the same school sector. This adds to parents’ confusion when moving states and/or changing schools as the educational opportunities offered to CHIP are not comparable in all States, or even within Victoria.

Even entry into the system can be confusing. Without explicit Early Entry policies for young CHIP, parents are at a loss to even find out the criteria for meeting these requirements in Victoria.

Many parents seeking advice from the CHIP Foundation report their confusion in the role of achievement testing versus intelligence testing in the identification of CHIP. It is important to stress that much school-based testing is achievement-oriented and is likely to miss underachievers, compliant girls, children from Non-English speaking backgrounds and children with language disabilities. Any assessment instrument for CHIP must not rely on previous learning, gender, socio-economic status, and must be culture fair.

Parents report that they are informed by school personnel that the school follows a ‘multiple intelligences’ approach and that the needs of all gifted children are met by this approach. Unfortunately widespread enthusiastic acceptance of an approach such as Multiple Intelligence Theory (Gardner, 1985) seems to assuage the desire to recognise all children as ‘gifted’ by down-playing intellectual giftedness as a mere variant of a giftedness which is available to all. In suggesting all children are gifted to some extent, the need to assess children displaying extra-ordinary abilities is thereby reduced, if not completely negated.

Whilst we welcome the interest in trying different approaches to teaching and learning it is imperative to realise that models such as Multiple Intelligences do not necessarily ensure that the curriculum is appropriately challenging for CHIP. Accompanying the increasing use of a variety of school-based models must be an understanding of the principles of a truly CHIP-appropriate education, which begins with identification.

Just as children with integration needs, are best served when their needs are identified through a test with a ‘low floor’, so too, testing appropriate to CHIP must have a sufficiently ‘high ceiling’. Children who consistently score highly on school based tests (both overall and in specific subject areas) should be referred for individual
testing by someone trained in the identification of CHIP. The use of school-based tests will not, of course, identify underachievers and students in other (known) under-represented groups.

Wider criteria from more informants, will see a number of students included in a ‘gifted’ program who are not CHIP, of course, and, however wide, will still miss some who are. Teacher training is imperative here so that teaching staff become astute identifiers of the traditionally hard-to-identify CHIP groups.

Formal assessments conducted by registered psychologists surpass achievement tests, nominations, folios, and group tests of abstract reasoning. Group tests, unlike individual instruments, often rely heavily on skills in reading and following directions and as such in their resemblance to achievement tests may not accurately identify all CHIP. The learning-disabled CHIP, the minority student or the underachiever may all fail to be accurately identified as CHIP.

An assessment on the Stanford-Binet or Wechsler Intelligence Scale requires little reading and holds little similarity to school-based tasks and the child being tested is engaged one-on-one with the psychologist. As well, the fact that the assessment does not resemble school activities can engage children who have previously been disengaged in their schooling. On the other hand, group tests and achievement tests look like a paper and pencil school activity, require reading and understanding, and, offer no interaction. Thus the learning disabled, underachieving or perhaps ‘troubled’ child may perform poorly.

Parents report that some educators are dismissive of the results of individual psychometric assessments: they say even psychologists disagree about what intelligence is. Why then do many psychologists persist in conducting and in giving credence to the results of individual intelligence tests?

Perhaps the words of an educator working with underachieving gifted students for over twenty years sums up our reasons,

as much error as individual intelligence tests may contain, they are far more accurate and useful in the identification process than are group aptitude tests or teacher nominations. Many studies have demonstrated that teachers are inclined to nominate as gifted those children who are striving, conforming high achievers and to discount the possibility that those who are not such “good students” might be gifted in academic potential. (Whitmore, 1980, p 62)

Psychologists persist in supporting individual assessments of ability because for all their inherent problems the assessment provides more accurate data than the alternatives.

The CHIP Foundation does not ‘employ’ Psychologists but recommends a small number of psychologists all of whom have higher degree qualifications in Gifted Education. Our psychologists utilise both the Stanford-Binet and Wechsler Cognitive Assessments – choosing the most appropriate test after discussion with parents.
Is access to gifted and talented programs provided equitably?

As previously mentioned the CHIP Foundation is concerned that access to school-based ‘gifted’ programs is not always equitable and can fail to provide for those CHIP who might most benefit from it.

Victoria-wide, the school scene appears more limited than in other Australian States. No CHIP-specific schools exist in the Primary sector. At the other end of the education spectrum, evidence from parents we speak to suggests that early entry into the major Victorian Universities is extremely difficult and filled with bureaucratic red tape.

It is important to note here that CHIP are not an homogenous grouping. CHIP of exceptional abilities, whom we term CHIP-X will require very different program differentiation than will CHIP who abilities lay within the moderate or lower range. The program options listed below may suit some CHIP but must be recognised as being inadequate for others.

Parents continue to report that schools still hold negative perceptions of acceleration (subject and whole year). Coupled with the lack of curriculum compacting options (Individual Education Programs) for CHIP in mainstream schools the needs of many CHIP are not being met. The lack of consideration of these two educational options in the majority of mainstream schools is disappointing.

Specifically, the CHIP Foundation has the following areas of concern:

**Early access for CHIP to tertiary education.**
A number of Universities publicly state in their Websites and handbooks, that their age entry point is 17.75 years.

Parents of CHIP who may have been accelerated at school will find difficulty in placement at tertiary centres for their children who may be as young as 14 or 15. The suggestion by a number of administrators in tertiary institutions that such students ‘travel’ or ‘go on exchange programs’ presupposes parental financial resources to allow such ventures.

**Selective schools.** We are pleased with the recent increase in Selective High schools but still concerned that no primary options exist. Whilst the selective schools in Melbourne do not offer a differentiated curriculum, they do offer a selective cohort.

**Select Entry High Schools.** Following its successful evaluation the number of selective high schools has been increased. Again the CHIP Foundation believes this is a step in the right direction but is still concerned about the shortage of such schools in the Northern and Western suburbs and the many rural regions who do not have access to schools offering these programs. The CHIP Foundation is concerned at the inequity of this.

**Withdrawal groups and differentiated curriculum.** As long as withdrawal groups, differentiated curriculum within the regular class and individual acceleration options are not mandated in policy documents they will continue to be offered on an *ad hoc*
basis. These can be seen as provisions rather than programs – a distinction previously made. Until these programs are mandated they remain at the whim of supportive personnel and are subject to the vagaries of budgetary restrictions. Experience, and parents, tell us they are much less likely to be offered in an economically disadvantaged school.

Until provisions for CHIP are mandated, there continues to be inadequate provision for the ‘gifted’, including access to appropriate educational delivery, social support structures, and flexible progression through the school years.

It is widely accepted that without adequate research, programs and provisions may be based on myths and fallacies.

**What can be done for gifted and talented students?**

The CHIP Foundation is aware that there are clear lines of differentiation between the State and Commonwealth. We appreciate that many of the changes we would like to see fall under Commonwealth responsibility but we would hope that Victoria could become identified as a leader in the field of meeting the needs of intellectually gifted students.

The Victorian Government could certainly modify many of the points below and in so doing clearly demonstrate its support for the education of gifted students.

**Education and Teacher Training Issues**

- Pre-service training for teachers in the area of CHIP must be mandated. Undergraduate degrees and post-graduate diplomas of education need to include at least one compulsory unit on the identification and education of CHIP students.

- Professional development – either pre- or in-service – is needed in differentiation of the curriculum

- mandate a compulsory unit in the identification of CHIP in the training of Early Childhood/Kindergarten personnel both at University and TAFE colleges

- facilitate pathways for under-age CHIP to enter Tertiary education

- increase the number of select entry schools, particularly in areas that are currently under-served

**Research Issues**

The following needs could certainly be addressed at a State level. The longer term goal would be a wider, national, focus

- support the development of a (national) clearinghouse for dissemination of Australian research into CHIP
• support the development of a (national) policy for early entry into primary school for CHIP

• support research into the area of CHIP by providing seed funding for this research

• develop a (national) advertising campaign, in association with the Universities, calling for expressions of interest for students to undertake financially-supported post-graduate and post-doctoral studies in CHIP. Additionally, that initially, particular preference for such studies be given to research into CHIP in under-represented groups

• develop a (National) Talent Search Program with a longer term view to establish and maintain funding in such a program to identify and support Australia’s brightest and best CHIP.

Bibliography:


Whitmore, J. R. (1980), Giftedness, conflict, and underachievement, Boston: Allyn and Bacon,