INQUIRY INTO THE EDUCATION OF GIFTED AND TALENTED STUDENTS

2011
INTRODUCTION

The Country Education Project welcomes the inquiry into the education of gifted and talented students within Victoria.

Over the past five years, the Country Education Project has been involved in undertaking consultations with rural school communities to gain an understanding of the issues they face in providing opportunities for talented students and their families as well as supporting initiatives within this area. Specifically it has included:

(i) The development of an online survey in the last two months gaining input into the provision of learning for talented students in rural communities and the challenges regarding such provision.

(ii) The facilitation of an online learning program specifically for students in the upper primary school area within rural school communities. (A full copy of this survey can be provided as required)

(iii) Specific conversations with people involved in rural education communities in relation to talented learning provision.

(iv) Consultation with organisations who offer talented student programs in other states.

From these various activities, a number of challenges and opportunities have been identified to ensure that talented young people within rural communities are not disadvantaged in their learning.

This paper outlines in greater detail these challenges; outlines rural specific initiatives that have occurred; and details possible strategies for supporting talented rural young people into the future.

CEP would also be prepared to present to the Committee to expand on the challenges and ideas outlined within this paper at an appropriate time.

Phil Brown
Executive Officer
INQUIRY INTO THE EDUCATION OF GIFTED AND TALENTED STUDENTS:

BACKGROUND

The Country Education Project (CEP) has been working in the area of Victorian rural education for over thirty years now. Initially established in 1977 as part of the Commonwealth Schools Commission Country Area Program, CEP has maintained a strong commitment to rural education and rural communities. It has operated as an intersystemic project since its inception.

With its strong commitment to building the capacity of these communities to provide high quality education provision, CEP promotes the clustering model as the central approach to achieving the desired outcomes for rural communities.

Participation, sharing, and collaboration remain the cornerstones of CEP philosophy and approach.

The Country Education Project covers all those rural communities who:

- have a population of less than 5,000
- are located at least 1.5 hours from Melbourne and at least 15 minutes from a regional population of 10,000 or more
- have limited, or no, access to public services
- have a “sense of community”.

This represents more than 400 education communities throughout the state.

The Country Education Project has an elected committee of management, representative of rural education communities, key stakeholder organisations, rural community organisations, education sectors and people with an interest in rural education.

In relation to the specific area of learning provision for talented students, CEP has been involved in numerous discussions at a local, regional and state-wide level, as well as facilitated initiatives focused on talented young people in rural communities. “eKids Rural Express” is one such example.

CEP believes that to ensure talented students have access to high quality learning reflective of their needs and aspirations, there are a number of areas that need to be considered:

- The need to define “gifted/talented” within the learning context.
- Development of strategies and approaches that ensure talented young people in rural communities have access to high quality learning within their community. The very small numbers of talented students within rural settings make it extremely difficult to provide relevant learning programs for them within the current policy and program provision context – often there is only one talented student within the school community.
- The social needs (in addition to academic needs) of talented students is also important in the development and provision of learning for such students – within a rural setting there is little, or no, social network for these young people.
• The skill and knowledge of teachers in relation to talented students could be improved and enhanced – from assessment and identification of talented students through to development and provision of appropriate learning environments.

Within a 21st Century learning environment where there is a strong focus on personalized learning along with the potential role digital learning can provide, CEP believes there are many opportunities to support a range of strategies and approaches to engage talented students in vibrant learning programs within rural communities.

Within this submission, we detail the challenges highlighted by rural communities in relation to learning provision for talented students; outline the experiences gained through the initiatives facilitated by CEP; and propose a number of strategies and approaches we believes will enhance the opportunities for such students into the future.
CHALLENGES

- **Definition of Talented and Gifted:**

  The definition utilized by people within schools for talented students varies considerably. Throughout the consultations CEP has undertaken, people have indicated in some cases that such students are defined as those with exceptional ability academically and socially, while others see students accelerating into the following year as talented students.

  While there is information in relation to this currently available on the DEECD website, from the consultations undertaken by CEP there seems a need to ensure that this information is provided to schools and classroom teachers.

- **Access to Support and Programs:**

  A talented student has the ability, potential or aptitude to perform beyond the level that matches the curriculum for that age level. They have a unique way of perceiving, with many often feeling lonely, left out or different. In small rural school communities this is further exacerbated with only one or two of these young people within the school, adding to their sense of isolation.

  In relation to learning provision, accessing learning programs and activities for talented students within a rural location (where numbers could be very small – often one in each community) is a significant challenge within the current environment. Throughout the consultations undertaken by CEP, rural communities highlighted the need to provide such initiatives within their local communities - developed and provided within these communities.

  In a number of cases highlighted within CEPs work, if access to such initiatives is not available within their local community, families are often making the choice of moving their child to another school to gain such access – such schools are generally located within larger regional centres or metropolitan Melbourne. In some cases this may mean the whole family relocate and leave their rural community. These moves are then having an impact on the local community both from an education perspective as well as broader community perspective.

  In addition, if talented students are not provided with the opportunity to be involved in learning programs to support their extended learning needs, they often choose to “dumb down” so they are not seen as someone different. This seems to become more extenuated within rural education settings where there are lower numbers of students within a school.
The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development currently provide learning opportunities for talented students through the SEAL program. Resources to implement and support this program are provided at an individual school level. This tends to mean that the larger schools are in a better position to access and gain such resources – they are generally located within regional and metropolitan locations.

Within the current SEAL initiative there are no programs being offered within rural or remote school communities.

Another challenge that has been highlighted by rural education communities is the lack of access to social interaction with “like minded” students, and their families. Having access to peer and social networks is critical to talented students ongoing development and learning. Within a rural community, there may only be one or two students, which then means they don’t have access to social networks for support, information, dialogue and development. While there are many talented student networks within regional and metropolitan centres, rural families are required to travel (often long distances) to access this support.

- **Teacher Skills and Knowledge:**

Throughout the consultations undertaken by CEP there were two key areas of teacher skills and knowledge highlighted by rural communities.

The first is that teachers indicate they have little access to information, resources, support and programs to support the learning of talented students.

A number of teachers within rural schools also highlighted the lack of professional development and training focusing on talented students.

The second is that teachers within schools have a varied understanding of what defines a talented student. As mentioned earlier in this paper, some staff see them as exceptional learners both socially and academically, while others see them as students being “accelerated” in a particular curriculum area.
• **Self Managing Schools:**

In Victoria since 1992 the responsibility for running schools was been devolved to the local school level. Curriculum development, human and physical resources are managed by the school (within statewide guidelines). Rural and remote communities with two or three teachers have fewer personnel to share this load.

Given their many responsibilities, staffs in these settings struggle to find the time to provide enrichment opportunities for talented students. In a number of cases, the family then makes the choice of moving their child to another school to gain such access.

Historically rural schools have worked collaboratively in local clusters to provide learning for their young people. This was strongly evident in curriculum areas of identified need – eg science, LOTE, technology and the arts. This collaboration resulted in initiatives such as Shared Specialists, sharing of staff across the cluster and the like.

With the introduction of the Self Managing School approach within Victoria, many of these arrangements have ceased to operate and individual schools are now focused on delivering learning within the context of their individual school.
CEP Initiatives

Over the past five years, CEP has facilitated initiatives aimed at providing extension learning for students within rural communities. It has been based on its eKids initiative that has been developed to enhance learning provision for rural young people through a blended learning approach – a combination of web-based learning and school based learning.

The eKids approach aims to build the capacity of teachers in the use of digital learning approaches while providing learning for rural students in identified curriculum areas of need. These have generally focused on the middle years of schooling and in curriculum areas of identified need – eg science, extension learning, technology.

As part of this approach, CEP facilitated a specific initiative for talented students in the upper primary school area focusing on numeracy, literacy and science. With funding from the Helen Macpherson Smith Trust, CEP was able to offer a web-based approach to providing learning for up to 40 students from rural schools across the state.

Known as “eKids Rural Express”, the program generated a great more interest than expected with a total of 90 upper primary school students participating in the program. With the funding of the program allocated for a pilot project only, this initiative ceased to operate after eighteen months of operation.

An evaluation of the pilot project was undertaken and CEP can provide a copy of the evaluation for the committees’ consideration.

In general, the learnings from the initiative included:

- the development of a web-based learning environment for upper primary school talented students was greatly needed and well utilized by those involved. The combination of learning materials and activities, social chat facilities and access to expert external people was greatly appreciated.

- The flexibility of the “eKids Rural Express” program allowed the program to be utilized by teachers within the classroom and also by students in their own time.

- The twofold aspect of the program (including specific learning activities focusing on a curriculum area, and longer term problem solving and thinking activities) was seen as a real advantage of the program.

- The provision of a teacher facilitator to oversee areas such as selection, program development and assessment was a great asset to the program.

- Students (and their parents) utilized the site for enhancing their learning.

- The provision of professional development for staff was valued. Students from rural schools where the teacher had undergone PD utilized the web-based program more effectively and more often.

- As a result of students being involved in the program, many parents were able to network with other rural students parents in relation to support and information of their talented students.
POSSIBLE IDEAS FOR EXPLORATION:

The Country Education Project would like to present a number of ideas/proposals for consideration by the government and believe they will enhance the provision of learning programs for talented young people in rural communities.

It would also be willing to meet with the committee to expand on these ideas/proposals further.

1. Web-Based Learning Environment:

CEP believes that all students within Victoria who are identified as talented are entitled to have access to learning opportunities within their community, regardless of where they live. While this is difficult to achieve within the current initiative structure (such as SEAL), it believes that the utilization of digital learning platforms allows for real innovative approaches being developed for rural talented students.

With the interest and learnings gained from the “eKids Rural Express” initiative of 2007/2008, and the growing use of digital learning approaches in provision of learning, CEP proposes the development and resourcing of a cross sectorial web-based model to provide learning programs and opportunities for these rural students into the future.

Such an initiative could have a number of key elements:

- activities and learning programs in a range of curriculum areas across a number of year levels.
- a team of appropriately skilled teachers from rural schools with expertise in talented student learning to support the web-based learning initiative. CEP believes that utilizing teachers within their rural education community and supporting them through a brokerage approach to be involved in the development and delivery would be preferred to centralising staff expertise to support the web-based approach.

This approach would also allow for the sharing of expertise and knowledge with other schools and teachers as well build the capacity of teachers within rural communities to provide quality learning for all students.

- social network facility to support talented students to mix with other like minded young people.
- the provision of information and resources for talented students and their families to access – including links to relevant websites and organisations.
2. **Cluster Approach:**

As mentioned earlier in this submission, rural schools have historically worked together in cross-sectorial clusters within their communities (as well as state-wide) to enhance learning opportunities for their students. As a result of these cluster arrangements many innovative programs were developed especially in specialist curriculum areas where a need was identified. For example science, LOTE, the arts, VCE.

With the introduction of Self Managing School approaches, the majority of these clusters have ceased.

CEP proposes the consideration of supporting locally determined cross-sectorial clusters of schools within rural Victoria from a policy perspective; and the allocation of resources to support such learning provision approaches, especially to allow them to work collaboratively in developing and delivering learning in identified curriculum areas and therefore develop the potential for “specialist” provision. Talented and extension learning opportunities could be one example for this specialization.

3. **Professional Development and Training:**

The development of a professional development and training approach for rural teachers and schools who are interested in supporting talented students is critical and highly needed to support talented students, especially in areas as the nature of talented students, assessment, development and provision of learning, support and social and peer networks.

While there are resources and professional development activities available through the SEAL initiatives, these activities are centred on those schools and teachers who are currently involved in the school based SEAL program.

CEP proposes a more holistic professional development and training strategy to ensure that all teachers who are interested in gaining skills and knowledge within the talented learning area are able to do so – regardless of whether they are involved in a specific project or not. For rural school communities such professional development would be greatly appreciated as many have minimal numbers of talented students and therefore don’t have the numbers to attract the resources to support current learning initiatives.

In addition, CEP proposes that the format of this professional development and training needs to be “rural friendly”. For example, the development and provision of professional development and training could be linked into the web-based platform proposed within the above proposed action – this would reduce the need for rural teachers to travel to access face to face programs.

*In conclusion, CEP would be happy to explore these ideas further with the committee, and to provide more specific information on how it believes it could be developed and implemented.*