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Parliamentary Inquiry into the Education of Gifted and Talented Students

Parents Victoria is in its eighty-sixth year of being the peak non-profit body representing parent associations and the collective voice of parents in Victorian government schools.

Our policy regarding gifted and talented students which has been democratically developed by our members states:

**H.9 Children with special abilities**

Parents Victoria believes that schools should provide programs to enable children with special abilities to realise their fullest potential. The major emphasis should be on meeting the children's needs through:

(a) curriculum programming which provides challenge and is matched to needs, abilities and interests;
(b) programming which is planned and systematic;
(c) programs which aim at developing purposeful skills at an appropriate pace and the opportunity to apply advanced skills in a range of situations;
(d) recognising that appropriate provision for these children may contain elements of acceleration, extension and enrichment;
(e) providing opportunities for children with special abilities to interact with both grade level and cross-age peers;
(f) providing balance and depth whilst concurrently developing special abilities

Parents Victoria has decided to respond to this Inquiry by providing anecdotal evidence regarding the experiences of some of our members and Parents Victoria’s response to their experiences.
**Case Study 1.**

The procedure in place at our local primary and secondary school seems to me to be reasonable. Students are identified and nominations submitted to the secondary school for nominees for extension classes. Parents are advised prior to purchasing books, that their child is in an advanced class. This seems fair as long as the primary school is “on board” and takes the time to place nominations.

Students are aware they are in the ‘extension’ program, and that they will be expected to get through the work at a quicker pace than the ‘regular’ class. They refer to it as the ‘smart class’.

Students are also aware that they can be ‘dumped’ from it (the extension class) from year to year. Our secondary school seems to do a fairly good job of assessing those in the ‘extension’ classes and considering participants for the following year (some to be removed from extension class and some others who are deserving, to come into the classes). The extension class is viewed as ‘important’ and a privilege to be in. The teachers do a good job of promoting the value of the classes.

I wouldn’t say that the students are well aware of the impact that the extension class is expected to have to their learning (outcomes). I also feel that the parents are not given much information about the ‘extension’ classes and the expected outcomes of children being in these classes. This is possibly more of a local issue though.

At our secondary school students in the extension classes are referred to as ‘nerds’ – but it doesn’t seem to have a huge impact on the kids. I think that the impact on the kids depends a lot on where their friends are at the school. If friends are in the extension class then the impact in terms of being seen as ‘different’ are not so great. If friends are outside the extension class, then the impact is probably greater.

I do think that the majority of parents rely heavily on and expect schools to ‘notice’ whether their kid has special talent. Therefore I feel the onus is very much on schools to keep abreast of the potential of their students. Parent/Teacher interviews are a great way of finding out how your kid is doing, but lots of parents do not attend parent/teacher interviews nor have a relationship with the school. Kids who are not well supported by parents in terms of home/school communication, need the opportunity to be ‘identified’ as well and this falls to the schools. Some parents do not recognise that their kids are “bright” in terms of school – these kids should not miss out.

**Case Study 2.**

My experience of gifted and talented at the primary level has been that, until the last year or two, students who had higher abilities were usually just given additional worksheets if they finished their work early. In some cases these were of a harder standard; it was mostly seen by students as being a punishment - they soon learned not to tell the teacher they had finished their work. If additional work is to be given, it should be something stimulating that the students will enjoy, and will not see as a punishment.

In my personal experience, my second child was accelerated only because I became aware of her working at the top of the grade 2 level when she was in grade 1. The teacher at no stage informed me that she was working at this level - I only found out because she came home one day and told me she was working in all the top level groups for English, and for Maths. This was a week after mid-year parent teacher interviews, and it was not mentioned to me at all. When I then approached the teacher to ask if she was in fact working in these groups, I was told she was. When I asked what the plan would be for next year, as she would in effect have already completed the work, I was told “I guess we could see about acceleration to grade 3.” I had to drag out of the teacher how to go about this process. Once she was accelerated, the process of keeping me informed with regular meetings was very
The primary school last year introduced a program called Wise Ones, which is run by a private operator. Students were invited to sit an assessment, and if accepted, were taken out of class to meet together and investigate higher thinking. Parents pay for this program.

This year, the primary school has started its own extension program, where students are nominated by teachers to take part. They have additional assignments and general work to complete. It seems a good program, but the only communication to parents so far has been a letter to say your child has been accepted into the program. We haven’t had any information which would be useful when trying to help our third child - we don’t know what is expected, other than to complete extra work.

At the secondary level, our college runs both extension and SEAL (Select Entry Accelerated Learning) programs. Both our first and second children were in extension programs (SEAL began the year after our second child started). The kids in these classes were seen by the general classes as being nerds. It never bothered either of my kids, but it might impact on others. They both made friends with others in their classes, and so that made things easier.

In the early secondary years (7 & 8) they seemed to go into detail a bit more in their subjects than the regular classes, and some teachers accelerated the students as a group (eg child 2 would read Yr 10 novels in Yr 7). But when it got to electives they just studied the same curriculum as the other classes, except for English and Maths for which they were kept together. Both children found this a bit boring and frustrating, as they were doing work they had already completed in earlier years.

Probably the biggest advantage of these extension groups was that, for the most part, they were with like-minded students who were interested in learning.

I have a friend whose daughter is in the SEAL program at the secondary school, and in the early years she was actually accelerated, but now, in Yr 11, she seems to be pretty much at the same point as the other Yr 11 students. She still goes into further detail than the other students but that makes it more of an extension program. When the SEAL program was advertised, it was expected that this first group of students would finish Yr 12 at least 6 months ahead of normal. I’m not sure why the program has been changed - perhaps they just didn’t know what they were doing for the first implementation cycle of the program.

As with the primary school, information to parents regarding the extension classes was minimal. The only feedback directly relating to the extension of the students at parent/teacher meetings was to say the teachers expected these students to go into a lot more depth when completing their work. Not anything about the extra detail being taught to them, or whether they were taught to think at a higher level, or any other information really. This would be my main complaint about the programs - extremely little information is given to the parents at any stage of the programs.

I think that it would be beneficial to all students and schools if there were set or suggested programs available from DEECD. It seems that, having spoken to parents at other schools, each school is left to their own devices to a) identify students and b) choose and implement a program. Some direction and uniformity would be beneficial to everyone. There is also very little information for parents on the DEECD website relating to gifted and talented programs, or on how to identify these students.

Undoubtedly there are additional costs associated with providing programs for gifted and talented students, and so it is essential that extra funding is provided by DEECD to cover these costs. Otherwise, given the tight budgets state schools have, schools may not be willing to run them, or may not be able to afford to run them, and then it is our students who are let down, and have the potential to become bored and disengaged.
Case Study 3.

Posting from Parents Victoria’s recent online conference 15th to 21st May. 2011

I’m interested in primary school support for gifted and talented students. I have experience of both the Canadian and British education systems and found it interesting that there is limited support for children that are identified as being very capable in a particular area. There is certainly support for those struggling with key skills, but I haven’t come across much available to those at the other end of the scale in ability. We’ve been told about programs which we can pay for (prices range from $200-$350) and we need to be able to pick up our child during the school day and drop them off to another school. Demand for these programs is also quite high. It certainly means that those working parents and those with financial pressures aren’t able to take advantage of these opportunities.

Issues raised and Recommendations

Identification of Gifted Students
Concern has been raised regarding the identification of gifted students. While academic excellence is relatively easy to identify, students who are gifted in other areas are not so easily identified. Another parent provided the following feedback:

I am the parent of a practical learner who has a creative gift but no motivation or interest in academic subjects (only sees the need to pass rather than stress over it, very accepting of her strengths & weaknesses). These students too need to be identified and given equivalent opportunities. It is only since my daughter has been seen by external providers in her senior years of schooling that her talents have been identified and acknowledged.

When a child’s talents are not identified and suitable programs put in place, there is a high chance that the child will become disengaged from learning and may be the cause of class disruption.

Parents Victoria believes it is vital that teachers, during their training, be instructed in regard to the identification of students with special gifts and talents and in addition the necessary coordination, documentation and communication internally to teacher peers & school management and externally to families and other providers. Ideally this would also be covered in a teacher’s ongoing professional development.

Communication with Parents
Communication not only with parents but with the student’s other teachers is key to supporting student learning. Parents Victoria emphasise the importance of regular communication between home and school for all students. Information regarding acceleration programs should be provided annually not just on enrolment. This information could be provided via newsletter updates, website, etc.

Progress reports and information regarding any extension work the child has been given is critical for students and families especially if the child is in a mainstream class. The Ultranet has huge potential for greatly improved home/school communication. We recognise that teachers do not have unlimited time and recommend that communication protocols be established including an appropriate timeline for responding to parent communications.

Parents Victoria also recommend that schools supply an information sheet to families when a student is signed up to an accelerated program. This could be a generic template which schools could adapt to document their program details, requirements and communication expectations.

Student Wellbeing
Our case studies referred to students in accelerated classes being referred to as ‘nerds’. Children who are seen to be different whether it be a physical, academic or cultural difference tend to be earmarked for bullying. The ‘smart’ kids are often targeted and discover ‘it’s not
cool to be smart'. While some students don’t appear to be concerned, for others there can be long term consequences as the result of bullying, exclusion etc. Consequences may include poor self-esteem/self-confidence and disengagement from school.

Parents Victoria recommend to the Inquiry that both primary and secondary schools at their information sessions and in their orientation programs, address the importance of diversity and difference including learning differences. Bullying must be taken seriously by all schools and at all levels and appropriate strategies put in place. Development and enforcement of the Student Code of Conduct is vital. Students are more likely to be supportive of the Code of Conduct if they are involved in its development. Strategies to deal with this issue can also be developed at school leadership camps and through peer support programs.

Provision of suitable programs for gifted students
Recognising competency and pre-planning classes for gifted and talented students is essential. Not all teachers feel they have time to modify lessons or build in additional or specialised tasks for those who are gifted (or have additional needs). Again the Ultranet has great potential for gifted & talented students. Teachers are able to use the Ultranet to share resources. Students, particularly those from smaller schools or in regional or remote areas, have the opportunity to work with like students from other schools.

Huge advancements in technology and studies about how we learn can be used to develop the most effective strategy for individual learners. It is extremely important that extension activities are not seen as a punishment for finishing work early.

For some students, acceleration to the next level of schooling maybe recommended to keep the student engaged. Parents need to be informed about how to orchestrate this process and the pros and cons of jumping a level e.g. social vs academic readiness.

Financial implications
There is no question that Victorian government schools are under resourced. Provision of programs for gifted and talented students are often at the expense of other school programs or as our case studies indicate reliant on parents paying outside providers. If schools are unable to provide extension programs, Parents Victoria would hope that opportunities for shared programs across clusters or with sister schools are seriously explored. If an outside provider appears to be the best solution, the program provided must be thoroughly scrutinised by the school governance body before recommending to parents. Issues such as access and equity must also be considered.

Conclusion
The current government’s election commitment platform includes that they will ‘Ensure that the National Curriculum is delivered in a way that recognises that children learn in different ways and at different rates’. In order to fulfill this commitment, the state government must ensure that public schools have the capacity and resources to identify and support gifted and talented students to maximise their learning potential.

In his Family Statement, the Premier said “The Government wants to give parents choice so they can find the school that is right for their children. To help to do this, we will be growing funding to non-government schools to one-quarter of the average cost of educating a Victorian student in a government school. By making it a priority and getting our education system right, the Government is making the best possible investment in our future - helping our children get the opportunities they need to fulfil their potential.”
Many Victorian families are feeling the pinch that rising costs are placing on household budgets and for them no amount of additional funding will ever allow them to choose private schooling. Parents Victoria will continue to lobby the government to fulfil its obligation and demonstrate that it values public education by properly resourcing public schools so that Public Education is the education of choice for Victorian families.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback to this inquiry.

Yours sincerely,

Elaine Crowle
Immediate Past President
On behalf of Parents Victoria Inc