Submission to the Parliamentary enquiry into the Education of Gifted and Talented Students

The Mac.Robertson Girls’ High School provides single sex education to girls who are selected through an examination conducted by the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority under the aegis of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD). The school is able to offer an academic curriculum to 225 students selected each year into Year 9. All of our students are highly able but not all are gifted and the talents of these students are often specialised to particular curriculum areas, although some of them are all round high achievers.

The students who are able to avail themselves of selective education are self selecting. They and their families need to be aware of the opportunity to apply and sit the entry examination and they need to be willing to move schools at the end of year 8, leaving their friends and travelling usually quite some distance into the CBD to take up the offer of a place. There are undoubtedly many highly able and gifted students who through lack of awareness of the opportunities offered by selective education miss out on the opportunity to benefit from the support available at a selective state school. Victorian parents increasingly seem to feel that they need to send their children to independent schools in order to access the learning support their gifted and talented children need. **Government education needs to openly and effectively provide this support to all such students.** It should not be a matter of chance that they are able to access the education support they need. **Australia requires that each student is able to realise maximum educational outcomes to provide innovation and creativity which will support our economy in the future.**

The selective entry examination is designed to test intellectual potential rather than what students have previously learned. **Only 5% of the Year 8 cohort of any Victorian school can be offered places at a selective school.** There are some schools which resent the loss of highly able students but I wish those people could experience the joy that is expressed by so many of our students at finding themselves, usually for the first time in their school lives, among like others. Many have described the experience as being like “coming home”, finding themselves in a school where all the students are focused on learning and exploring their potential. They are very comfortable with likeminded students, are not afraid to demonstrate their intelligence and unashamedly seek to be high achievers. Our selective school is able to provide a learning culture which nurtures creativity and encourages students to work hard and realise their vision for their futures.

Many highly able students have been isolated by other students previously, regarded as suspect because of their abilities. **Others have experienced more overt bullying or sought to hide their intellectual capacity in order to be accepted by others.** Sometimes it can be daunting for our students to find themselves no longer the top of the class but they quickly discover that a class of highly able students is able to work through material and ideas at a speed which seems to be
about four times that of a mixed ability group and that the challenges they meet ensure that they are extended and classroom boredom is a part of the past. Mac.Robertson Girls’ students have topped the state in VCE achievement in seven of the last eight years. In 2010, 44.3% of VCE study scores were over 40 (out of fifty) with the next school listed achieving 39%. An amazing 49.6% of student grades were A+ with more than three quarters in the A-A+ range.

Some educators believe that gifted and talented students have the responsibility of supporting the achievement of other less able students. This unwarranted burden is felt by highly able students who are sometimes singled out by teachers to provide examples to other students however there is evidence that in so doing, they create social difficulties for the students and set them up as targets for bullying and isolation. Additionally, this provides a disincentive to achievement. **Many gifted and talented students deliberately underachieve to avoid discrimination and bullying.**

Highly able students are, as research has amply demonstrated, particularly susceptible to depression and anxiety and our school has set up very strong support mechanisms to assist them and their families cope with a range of medically diagnosed conditions which we anticipate finding examples of in each intake. A number of our students are on the high performing end of the autism spectrum and staff and the other students are extremely supportive of these students. We are proud of the way in which we are able to enable the social and academic achievement of these students who usually go on to experience success at tertiary education. **Schools must be able to protect and nurture such students.**

The Mac.Robertson Girls’ High School came into existence despite the prevailing prejudices against the education of women and has gone on to provide generations of young women with excellence in academic education. **It is the only selective government school in Victoria offering single sex education to girls** and generations of former students tell us how grateful they are for the education and the learning and self confidence it gave them to continue on to a tertiary qualification and some exceptional careers. Many of them tell us that they realised only in retrospect the advantages they experienced by attending our school and they look back now with great affection at their time here.

One of the aspects of the school about which former students are very clear is the value of experiencing membership of a culturally diverse school. Enrolment patterns at Mac.Rob have followed the pattern of migration to Australia. During the years prior to World War one there were many European migrant families represented here and in the post war years there were even more European countries. We currently also have a large number of students from families migrating from China and the Indian Subcontinent. None of our students are international students; they are all Australians or permanent residents. What is most striking things about multicultural Mac.Rob is the way in which it is part and parcel of everyday life in which acceptance of difference is taken as the norm. Indeed the differences are celebrated with an annual student initiated and organised multicultural week which invites everyone to recognise the diversity which is taken for granted most of the time. **Students from different backgrounds interact naturally and collegiately in an inclusive and friendly environment which we value enormously and which prepares them to be active citizens of Australian society.**
The arguments for single sex education of girls have been put forward many times but one of the most cogent reasons is, I believe, that it enables girls to strive for excellence unimpeded by the presence of boys who can be physically and socially dominant in many educational settings. This effect is enhanced in a selective girls’ school by the fact that it is “cool” to excel in such subjects as physics and mathematics where such classrooms are a welcoming environment often managed by female teachers who are passionate about their subjects. When there are eight classes of chemistry in Year 12, it is impossible to feel that this is not a subject that girls should be studying. Mac.Rob students are characterised by a strong sense of where their careers might lead and seek to gain entry to university courses which will enable them to take advantage of the best opportunities available.

Many of our students are blessed with a delightfully ironic sense of humour and love to make jokes about ‘embracing your inner nerd’. They are ambitious, hardworking, focussed and keen to experience success in a wide range of fields. They enjoy collaborating with students from our brother school, Melbourne High School, and often form friendships through joint activities but many of them deliberately limit their social life to enable them to focus on their work. I enjoy the fact that most of our girls don’t bother trying to incorporate makeup into their school appearance and are happy to don a range of practical sports outfits which enable them to throw themselves into activities or wear ‘daggy’ costumes as part of house activities for effect. They wear the school uniform well and take pride in their appearance but they are not focussed on attracting male attention. This businesslike approach is part of a culture which encourages them to support each other and work together to achieve outstanding educational outcomes.

Girls are usually found by researchers to be more collaborative in their work styles than are boys and when you combine this with the fact that at Mac.Rob they are also highly able students with a personal vision, enabled to extend, enrich and challenge themselves by teachers with a passion for their subject who understand how to stimulate curiosity and support their learning experiences, it is a powerful mix which magnifies the outcomes for everybody. There are always sceptics who are inclined to state that if a school’s student intake is selected, then the outcomes are guaranteed. This ignores the fact that although our students are highly able, they are not always gifted across the board. Many of our students have particular abilities along with some weaknesses. What we have attempted to develop is a highly personalised education for each student, where teachers know the preferred learning styles, strengths and weaknesses of each of their students and are able to support each individual to maximise her development. In our outstanding VCE results last year, it was really pleasing to see that in addition to those students expected on the basis of their previous performances to excel, the whole cohort of students lifted their performance to achieve a general excellence even higher than in previous years. This result is made possible by the combination of factors described and provides a compelling reason for the selective nature of the student cohort.

Mac.Rob places a strong emphasis on student leadership and the co-curricular program. We encourage young women to take on leadership roles in every sphere of endeavour and provide training in the skills needed including public speaking, running a meeting and being consultative. The co-curricular programs and activities are a vibrant and important part of school life at Mac.Rob and build on or extend the school curriculum by enhancing personal growth and development and encouraging the students to embrace citizenship through
involvement in volunteering and social service activities. Co-curricular activities are usually student initiated and run and include house activities such as the choral and drama competitions, sport, drama/stage crew, music and music performance, special interest groups e.g. animé, debating and public speaking, subject competitions and community involvement. **We try to balance academic studies and the co-curricular activities to provide the best educational experience possible and build the wellbeing of the whole person.**

The school **recognises excellence** in every aspect of student activities and we regularly give awards and recognition of individuals and teams at school assemblies and publish achievements and prizes in the weekly newsletter, culminating in the many awards made at Speech Night each year. Even so there is the problem that so many of our students achieve such great results and so many prizes and awards throughout the year that it is impossible sometimes to recognise the outstanding work of the students who are just behind the award winners and in other schools would have been at the top. We encourage each student to aim for her personal best in everything and are pleased that there is a strong history of participation and commitment to the school.

I am privileged to be principal of such a vibrant, dynamic student body as I have described and I think that the women who fought for the survival of the girls’ school in the 1930s would be proud of what its students are achieving in 2011. I would love to see the provision for our splendid students extended to all who might benefit.

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