Submission to:
Parliamentary Inquiry into the education of Gifted and Talented Students
Victorian Parliament

Methodist Ladies’ College (MLC) has a long history of catering for the needs of the gifted and talented students within our school population and has set up the Compass Centre to facilitate this. In the first instance, all classrooms provide differentiated instruction, aiming to cater for the individual needs of all learners. Also, the relatively large student population at MLC allows the school to offer a greater range of subjects and co-curricular opportunities than many other schools. This in itself caters for many of the needs of our gifted students. The role of the Compass Centre is to provide that which cannot reasonably be delivered in the regular classroom. The Compass Centre provides withdrawal programs, open entry clubs based on students’ interests, case management, advocacy and monitoring of exceptional students, as well as providing professional development and advice for classroom teachers. Staff are also involved in the local gifted networks and undertake regular professional reading in the area of education of gifted and talented students with the aim of constantly updating our practice and policies to reflect current research and understandings.

This submission relates to our particular experience of catering for the needs of gifted and talented students. We recognise that different communities need to examine their priorities, values and resources in order to maximise the effectiveness of their programs and that no one model will suit the needs of all communities.

1. How the concepts of giftedness and talent should be defined

We acknowledge current definitions of giftedness and talent as adopted by Gagne (2003) (on the DEECD website)¹ and Zeigler and Heller (2000)². A child may be born with a gift, but it is vital to give that child the opportunity to develop that gift as a talent.

Joseph S Renzulli’s Operation Houndstooth Theory (3-ring conception of Giftedness)³ underpins many of Compass’s core beliefs, recognising the three essential elements for talent development as above average intelligence, creativity and task commitment. It is our aim to present challenges to highly able students that require them to engage in intellectual struggle and develop perseverance.

In line with Renzulli, Koehler and Fogarty, we also aim to develop co-cognitive traits of gifted students that contribute to the development of social capital. Included are traits such as courage, optimism, a sense of power to change things, and the ability to fall in love with a topic or discipline.

Francois Gagne in his keynote address at the World Conference for the Education of Gifted Students, 2003, indicated very strongly that perseverance was the single best predictor of success and happiness in adult life and career. It is our opinion that rushing the curriculum with students who grasp the concepts quickly, reduces the chance of a student being required to persevere with a challenging task.

2. The key benefits and issues surrounding programs for gifted and talented students, including any gaps identified in current programs

Programming for gifted and talented students is not an optional extra. As part of the Learning Support Faculty, we recognise that some individuals do not thrive in the classroom and need extra support to assist them to reach their potential. The key to successful provision is flexibility and knowledge of the needs of individuals in our care.

At MLC, the preferred strategy for addressing the individual needs of gifted students is a compaction / extension model. A student's classroom work is compacted in the domain or domains of talent potential, enabling in-depth extension to be undertaken. By its very nature, such enrichment will involve a component of accelerated learning as is required to address the extension topics.

When considering an accelerated program, the student’s social/emotional needs and level of maturity are taken into account, along with their level of cognitive and intellectual development. The policy is to manage a student's individual program so she is able to undertake studies which are not offered within the regular curriculum due to the qualitatively different nature of the topics. Themes and skills which require a higher degree of abstract thinking and perseverance are essential elements of the curriculum for gifted students. Should students have only an acceleration solution to their needs, then they may be denied opportunities and skills that are outside the core curriculum. They merely do the topics which are accessible to all students, but do them faster or earlier. Our goal is to enrich their school experience with explorations into the many wonderful fields which are not usually within the academic curriculum.

Many of our extremely able students have demonstrated a long term passion for an academic topic, undertaken in private. We want to optimise the chance of having the time and resources to acknowledge and incorporate such passions, validate their worth in the intellectual development

of the child, and run with them in a formalised setting. The compaction / extension model of curriculum offers the best opportunity for us to do so within a school environment.

The issue of doubly exceptional students is also of concern. Through shared expertise in the Learning Support faculty, students of high ability but with a learning disability can be identified. Other disabilities such as physical disability and autism spectrum disorders also need to be addressed. The need for trained and experienced teachers in these areas is vital to catering for the needs of such students. Staff at MLC have undertaken extensive professional development in these areas but necessary expertise is developed over years and there needs to be intentional development of such staff. Also, access to support resources, counsellors and psychologists is vital.

3. Any relevant projects currently underway specific to the education of gifted and talented students

- MLC has extensive and reliable Information and Communications Technology. Use of technologies is embedded in all programs and many administrative support systems are designed in house. This means that some problems of timetabling and delivering resources to students are relieved. All students engaged in Compass programs have access to online services, wikis, discussion forums and email contact with teachers/mentors. There is also access to multimedia equipment and software so that students can have greater choice of medium when designing products. While we aim for significant face to face contact with students, there is the option of following up online. Indeed, for some of our students who are reticent in class, the online discussion offers the opportunity for them to engage in discussions at a time of their choosing. Electronic communications also has the advantage of delaying teacher responses, helping to avoid premature closure of thinking on a topic. Technology is another effective tool with unique capacity to support our ability to cater for gifted and talented students.

- Programs within the Compass Centre and indeed throughout the school reflect the development of intellectual character— to be curious, open-minded, sceptical, strategic, metacognitive, and truth seeking. (Ritchhart, 2002)5 There has been an intentional development of a shared language of metacognition that assists students to discuss their thinking. The goal is to make thinking visible.

- Within extension mathematics programs, this development of language skills is evident in helping students to identify thinking processes that may otherwise remain unexamined; as mathematical intuition. Again the goal is to make thinking visible so that it can be examined and improved. Staff engage in action research to inform practice in these areas. Insights gained through such shared classroom projects in the Compass Centre are shared within the school and also with interschool networks such as Ithaka. More informal sharing occurs through special interest networks such as CSE and the Boroondara Gifted Network.

- The Boroondara Gifted Network involves secondary schools from all sectors in the Boroondara region. Schools offer workshops in areas of special interest. These are open to all member schools who are invited to send students to attend. This allows schools to

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access a wide range of events in disciplines that may be so specialised that there would not be enough students in one school alone to justify running a program. Further, students are able to meet with others of like mind and interest. Staff involved in the network meet to share best practice and engage in professional development.

- Da Vinci Decathlon – MLC is a host school for the Victorian da Vinci Decathlon and the coordinator of the Compass Centre is the Administrator of the Victorian events. The National da Vinci Decathlon originated at Knox Grammar in New South Wales. This event is open to Year 7 students. Teams of eight students tackle ten tasks in different disciplines over the course of a day. Disciplines include science, mathematics, English, art and poetry, engineering, code breaking, forensics, general knowledge, games of strategy and creative producers. Schools are encouraged to use preparation material with their gifted students. Indeed, the material is aimed at stimulating the development of spin-off programs within participating schools. At events, staff are offered the opportunity to network and at some events, professional development sessions are also run.

- Compass programs are specifically designed with content, process, learning environment and product modified for the needs of gifted and talented students (Maker & Neilson)⁶. The work of Grant Wiggins (Understanding by Design)⁷ has been drawn upon to help shape curriculum design with the needs of gifted students in mind. Students and staff work together to determine what big ideas are worth understanding and with that in mind develop a rigorous and engaging curriculum. Curriculum design focussed on the passions of our students and their needs is an ongoing focus of the Centre.

- Mentoring – with the aim of linking gifted students of similar interest but different ages, the Compass Centre has trained mentors, usually International Baccalaureate students in Year 11 to work with primary aged students from our Junior School in a lunchtime club.

4. Equity of access to programs for all gifted and talented students in Victoria

While access to appropriate programs at MLC is relatively good, we are conscious in our dealings with other schools in our area, that the level of support and funding within schools is not uniform. Many of our colleagues are struggling to cater for the needs of their gifted students as time allocated and funds available to access outside programs is limited.

Many designated teachers of gifted and talented students are the only expert in their setting and need the support and collaboration of similar teachers in other schools. The opportunity to reflect intentionally on practice is vital as a considerable degree of creativity is required to engage highly able learners at an appropriate level. So access to programs for gifted and talented students should also take into consideration access to appropriate expertise and support for their teacher mentors.

School clusters and networks would benefit from funding for network meetings, professional development, shared projects and travel for students accessing opportunities outside of their own

⁷ Grant Wiggins & Jay McTighe, Understanding by Design, ASCD
school. Similarly, funding for shared professional reflection is another effective way of addressing the needs of the students.

The underrepresentation of indigenous students, students with English as a second language and students with refugee backgrounds in gifted programs has been noted. There has been research into such groups in other countries but there is still a need for investigation of these populations in Australia.

5. Addressing the issue of underperformance among gifted and talented students

The issue of underperformance is closely linked to effective identification of gifted and talented students. Where identification is based on curriculum based performance (classroom tests or similar), there is no reference to what a student is capable of achieving. So curriculum based testing needs to be cross referenced with general ability testing. The need for identification procedures based on multiple measures including behavioural traits is also evident. (At MLC, we use multiple methods of identification, collecting information from as many sources as possible, over as much time as is possible. This includes testing, Gifted Ratings Scale observations, teacher and parent referrals and anecdotal observations.) This addresses the identification of the underachiever but there is still much that needs to be done in addressing the causes of underachievement. Similarly, some student behaviours can be misinterpreted by teachers, leading them to eliminate some children whose behaviour is seen as disruptive from consideration for gifted programs.

Our approach is based on identification and then individual case management of students, working to address key issues such as motivation.

The need for increased understanding of these issues is required – again it should be addressed both in pre-service training and in teacher professional development.

6. Overcoming negative attitudes and misconceptions surrounding giftedness and talent

The issue of misconceptions is addressed through education. It is important at MLC that we continually address staff to in-service them about the needs of particular individuals or the Compass Centre. Parents, too, require accurate information on giftedness. Compass staff provide advice for parents where required on an individual basis.

Parent support networks external to the school are useful. The primary schools’ Boroondara Gifted Network includes parents and provides information sessions and professional development to both staff and parents.

7. Mechanisms to improve the capacity of teachers to identify and adequately respond to gifted and talented students

As mentioned previously, pre-service training is vital in preparing teachers to cater for gifted and talented students. A compulsory course in gifted education at pre-service level would assist in
addressing many of the issues raised by this inquiry. However, it is also important to update knowledge and skill in this area once a teacher has some classroom experience and can appreciate the differences between a bright student and a gifted learner (Szarbos). 8 So, professional development as well as encouragement to engage in post graduate studies in the area would be helpful.

Training in the recognition of gifted behaviours is also of benefit. While testing can give an indication of a student’s potential, it is only one method of identifying gifted students. We recognise that multiple methods provide the most effective way of identifying students who can most benefit from our programs. So alongside testing, behavioural checklists and common characteristics of gifted and talented students should be used.

Ongoing professional development and dialogue with classroom teachers is vital in our practice. Compass staff are available to go into the classroom to observe students and provide advice to staff. Observations and checklists can be done together. This provides expert advice and mentoring in situ at the time it is most effective.

A successful strategy employed at MLC has been to co-opt members of various faculties to work part-time in Compass alongside experienced teachers of gifted and talented students. This has been for terms typically lasting two to three years. Expertise in identifying students and modifying curriculum for the needs of gifted and talented students is then taken back to the relevant faculties. Several projects developed in Compass have then been adopted within the relevant faculty, making them available to more students and further enriching the curriculum.

8. any broader implications for school communities arising from the education of gifted and talented students

In an environment where there are many competing interests for education funding, misconceptions about the needs of gifted and talented students could eliminate them from consideration. Education of the wider community along with the educational community is vital in bringing the needs of gifted and talented students into perspective.

The benefits of whole school differentiation are well documented (Renzulli9, Carol Anne Tomlinson10) When modifications are made to cater for gifted and talented students, it has the effect of raising the standards and expectations for all students.

In Conclusion:

Provision for gifted and talented students needs to be made at the local level, taking into consideration priorities and resources available. Local providers need to be supported through

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adequate professional development, provision of support services and relevant experts. Networks are effective in pooling resources and linking gifted education teachers within schools but need adequate funding to support all schools gaining access.

MLC has a dynamic model for providing for gifted and talented students which evolves in response to the needs of its students and the emerging understandings and developments in gifted education. We believe it is important to continually examine and evaluate what we do in order to respond effectively to our students. The support and input from colleagues and other professionals outside our school has assisted our development and we would like to see further support and development of networking in gifted and talented education.

Signed,

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