Suzanne Cory High School Response to the Parliamentary Inquiry into the Education of Gifted and Talented Students

This response is provided by Suzanne Cory High School, a state Years 9-12 co-educational high school which opened for the beginning of Term 1, 2011. The response is in two parts. Part one provides a general response to selected Terms of Reference of the Inquiry. Part two provides responses specific to the current programs and practices of Suzanne Cory High School. Generally, responses will be limited to those apparent from the perspective of the short experience of our school as a selective entry high school.

Response to the Terms of Reference

Students offered a place at Suzanne Cory High School are selected on the basis of a competitive academic examination. The examination measures achievement and ability over a battery of items within six test components. The examination ranks students and places in the school are offered only to those who satisfy a requirement that they are assessed as high average to above average, at a minimum, to those who are placed within the highest ability and achievement levels for their age and stage of schooling in any given similar population. Thus, it is the case that a proportion of students enrolled meet the definitions of gifted and talented as referred to below.

Offers of enrolment in most cases are made on the basis of this selective entry examination result only, subject to the cap rule which limits the percentage of places available to students for any given school. That is, for 85% of the enrolments, a single examination is used to identify eligible students. There exists a serious debate about whether it is possible or prudent to use a single instrument to measure for giftedness or talent. It is considered that the range and balance of test items included in the selective entry examination provides for a comprehensive measure of ability and achievement.

In relation to equity of access to selective education, recent changes to the eligibility rules have resulted in 10% of places in the Year 9 intake of each selective entry high school being made available to students who satisfy the requirement to be considered under the Equity category of enrolments, subject to achieving an acceptable score on the entry examination. Equity eligibility is determined by socio-economic status or self-declaration of indigenous heritage. In 2011, the Equity component of enrolment was achieved, although only one enrolled student met the indigenous heritage eligibility. This is considered to be a significant under-representation of this community. Further, the physical location of all four selective entry schools represents a barrier to participation from non-metropolitan students.

As an equity and access strategy, and to provide opportunities for students in mainstream schools, the provision of outreach and on-line courses and units of study should be investigated. There is now considerable overseas experience of blended learning models and there is significant potential represented by these models to provide for compacted, enriched or accelerated learning to students who are unable to access such opportunities due to location or lack of school capacity.
Community awareness of the option of selective entry education rests largely with the individual schools. A Selective Entry High Schools Network has existed since 2008. This network has been initiated by DEECD, following the decision by government to establish two new selective entry high schools and to rationalise entry procedures DEECD funding has supported initial advertising by the two new schools and limited advertising on behalf of the network, chiefly to advise parents of the selective entry examination process. DEECD has also established a website for the purpose of providing information and enrolment in the selective entry examination. However awareness of selective entry education remains low and DEECD remains reluctant to promote this choice when parents are considering secondary school options. This results in uneven access to information and opportunity, especially in non-English speaking communities.

**Information specific to Suzanne Cory High School**

**Programs currently provided at Suzanne Cory High School.**

Suzanne Cory High School is a selective entry state school located in Werribee. The school is the fourth state selective entry high school. Suzanne Cory High School is a co-educational school established in the tradition of excellence characterising state selective entry schools. The core values of the school are **Respect, Aspiration and Contribution.**

Suzanne Cory High School commenced in 2011 with 200 Year 9 students and will continue to take in new students at year 9 each year, reaching full capacity of 800 students in years 9 to 12 in 2014.

The curriculum provides preparation for all students to gain the Victorian Certificate of Education. The curriculum is comprehensive and designed to maximise the opportunity for each student to undertake tertiary level study. The current curriculum offered is as required by the Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS). Students in Year 10 will also have the opportunity to access VCE studies. To enrich the formal curriculum, Suzanne Cory High School is developing partnerships with Melbourne and Victoria universities to enable students to access facilities, programs and academic staff.

The current Year 9 curriculum is subject discipline based, with an emphasis on literacy and numeracy as the foundation for successful participation in the curriculum in later years. In determining the optimal curriculum offering for students of higher ability, an examination was undertaken of the curriculum programs in the existing selective entry schools. This revealed a greater than usual participation in Mathematics, Sciences, Music and Languages Other than English (LOTE). Typically these students also display sporting ability and interests and a desire to follow an interest outside their normal learning program. For these reasons the current Year 9 and planned Year 10 program at Suzanne Cory High School requires all students to undertake Maths and English, a LOTE (Mandarin or French), Music, Humanities, Science, Arts/Technology, Health/Physical Education, Sport and a Co-curricula subject.
The school has adopted a teaching and learning model based on what is known about effective teaching of highly able and gifted students, thorough documentation of curriculum units, lessons, assessment and student progress, powerful use of ICT for learning and the establishment of a positive, productive and innovative learning environment. The specific teaching and learning model draws on the works of Tomlinson and Reiss (2004), Gross, Macleod, et al (2005), Dixon and Moon (2006), Anderson and Krathwohl (2001), Hattie (2007, 2009), Marzano (2001, 2009) and Glasson (2005). The model uses pre-assessment as a means to inform teacher decisions regarding compacting and acceleration of curriculum. Teacher decisions regarding depth and pace of instruction are made on this basis and the use of continuing feedback as a teaching and learning strategy. Typically the emphasis within the curriculum is on higher order tasks and thinking skills, employing a revised Blooms Taxonomy.

**Experience and issues surrounding these programs**

There is strong interest in selective education as measured by demand for places in selective entry schools. The establishment of a selective entry school in the west of Melbourne was to meet this demand and provide for greater diversity and choice for parents and students in the west of Melbourne. This purpose appears to have been substantially achieved taking into account the experience of our school thus far. 75% of places in 2011 are occupied by students whose families have a western suburbs address. 25% of the students have an address within the Wyndham LGA. At the time of writing, and taking into account all preferences, there are approximately five times as many students seeking places than the number of places available for 2012 at Suzanne Cory High School. Further, taking the 2011 cohort of students as typical, 50% of the cohort has come directly from the non-government sector. There is also considerable anecdotal evidence of strong community interest in selective entry schooling.

We have no evidence of negative perceptions toward provision of education for highly able or gifted students. Indeed, many of our parents have actively sought out such a school out of frustration with the experience they report in their previous school. This is not expressed as a criticism of the particular school but rather a desire to have their son/daughter learn in a more suitable environment populated by like-minded and similarly talented students. A significant number of our students have experienced accelerated programs in their previous school.

An issue which challenges us at Suzanne Cory High School is the lack of transition information and wide variety of previous experience of the students. Establishment student wellbeing services is hampered by this as is our capacity to have clear learning profiles of students at the commencement of Year 9. This is particularly the case with LOTE where establishing a LOTE program invariably faces the challenge of seeking to ensure that students are “VCE ready” at the end of Year 10 after they enter a Year 9 LOTE with either no
previous experience or having had varying experience in the LOTE studies on offer. A related problem arises where students have undertaken an accelerated program in their previous school and believe they have successfully completed Year 9 subjects upon entry to our school. Pre-assessments do not always verify this level of attainment. These problems arise largely out of the fact that the selective entry schools in this state begin at Year 9 rather than at the beginning of secondary education.

The Year 9 entry also results in pressures on schools that "lose" students to selective entry schools at the end of Year 8. Despite rules to ensure schools are not adversely affected by the loss of Year 8 students to the selective entry schools at Year 9, there is residual concern from some of these schools concerning the impact this has on the public measures of school achievement. Similarly, the cap rules can be considered discriminatory where a student at a particular school may not be offered an enrolment where there are a large number of highly achieving students who apply for a selective entry place, but if that student were enrolled elsewhere, their entry examination result may have resulted in an offer of enrolment. This problem would be significantly addressed if the entry level was Year 7, for example.

The experience of students participating in these programs

At this stage, Suzanne Cory High School has little hard data on student performance or attitudes to school since the school has been operating only since the beginning of term one this year. The statewide accountability process of collecting such student opinion data has recently been undertaken but results are not released to schools until later in the school year.

School data collected using an internal student opinion and attitudes survey is very positive on all measures.

2011 NAPLAN data is unavailable until August but it is of interest that 99% of our students sat the 2011 NAPLAN.

"Giftedness" and "talent"

There is a significant relevant literature concerning the definitions of "giftedness" and "talent". The work of Gagne (1999) has had the most recent influence on thinking about these terms and is the framework adopted by this school. Gagne distinguishes between giftedness and talent. He views giftedness in terms of exceptional (top 10%) aptitude or potential where talent is defined as outstanding achievement (top 10%) or performance, especially compared to what might be expected at any given age. Gagne suggests the interaction of a number of variables can either foster or impede the movement of giftedness to talent.

The selection process for students entering selective entry high schools utilises a testing procedure which recognises this distinction and measure both achievement and ability. Test
items are designed to measure both of these elements and the test score arises out of a consideration and combination of both.

In the context of this model, the role of the selective entry school is to contribute to the developmental process through both the curriculum content, including extra-curricula programs, and learning process. This is to be achieved at Suzanne Cory high School through a combination of the social and physical environments, the positive effects of teachers and other mentors, the curriculum and other opportunities provided for learning and personal growth and the provision of opportunities within the program and cultural experience for stimulation and challenge.

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

This issue is critical to the successful experience of students with these characteristics. It is generally accepted that the "teacher effect" on all students is the single most powerful and controllable variable influencing student outcomes. Current approaches to building teacher capacity to effectively provide for such students are diverse and varied. Given that so many schools offer programs of various sorts for such students, there may be a need to review current approaches to teacher training to ensure attention is paid to building appropriate knowledge and skill within the pre-service training regime. A review of teacher training courses is warranted to ascertain the extent to which courses provide training relevant to the identification and effective teaching of gifted and talented students.
DEECD in-service programs are offered. However these programs appear to lack integrated planning and are of varying quality and usefulness. There appears to be little serious systematic and targeted professional learning sponsored by any authority. This may be a result of policy ambivalence toward specialism. What seems to thrive are a number of networks, some initiated by individuals or groups with special interests or expertise, including parent groups.

Suzanne Cory High School has sought to recruit teaching staff with prior experience working with gifted and talented students or whose personal experience and achievement allows them to successfully understand and teach these students. The school has privileged ongoing professional learning through regular timetabled professional learning time and has developed a professional learning plan to support whole-school teaching and learning and individual professional learning needs of staff. This has emphasised professional learning to further develop teacher’s understandings of the nature of selective entry students and how they learn. In addition, Suzanne Cory High School is negotiating a research partnership with Victoria University to explore and elaborate on pedagogy through an action research model.

The Selective High Schools Network has discussed professional learning and the development of an outreach program to support staff in selective entry schools and others in similar programs. This is an initiative worth exploring.

Consideration could be given to providing more incentives and opportunities to teachers to upskill through scholarship support, or similar, to attract teachers to suitable approved training courses. There is precedent for this type of strategy in retraining in areas of critical shortfall in teacher supply.

Any broader implications for school communities arising from the education of gifted and talented students

The model and selection processes for selective entry schools can present challenges in defining the school community and establishing constructive relationships and a presence within their local communities. A particular feature of the Suzanne Cory High School community is the geographical definition of the clear majority of its community. Three quarters of the current students have a western suburbs address, with one quarter residing within the local government area. However, approximately half the current students travel to and from school by public transport, with a significant number of the students are transported by a parent. This characteristic means the school will need to creatively seek ways of engaging in and actively belonging to the local community.

Non-selective local schools claim a significant negative impact on school performance as a result of selective entry schools attracting their most gifted and talented students. This is not substantiated by any clear evidence. There is no independent study which measures the effect on individual school outcomes where students move from a non-selective to a selective school. There is no independent evidence to suggest that in all cases such students are those
who would have succeeded at the highest level if they had continued at that school for the remainder of their secondary education. In addition, the present rules cap the percentage of students from each school who may be offered selective entry enrolment, thus minimising any such potential effect.

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Selected Bibliography


