In reply please quote:

GE00/0314

30 May 2011

Mr D Southwick MP
Chair
Education and Training Committee
Parliament House
Spring Street
EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002

Dear Mr Southwick,

The Catholic Education Office Melbourne welcomes the Victorian Parliament's Education and Training Committee's Inquiry into the Education of Gifted and Talented Students.

Catholic Education acknowledges the need to further develop policy, research and teacher training to enhance the effectiveness of current programs and policies for gifted and talented students.

Catholic Education in collaboration with both the Independent Schools Victoria and The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development seeks to enhance the capacity and scope for gifted and talented students throughout metropolitan, regional and rural Victoria.

The Catholic Education Office Melbourne seeks to be formally involved in future opportunities which may be a result of the Parliamentary Inquiry into the Education of Gifted and Talented Students.

The attached submission seeks to assist the inquiry by providing particular attention from the Catholic Education Office perspective to the Terms of Reference of the inquiry.

Yours sincerely

Stephen Elder
DIRECTOR OF CATHOLIC EDUCATION
Parliamentary Inquiry into the Education of Gifted and Talented Students

Introductory comments:

The Catholic Education Office Melbourne (CEOM) promotes inclusive learning to improve the quality of outcomes for all students. Developed in consultation with school communities, the CEOM learning and teaching framework, “Learning Centred Schools: A Sacred Landscape,” is designed to support school communities in their collaborative pursuit of excellence in learning and teaching within the central vision of Catholic education.

The notion of equity is pivotal, set within a framework of faith development, excellence, innovation and justice. This requires that students are provided with a learning environment that acknowledges and maximises their individual potential and promotes their wellbeing and their experience of participation and inclusion. The characteristics of contemporary learning in a Catholic school described within this framework will assist all school leaders to connect their school’s improvement goals to the broader mission of providing high-quality learning for all students in the Archdiocese.

The notion of equity acknowledges that students should also receive equity of opportunity across all spectres of socio-economic status, urban or rural context, and degree of ability or disability. The CEOM acknowledges that schools have varying needs and seeks to personalise support to schools in order to provide equity of opportunity.

This point was heralded by Pope Paul VI:

“All students regardless of race, age or gender, by virtue of their dignity as human persons, have a right to an education that is suited to their particular needs and adapted to their ability.”

Definition of Gifted


“Giftedness designates the possession and use of outstanding natural abilities, called aptitudes, in at least one ability domain, to a degree that places an individual at least among the top 10% of age peers. Talent designates the outstanding mastery of systematically developed abilities, called competencies (knowledge and skills), in at least one field of human activity to a degree that places an individual at least among the top 10% of age peers who are or have been active in that field... These three components, giftedness (G), talent (T), and the talent development process (D), constitute the basic trio of components within the DMTG”
Gagne’s model further considers the impact of intrapersonal catalysts or personal characteristics of the individual (I) and environmental catalysts including the educative process (E) as critical factors to be considered. Gagne (2008) also notes that high natural abilities may remain just gifts, and not be translated into talents, commonly known as underachievement. In situations where the complex interplay between the elements which influence performance are not carefully supported through the education process, there is a danger that these students will never reach their full potential.

Consequently, the term ‘gifted and talented’ describes students who demonstrate an exceptionally high level of performance in one or more areas of human endeavour. As exemplified in Table 1, titled; High ability level performance and prevalence. The degree of giftedness as represented on a normal distribution curve, indicates that students can be perceived as requiring a range of adjustments in order to effectively and actively engages in the educational pursuits offered by the schooling system. The degree of adjustment required in order to support student’s increases in accordance with their intellectual capacity as measured on an IQ assessment. Adjustments can be considered as supplementary, substantial and significant.

**TABLE ONE: HIGH ABILITY LEVEL PERFORMANCE AND PREVALENCE**

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Adjustments: Supplementary Adjustments | Substantial Adjustments | Extensive Adjustments

**Supplementary Adjustments**

A supplementary adjustment is provided when there is an assessed need to address the specific innate high ability in at least one field or domain and when it is necessary to further enhance the strategies and resources already available for all students within the school.

**Substantial Adjustments**

Substantial adjustments are designed to address the specific nature and impact of a student’s naturally high ability or aptitude addressing barriers to engagement, effective participation and performance.
Extensive Adjustments

Extensive adjustments are designed to address the specific nature and impact of the student’s exceptional ability and the associated barriers to their engagement, participation and performance.

In order to effectively meet the needs of students across the spectrum of giftedness in accordance with Gagne’s definition, teachers must have both the content and pedagogical knowledge to identify and provide opportunities for these students to achieve their potential. Without significant support in the form of an appropriate curriculum and trained educators, such potential may never come to fruition. (Gagne, 1995 cited in Gross & Sleepe 2000)

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

The CEOM promotes the principles of personalised learning and the view that the curriculum for the gifted should be characterised by flexibility rather than uniformity, quality not quantity and should be designed to fulfill the needs of each individual student in the belief that appropriate teacher and student interaction, together with differentiated content (qualitatively different provisions) will result in a quality curriculum. Professional learning is offered to both primary and secondary teachers to support the practice of curriculum differentiation. As gifted students are diverse in terms of their abilities and levels of giftedness” (Gross, 2000), a differentiated curriculum assists in addressing the different learning styles of these students in both mixed ability and self-contained gifted classrooms (MacLeod, 2005). Essentially, the aim of differentiating instruction is to maximise each student’s growth by meeting each student where he or she is and helping the student to progress. In practice, it involves offering several different learning experiences in response to students’ varying needs (Tomlinson, 2000).

The practice of differentiated learning is clearly supported in the National Professional Standards for Teachers published by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL), particularly in standard 1; Know students and how they learn. The AITSL standards acknowledge that teachers must be able to cater for the physical, social and intellectual development and characteristics of all students, understand how students learn and differentiate teaching to meet the specific learning needs of students across the full range of abilities.

The CEOM seek to continue to maximize student achievement, fulﬁl the promise of equal opportunity, and continuously improve the education of all students. The CEOM provides support for schools in identifying gifted students, assessing specific needs and in making appropriate programming recommendations to practitioners via a referral service. Services may include classroom strategy support, support in the development of Individual Learning Plans (ILPs) and/or provision of professional development opportunities for school staff. In accordance with the CEOM’s student centred philosophy, parents form a crucial partnership with schools in order to collaboratively plan educational provision. A Program Support Group (PSG) is established to review the educational needs of students with additional learning needs and in this process may decide that a referral is for additional support would be of benefit. If service is to be provided, it is expected that the PSG will meet on an ongoing basis with a minimum frequency of once a term.

Through the established PSG structure, appropriate educational responses to meet the ongoing needs of gifted and talented students are reviewed and enacted. Accelerative practices continue to be offered through a PSG structure supported via clearly articulated ILPs. Accelerative practices currently supported through this process include early entry to schooling, acceleration in one or
more key learning areas, grade skipping, access to university courses whilst still enrolled at school and/or early entry to university. Accelerated instruction enables bright students to work with their mental peers on learning tasks that match their abilities (Kulik & Kulik, 1984b, p.84). Research has revealed three significant characteristics of gifted learners that must be addressed to best match the curriculum to the learner. Gifted and talented students are often precocious and hence learn more quickly; exhibit intensity in the affective and cognitive areas and hence may be more emotionally responsive than students of average ability, or display intensity by concentrating and persisting at a task that interests and engages them. Gifted students are also noted as being capable of engaging in higher-level and abstract thinking earlier than age peers. They like challenging work beyond their current level of functioning and can make connections or see relationships among concepts from diverse content areas (Van Tassel-Baska, 2003). Whilst there are varying opinions of the many types of acceleration, research evidence, as reviewed by Hattie (2009) and Collangelo et al (2004) in A Nation Deceived report benefits to student outcomes.

As an inclusive education system, the CEOM acknowledges that gifted and talented students have the right to an education which directly meets their needs as a matter on inherent equity and justice. It is often also noted that gifted and talented students who have been actively engaged in education and in the broader community have the capacity to provide benefits to society. In instances where gifted students are actively engaged in the pursuit of excellence in their chosen field they afford society the possible benefits and enjoyment of their creative endeavours, inventions and contribution to society.

Issues

Effective teachers require the knowledge and expertise to plan and design curriculum which caters for individual differences, in short, to effectively differentiate the curriculum. Professional development for practicing and pre service teachers is required to expose them to research in the area of gifted education and engage them in the application of this pedagogy to meet the specific needs of their own students via action research models. The CEOM currently provides a range of professional development programs directed at supporting pedagogical practices as they directly relate to the education of gifted and talented students. The application of these services is transferred directly to the classroom context through the action research projects. The CEOM also supports pre-service training at the Australian Catholic University (ACU) through provision of sessional lectures conducted by highly experienced staff. The need for the provision of carefully considered and structured pre service program implementation is well documented.

The asynchronist abilities of gifted students is also well documented and it is recognised that whilst many gifted students may have well-developed research, independent study skills and intrinsic motivation, others need considerable support in these areas. Rogers (2007) notes that gifted students may prefer independent study but adds that it needs to be structured appropriately so that deep understanding and self management skills are acquired whilst Tomlinson (1998) notes that achievement is enhanced when tasks are structured, allow for concept acquisition, and enable students to pace themselves. Highly able teachers will be capable of identifying the varying profiles of gifted and talented students and provide the explicit instruction and scaffolding required whilst recognizing that they may not need the degree of support and repetition required by less able students.
Teacher capacity

It is essential that all teachers have the skills and knowledge to effectively meet the needs of all students in their classrooms. It should be mandatory that all teachers undergo some professional learning in the area of gifted education in order to maximise engagement of highly able students.

Gifted students are represented in all school communities but school communities vary in their ability to meet the needs of these students. In the absence of designated funding models to support the identification and implementation of appropriate educational programming for gifted students, schools are left to make the most of the resources they have and prioritise the needs of students. In these circumstances, it is often difficult for schools to allocate resources to support gifted students when students with learning difficulties are also in need of resourcing. This issue is particularly relevant in low SES communities where gifted students are few in number in comparison to high SES communities and can hence be viewed as a minority issue.

Students may be fortunate enough to come across a particularly skilled or sympathetic teacher but a strategic response which is accompanied by appropriate resourcing is what is required. It is evident that families recognise a need for an enriched educational program as evidenced by the number of students seeking enrolment in selective entry schools in Victoria. Catholic students make up approximately twenty four percent of the total Year 8 population in Victorian schools. Twenty three percent of all selective entry places to Melbourne High School, Mac Robertson Girls High School, Nossal High School and Suzanne Cory High School were offered and accepted by students who exit the Catholic system. Whilst there may be benefits to the students, it could be argued that this is an indication that the educational needs of highly able students may not currently be met within their current educational settings.

The implications of selective entry schools are many and varied impacting both upon the students who accept the places but also on the schools from which they exit. Within the principles of inclusive practices, the CEOM believes that the needs of these students would best be met within their local school community.

This view is further supported by examination of the 2009 PISA data which indicates that Australia was the only high performing country to show a significant decline in reading literacy performance. It is notable that similar proportions of students in government and Catholic schools performed at the highest levels of reading literacy, with 10 per cent of students from the government school sector and 14 per cent of students from the Catholic school sector at Level 5 or 6. In terms of the proficiency levels, the proportion of students who achieved Level 5 or 6 declined significantly between PISA 2000 and PISA 2009, from 18 per cent in PISA 2000 to 13 per cent in PISA 2009. The ACER analysis (Thompson et al., 2010) further denotes concern the decline is primarily among high-achieving students, and that the proportion of both males and females in the highest two proficiency levels declined significantly over the nine-year period.

The PISA data indicates that students across sectors may not be achieving their full potential as after adjusting for student and school socioeconomic background, there are no significant differences between the results of students in government schools and those in independent schools further highlighting the urgent need for teacher professional development. The underachievement of a significant number of students continues to be a concern with students either deliberately underplaying their talents or becoming accustomed to being under challenged and bored and failing to complete their schooling.
Gifted students are represented in all school communities but school communities vary in their ability to meet the needs of these students. In the absence of designated funding models to support the identification and implementation of appropriate educational programming for gifted students, schools are left to make the most of the resources they have and prioritise the needs of students. It is notable that PISA data further highlights this.

“One of the most important indicators of equity in education is the strength of the relationship between the social background of students and their educational achievement. If the relationship is strong, the education system is not acting to produce more equitable outcomes, but is instead reinforcing educational privilege where it exists by conferring higher scores and denying privilege where it does not already exist.” (Thompson et al., 2010. P. 18)

The PISA data clearly indicates the impact for students marginalised by rurality, SES, and culturally diverse backgrounds. There is a substantial under-representation of Indigenous students at the higher end of the reading literacy proficiency scale and a similarly substantial over-representation of Indigenous students at the lower end. Only two per cent (2.4%) of Indigenous students reached Level 5 and there were even fewer Indigenous students (0.3%) who were placed at Level 6.

Four per cent of students from the lowest socioeconomic quartile, compared to 25 per cent of students from the highest socioeconomic quartile, performed at the higher end of the reading literacy proficiency scale (Levels 5 and 6).

Six percent of students (including only 0.4% at Level 6) from remote schools, compared to eight per cent from provincial schools and 14 per cent from metropolitan schools, performed at the higher end of the reading literacy proficiency scale (Levels 5 and 6). Those gifted and talented students from minority groups are further impacted upon by the use of middle class Anglo Saxon assessment tools which are culturally biased and may under identify a student’s capabilities.

As noted by Winebrenner (2001, page 23), “Many gifted students from ethnically and culturally diverse backgrounds, minority cultures and economically disadvantaged families continue to fall through the cracks when children are identified for gifted programs and other learning opportunities.” She continues to note a variety of contributing factors which include the cultural bias of the commonly used assessment tools, the fact that the children may attend schools where gifted education is not a priority and teachers are unable to identify the characteristics of gifted students. A number of studies have debated the ability of teachers to identify gifted students since the issue was raised by Pegg and Birch in 1959. Their study is often cited as an indicator of the poor capacity of teachers in identifying students with an IQ above 130. Issues in teacher identification of gifted students were also raised by Dusek & Joseph 1983, Cramond and Martin 1987 and Seigle and Powell in 2004. Gagne (1994) criticised the original work of Pegg and Birch and reported that teachers were as effective as most other sources of information in identifying gifted students.

What is highlighted is that the assessment and subsequent identification of gifted students remains a difficult area, yet a great deal may depend upon accurate identification. In what can be considered the “high-stakes testing” environment of the 2000’s, employment opportunities, high school graduation, grade promotion, university admission, gifted education placement, and special education placement rely extensively on test results. Thus, the discussion of how tests impact the decisions of test users and the opportunities of those tested is by no means insignificant. Stated another way,
"An intelligence test is a neutral, inconsequential tool until someone assigns significance to the results derived from it. Once meaning is attached to a person’s score, that individual will experience many repercussions, ranging from superficial to life changing. These repercussions will be fair or prejudiced, helpful or harmful, appropriate or misguided—depending on the meaning attached to the test score" (Gregory, 2004, p. 240).

This highlights one critical issue in gifted education which applied not only to the use of assessment and observation to identify gifted and talented children, but to all facets of educational programs and that is that sound theory must underpin practice (Feldhusen, Asher & Hoover, 1984; Renzulli, 2004). There is a need to ensure that the tools used to identify gifted and talented students are both grounded in solid research and effective in their application.

Although not directly measured, it is notable that there can be a significant detrimental impact for highly able students when the education system does not directly recognise and meet their needs. This is further impacted for students with dual exceptionality. Gifted students with disabling conditions remain a major group of underserved and under stimulated youth (Clive & Schwartz, 1999). The focus on accommodations for their disabilities may preclude the recognition and development of their cognitive abilities. It is not unexpected, then, to find a significant discrepancy between the measured academic potential of these students and their actual performance in the classroom (Whitmore & Maker, 1985). Examination of the CEOM data indicates that students with high abilities are being supported through a disability funding model due to a broad range of co-morbid factors but considerable prevalence of autism mental health issues. The group which also has some degree of disability has access to targeted support whilst the others do not.

The CEOM promotes the use of ILPs for gifted students. Support available for the development of these plans via a referral service however, whilst Catholic schools have access to support services (psychology, educational assessments, program development support), these services often need to prioritise students with learning difficulties and disabilities.

Gifted students need to be identified as target population with associated resourcing provided to ensure that they have an equal opportunity to reach their full potential. Gifted students may often not meet their full potential without some intervention. School counsellors and or psychologists need to be made available to support these students. There is strong empirical evidence to show that specialist training in gifted education improves teacher effectiveness in identification. (Gear, 1978), and leads to a significant improvement in teaching skill and classroom climate (Hansen and Feldhusen, 1994).

Projects

The CEOM has many relevant projects currently underway which seek to redress the issues raised above in the arena of gifted education. In partnership with government the CEOM is committed to improving the learning outcomes for all students and acknowledges the diversity of student needs through a range of responses. The delivery of this goal requires teachers to have both the content and pedagogical knowledge to provide opportunities for all students to achieve their potential within an inclusive community. Effective teaching makes a difference, whatever the particular needs of individual students.

Teachers need to be aware of the various options for gifted students especially the various curriculum choices and the effect on learning. In order to capitalise on the expertise within the system, a ‘gifted think tank’ was established in 2010 with members drawn from senior educators,
principals and consultants from the CEOM and diocesan offices. This group of highly engaged and well informed educators supports the development of key initiatives in the arena of gifted education.

The CEOM advocates implementation of evidence based practice. Whilst there are any number of research projects regarding groupings and instructional management of gifted students, this is not commonly known or understood by teachers unless they have had an opportunity for credentialed learning in this area. Teachers need to be aware of the various options for the identification and subsequent program development required to effectively meet the needs of gifted students and maintain high levels of student engagement.

The CEOM seeks to provide excellent opportunities for the professional development of current and pre service teachers and has strategically fostered relationships with the university sector. These projects include exploration of the various supports which can be implemented to encourage teachers to undertake post-graduate studies in gifted education. Professional learning has been delivered by highly qualified staff to large numbers of primary and secondary schools. Teachers who have attended a series of 5 professional learning days have applied their knowledge through action research projects completed within their school setting. These teachers have subsequently developed knowledge and expertise and have facilitated professional learning in their own schools.

The CEOM has sought to provide teachers with access to a range of high calibre speakers and experts in the field. Speakers have included, Rosemary Cathcart, Francois Gagne and Jason Clarke. Given the importance of effective teaching and the prevalence of gifted students across all populations, it is imperative that pre service education for both primary and secondary teachers include the study of differentiating the curriculum especially for gifted students. Merrick, C. & Targett, R. (2005) noted that what has been made clear through the research, is that teachers need to have knowledge of the specific characteristics they should look for when seeking to identify gifted and talented students and that professional knowledge is hence essential.

The CEOM has recognised the need for the development of strategic partnerships in order to refine and develop the agenda within the arena of gifted education. The CEOM has actively sought relationships with key University personnel at The University of Melbourne and ACU and has provided staff to deliver sessional lectures to pre-service and post-graduate students at ACU. The CEOM has representation at the Victorian Association of Gifted and Talented and affiliations with the National Gallery of Victoria in the provision of rich inquiry experiences for highly able and creative students.

The CEOM works with the Australian and State governments to promote the common good and the development of a socially cohesive and culturally rich society. This requires that students' needs, backgrounds, perspectives and interests are reflected in the structures and processes as well as in the teaching and learning program of the school. Teachers in the classroom can make a difference in the learning outcomes of students through the development of positive relationships and the implementation of a rigorous teaching and learning program. In the words of St Benedict, effective teachers 'must so arrange everything that the strong have something to yearn for and the weak have nothing to run from' (The Holy Rule of St Benedict, 64:9).

The CEOM supports strong family and community involvement in the educative process and has emphasised the critical role of families in the planning process through establishment of PSGs and the use of PSG/ILP frameworks for the delivery of supportive processes utilising models such as the DMTG as developed by Gagne. In order to strengthen processes, the CEOM is currently undertaking
a project which seeks to support schools to redefine the critical processes in establishing collaborative program support group structures, the development and implementation of the ILP and methodology for maintaining positive and clearly communicated meeting and recording processes. In addition, limited support is available through a referral process which whilst targeted toward the needs of students with disabilities, also has capacity to provide some degree of assessment and programs planning support. This has included the facilitation of processes which seek to provide gifted students with mentors located across higher education, business and community organisations. Great scope for the use of technology to link students with like-minded peers, mentors and ‘experts’ has been identified and avenues of promulgation are currently being explored.

The CEOC has strongly supported the implementation of the Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) as a community mapping tool with capacity to inform teaching and learning models based on early entry differentiation for all students as a global platform for support including support for gifted students. The tool is currently primarily used to identify the proportion of children entering school who are developmentally vulnerable across the domains of physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, language skills, cognitive skills as well as communication skills and general knowledge. As each student is individually considered, it may be possible for this tool to be used to also identify the highly able students across these domains. The community engagement created through the implementation of the AEDI provides further avenues for the exploration of enrichment and extension opportunities both within the school and local community context and beyond.

Opportunities for improved educational offerings for gifted and talented students through collaboration across all school sectors and with community, business and industry.

Whilst many mechanisms to increase teacher capacity to identify gifted and talented students have been supported by governments and education sectors alike, a unified and strategic policy is required which provides clarity and a structured approach to equitable access to the teacher training required in order to meet the goals outlined in the National Professional Standards for Teachers as documented by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL).

This clearly defined policy should include a clearly articulated process for access to required resources and include:

- Cross-sectoral collaboration
- The development of a broadly accepted definition of ‘gifted’ and ‘talented’ or acceptance of a designated model such as the DMTG proposed by Gagne
- Appropriate assessment options for all populations
- Clear pathways for access to professional learning both for practicing and pre-service teachers
- Access to support services as required both to meet academic needs, support for the development of Individual Learning Plans, and access to support for mental health adequate resourcing with provisions to ensure equity of access regardless of rurality, SES etc
Gifted students are represented in all school communities but school communities vary in their ability to meet the needs of these students. In the absence of designated funding models to support the identification and implementation of appropriate educational programming for gifted students, schools are left to make the most of the resources they have and prioritise the needs of students. In these circumstances, it is often difficult for schools to allocate resources to support gifted students when students with learning difficulties are also in need of resourcing. This issue is particularly relevant where resources are already scarce and where gifted students are few in number and can hence be viewed as a minority issue. Students may be fortunate enough to come across a particularly skilled or sympathetic teacher but a strategic response which is accompanied by appropriate resourcing is what is required.

Many government initiatives have included resourcing for teacher development but have not specifically targeted the knowledge and skills required to meet the needs of gifted students. Education sectors would greatly benefit from an initiative which recognises and resources credentialed learning for teachers creating a link between the researchers and the teaching practitioners.

Summary

Catholic Education Office Melbourne, following consultation with Catholic educators endorses the need for enhanced differentiated curriculum provision, along with the need for opportunities to enhance provision of support to gifted and talented students.

The CEOM acknowledges that provision of support for gifted and talented students requires a Victorian State Plan to be considered to ensure that the educational needs of gifted and talented can be met through enhancement of current policies and programs for students. The Victorian State Plan should also include opportunities and strategies for parents and carers, teachers and school leaders to enhance support for gifted and talented students.
References


Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL), http://www.aitsl.edu.au/


Government Department of Education, Science and Training and University of New South Wales, GERRIC (Gifted Education Research, Resource and Information Centre).


