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

by

Maroondah Gifted Children's Parents' Association

Maroondah Gifted Children's Parents' Association (MGCPA) is a voluntary parent organisation
which offers support, information and advocacy for gifted children and their families. Contact may
be by phone, email or at our regular meetings. We have had contact with hundreds of gifted children
and their families since 1996. Many maintain regular contact for years. Others make frequent
contact for a period of time while in the most intense period of advocacy for their children.

We thank you for the invitation (letter dated 22 March 2011) to make this submission and greatly
appreciate the interest shown by the government in the education of our gifted and talented students.

This submission will address some of the terms of reference – those which are most frequently of
concern to our members. All names are pseudonyms.

The effectiveness of current policies and programs for gifted and talented students,
with particular consideration of, but not limited to:

- the identification of gifted and talented students;

- equity of access to quality educational choices for gifted and talented students and
  their families; and

- impact on the learning, development and well being of gifted and talented students.
To begin, some definitions or models of giftedness which Maroondah Gifted Children's Parents' Association finds very useful will be described.

First a definition which beautifully highlights the package a gifted child presents to parents and teachers. It's not just being smart! There are surprises and vulnerabilities included. A gifted child may appear as many ages at once.

**The Columbus Group's Definition**

*Giftedness is asynchronous development in which advanced cognitive abilities and heightened intensity combine to create inner experiences and awareness that are qualitatively different from the norm. This asynchrony increases with higher intellectual capacity. The uniqueness of the gifted renders them particularly vulnerable and requires modifications in parenting, teaching and counselling in order for them to develop optimally.* (The Columbus Group, 1991, p.1, from Silverman, 1993).

Gagne's model of giftedness and talent development as used by the DEECD is excellent as it allows for the recognition of underachieving gifted students, and clearly differentiates between giftedness and talent.

**Gagné’s model of giftedness and talent development.**

Gagné (1995) proposes a Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent Development that defines giftedness as the possession of untrained natural ability in at least one domain. This natural ability needs to be present to such an extent that it places the individual in at least the top 15% of the population in their age bracket. Gagné proposes the following domains of giftedness: Intellectual (comprising reasoning: verbal, spatial, memory, judgement etc.), Creative (comprising originality,
inventiveness, etc.), Socioaffective (comprising leadership, empathy, self awareness etc.) and Sensorimotor (comprising strength, fine motor control, endurance, flexibility etc.). An individual may be considered gifted in any one or indeed all of these domains, and they are of distinctive genetic origin. Gagné maintains that talent on the other hand, is the development of any one or all of these domains of giftedness so that the individual achieves in that domain in at least the top 15% of the population for his or her age. For a gifted individual to become talented there is a developmental process of learning, training and practising which must occur to allow high achievement or talent in the area of giftedness. In between being gifted in a domain and developing that gift into a talent there will be a number of catalysts or positive and negative impacts that determine whether the person becomes talented or remains a gifted underachiever. Intrapersonal characteristics such as motivation, personality and temperament, along with environmental influences such as surroundings, people with whom the gifted child interacts, provisions and events will all interact and determine whether a gift is developed into a high level of performance or talent. Fields of talent relevant to school age youth are Academics, Arts, Technology, Games of Strategy, Social Action, Business and Sports. It follows that giftedness is a prerequisite of talent – however, a gifted person may for a variety of reasons never develop the high level of performance we call talent (Gagné, 1995).

In our experience the children who are in the statistically gifted population, i.e. above the 98th percentile on a standardised test of general ability such as Weschler or Stanford - Binet are those who present the biggest educational challenges for their parents and teachers, and appear to be those whose parents most frequently seek our services for support. It is also important to remember that the gifted are not an homogeneous group, and that the needs of the moderately gifted differ from those of highly, exceptionally and profoundly gifted students The highly, exceptionally and profoundly gifted are particularly challenging to provide for in a regular school setting.
Identification of gifted students is an important issue which needs a co-ordinated approach. Teachers need guidance and direction here and professional development will help. A multi-faceted approach using check-lists, NAPLAN results, International Competitions and Assessments for Schools (ICAS), above level testing on standardised tests of achievement and assessment with Raven's Matrices, Weschler or other psychologist administered tests. Untrained teachers often identify as gifted high achieving, bright, conforming students. While those gifted students who do not fit this profile are frequently not identified. We have had contact with many parents whose gifted children have gone right through primary and even well into secondary school without being identified and catered for. Many parents we meet now realise they themselves were unidentified gifted students who were not catered for and didn't reach their potential at school. They do not want the same for their children.

“Thank you so much for the referral to ............... The assessment revealed our daughter to be highly gifted and functioning in many areas years above her chronological age. We now understand her situation at school where no provision is made. Our son went right through that school before being identified by gaining entry to a SEAL program. If only the school had identified them earlier. How different things would have been for us all” Parents of Celina, 9 and Sam, 13.

Even when the child has been assessed as gifted by a psychologist things don't always proceed smoothly at school.

“It's six months since he was assessed. The school has the report and we've had a meeting but nothing seems to have changed” A story regularly heard from countless parents over the years.

When a parent takes the initiative and has their child assessed by a psychologist, they usually believe that this confirmation of what they may have long suspected will lead to their child being provided at last, with a well thought out, cohesive program providing an appropriately paced,
Challenging education for their child. They are frequently disappointed and frustrated by the schools’ lack of response to the report. Schools and teachers often feel inadequately prepared to deal with gifted children - as indeed they are due to most having no pre-service training in the education of gifted children. So they do little or nothing in response to the report. Or worse the report may sit in the child's file ignored – either by oversight or decision. Some teachers have been reported as saying they take no stock in those psych reports and that they like to make their own decisions about a child without having any preconceived ideas. Others say they haven't seen any signs of giftedness in the child, and therefore nothing needs to change.

“I didn't realise what is was like for him at school until one day halfway through year one he said “Today we started to learn to tell the time. That's the first time I've learnt anything at school.” That really hit home to me.” Sonia, parent of Marcus, 6

Most primary students have little or no access to appropriate educational programs for their giftedness. Many languish (often patiently) in classrooms where little attention is given to their right to an appropriately pitched and paced education. They feel undervalued and ignored, while teachers tend to their slower learning classmates. Frequently they become unmotivated, unhappy, angry or depressed. Girls in particular may dumb down to blend in with everyone else – they don't like to appear different. This unhappiness is a frequent reason for parents contacting our organisation. They seek other parents with whom to discuss ways to make their child happy at school. All parents want their children to be happy – none of the parents we know are pushy, although most have probably been branded so by the schools their children attend. The children drag their parents along on a quest for appropriate learning. The parents are pulled – they don't in our experience push!

“He comes home from school angry. Angry that his needs seem to be overlooked” Frequent comment from numerous parents
Some schools provide well for the gifted, and take in stride a differentiated curriculum, pretesting, subject acceleration, vertical groupings for spelling, maths and literacy, clustering gifted students together in a classroom, enrichment offerings and even whole grade acceleration. Gifted children are valued and thrive in these places. They tend to be schools where at least one staff member has postgraduate qualifications in gifted education and the principal is supportive. These schools can find themselves to be magnets for gifted children who may travel long distances each day to get to school.

“She's a different child since we changed schools. They pretest there and she starts to learn at her level instead of waiting for the others” Parent of Jade, 10

“He loves G.A.T.E.WAYS and comes out bubbling with enthusiasm, but they don't happen very often, I have to get him there and back and it's expensive!” Many parents

Other schools believe they are providing for their gifted students with extracurricular options such as Tournament of Minds, Competitions, G.A.T.E.WAYS, Chess, etc. While offerings such as these are frequently enjoyed by gifted students they do not alleviate the stagnation of no adequate provision on a lesson by lesson basis in the regular classroom. These children are gifted all the time not just at Thursday lunchtime at chess or 4 mornings over the term at G.A.T.E.WAYS. Most of these activities require extra payment and or effort by parents/carers, and as such are often not able to be accessed with equity.

It is extremely important that gifted students, no matter where they live, the school they attend or their socio economic status receive gifted programming in their day to day schooling. They will not be alright on their own. Yes, they may be ahead of others their age but they need direct instruction and teaching that enables them to learn every day at school.
“We just can't afford to pay for any extra activities, we struggle with the usual uniforms, books, fees and excursions. We can't afford camps let alone WiseOnes every term.” Many parents

“This is much better then anything before, but I'm still unhappy more than I am happy at school” (Marcus, 7, year 2, in his 3rd school). Reported by a mother with tears in her eyes.

When gifted students are not provided with adequate learning programs, they are forced to underachieve, may develop low self esteem, poor work habits, lack of motivation, school refusal, depression, anger and behaviour problems. Gifted children are not alright on their own – they are just as different in their learning needs as those students who qualify for a special school.

“I've never seen her so happy, she loves Box Hill High School, and I don't have to worry all the time if she is being catered for. I know she is – at last!’ Comment by many parents of SEAL students at BHHS.

SEAL (Select Entry Accelerated Learning) programs are excellent; allowing a modest level of acceleration in that students complete years 7 to 10 of secondary school in 3 years. This results in real, challenging learning (often for the first time), true peers and real friendships with like minded students and increased self esteem in a greatly improved social situation. Happy, engaged students abound in these programs. Several of our members have students in these programs – all report very positively about the effects they have on their childs' education and general well-being. Many report not having to worry about their childs' education on a day to day basis for the first time ever. Children happily go to school and are truly challenged and engaged. They have friends and get invited to birthday parties - something many gifted kids don't experience in primary school.

Many of the parents who seek our support ask about special primary schools to cater for their gifted childrens' learning. They are astonished to find that there are none. They know that children just as
far from the norm as their children are (but in the other direction) are catered for in specialist school settings, with specially trained teachers and surrounded by a true peer group. Why, they wonder, are their gifted children not afforded the same consideration and respect with regard to their educational needs.

“We've tried four primary schools and he just doesn't seem to fit in anywhere” Parent who decided in desperation to home school her gifted child.

Enforced underachievement imposed by an inappropriate curriculum may mean a gifted student with high potential is never able to develop into a talented individual. – advanced options and acceleration can prevent this. Families of gifted children who have dropped out of the school system altogether are known to MGCPA. Several families choose to home school their gifted children – often after years of trying, hoping and advocating year after year for adequate programming in a variety of school settings. Gifted children are not alright on their own. They need teaching, help, encouragement and guidance with their learning just like all children do.

The scope, coverage and effectiveness of policies and programs for students from both metropolitan and regional school communities, school leaders, teachers and parents and carers to support gifted and talented students.

36 Select Entry Accelerated Learning Program schools spread through metropolitan and regional Victoria were reviewed a few years ago and shown to be very effective. However, many primary
school teachers, principals and parents are unaware of these programs at secondary level, so gifted (if identified) kids miss out on testing for entry and the opportunity for an appropriate education at secondary level. The profile and purpose of these schools need to be raised in the community.

Other programs (for high achieving students) operate in some government secondary schools and it is excellent to see schools offering these. However, do they really cater for gifted students? In our experience parents are frequently not aware of the difference between these programs and approved SEAL programs.

Many parents believe that by obtaining a scholarship (or entry) to a private school their gifted child's educational needs will be met. Anecdotal evidence from many parents and students reveals this is often not the case. We have heard of gifted students offered a scholarship on the basis of incredible mathematical ability (for example) only to find, when at the school, they were expected to do maths with the regular mainstream class with absolutely no differentiation, enrichment or acceleration. Others have been promised withdrawal extension classes which either don't eventuate or are so ad hoc as to be of little benefit. Or parents may naively believe that since it is a private school it will be inherently suitable for their gifted child. Many gifted students stay in private schools under-catered to while their parents pay a small fortune for the privilege. Other gifted students leave private schools for the havens to be found in Select Entry or SEAL schools.

Many gifted students go through their entire education (in all sectors) with absolutely no suitable educational programming. As such they are an educationally disadvantaged group, (Commonwealth of Australia, 2002) and probably never reach their potential. They are likely to remain gifted underachievers.
Opportunities and strategies for enhancing support for gifted and talented students, their parents and carers, teachers and school leaders

Teacher training in identification of giftedness and programming for gifted students needs should be mandatory for all pre service teachers. If we are to improve strategies for supporting gifted students this is imperative. All teachers currently in service need training too.

Qualified gifted education specialist teachers should be in each school as a resource for all staff and to help with teaching and programming for gifted students.

All teachers in SEAL and select entry schools should be qualified gifted education specialists. Teaching gifted children is a challenging task (as is parenting them) and it makes sense that in order to teach them properly special training ought to be mandatory. This is not the case now, and we know many teachers struggle with the task.

Select entry and SEAL schools exist side by side in Victoria, and we believe there is a conflict of interests. Why for example does giftedness only begin in year 9 for the select entry schools? Perhaps the gifted student population would be better served if these schools all took students from year 7. Currently many students leave SEAL programs for the kudos seen to be provided in the select entry schools, which is disruptive for both the transferring student (who repeats year 9 at the select entry school) and the SEAL schools and their remaining students.

The introduction of specialist schools, or specialist classes within schools, for gifted students of primary school age would be most welcome by our members, who currently may spend several, often anguished years advocating for an appropriate education for their children. An appropriate education which is freely available in the local school for most children and in the specialist school
system for those at the other end of the bell curve is not available to the majority of gifted primary school children. Gifted children have a right to an appropriate education; it is not elitist to provide it. It is discriminatory not to.

**Acceleration** in its many forms is worth considering for gifted children's needs. Many of our members' children have benefited enormously from subject or whole year acceleration. None have been damaged by it. In all cases the students have had improved social and emotional functioning as a result of the acceleration, as well as the obvious academic benefits.

Our members are passionate about gifted education. They want their children to be happy and challenged at school just like every other child. Please help them in their quest.

Should you wish to have anything in this submission clarified or if you require any further information to assist you, I would be pleased to help.

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References

