Ms Kerryn Riseley  
Executive Officer  
Education and Training Committee  
Parliament House  
Spring Street  
EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002

Email: etc@parliament.vic.gov.au

Dear Ms Riseley

I write in response to a letter dated 22 March 2011 from Mr David Southwick MP, Chair, Education and Training Committee, regarding the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into the Education of Gifted and Talented Students.

The NSW Department of Education and Communities is pleased to make a submission to this Inquiry.

The enclosed submission focuses on nine items, as requested by Mr Southwick.

If you need any further information about gifted education in New South Wales public schools please contact Dr Angela Chessman, Senior Curriculum Policy Officer, Gifted and Talented on telephone number (02) 9886 7743 or via email angela.chessman@det.nsw.edu.au.

I hope that this submission is of assistance to the Inquiry.

Yours sincerely

Pam Christie  
A/DIRECTOR-GENERAL OF EDUCATION AND COMMUNITIES  
A/MANAGING DIRECTOR OF TAFE NSW  
9 June 2011
NSW Department of Education and Communities Response

The NSW Department of Education and Communities consists of 10 regions: four metropolitan, four rural and two amalgamations of rural areas and coastal cities. In 2010 there were 2235 Government schools, including 1634 primary schools, 67 central or community schools, and 398 secondary schools.

Gifted and Talented Policy
The Department conducted an extensive and rigorous revision of the former Policy for the education of gifted and talented students (Department of School Education, 1991) prior to the release of the current Policy and implementation strategies for the education of gifted and talented students (NSW Department of Education and Training, 2004). The current policy was developed with particular reference to the 2001 Australian Senate Report The Education of Gifted Children. Key issues considered were clarification of the definitions of giftedness and talent, development of identification programs that include appropriate procedures and use of tools, differentiation of the curriculum and the provision of teacher training in gifted education. The policy is available at <www.curriculumsupport.education.nsw.gov.au/policies/gats/index.htm>

The Department endorses a flexible approach to meet the needs of gifted and talented students. It provides for their education in a range of settings including selective high schools, opportunity classes, specialist high schools and regular classes in primary and comprehensive secondary schools. Teachers support gifted and talented students in all schools through appropriate instructional strategies, grouping options and accelerated progression.

Role of the NSW Curriculum Learning and Innovation Centre
The Department's Curriculum Learning and Innovation Centre supports regions and schools in curriculum development and implementation. Its Learning Policy group develops strategic curriculum policy for gifted and talented education.

Contact:
Dr Angela Chessman, Senior Curriculum Policy Officer, Gifted and Talented.
Telephone: (02) 9886 7743, email: angela.chessman@det.nsw.edu.au

Role of the Selective High School and Opportunity Class Placement Unit
The Selective High School and Opportunity Class Placement Unit is in the Educational Measurement and School Accountability Directorate and is responsible for the selection and placement of students into opportunity classes in primary schools, and selective high schools.

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Measurement of students' achievement outcomes
An extensive array of data is collected on students' academic, social and affective outcomes. The collection, monitoring, analysis and reporting of data have been enhanced by the development of a School Measurement, Assessment and Reporting Toolkit, which is designed to measure how well syllabus standards are being achieved and to ensure that schools are being supported to maximise students' outcomes (Smith, 2005). Information about the School Measurement, Assessment and Reporting Toolkit and its use in regions and schools is available from the Educational Measurement and School Accountability Directorate.

Contact:
Gerry McCloughan, Assistant Director, Educational Measurement and School Accountability
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The submission discusses nine items related to the Department's provisions and programs and gifted education as follows:

1. Gifted and Talented Programs provided by the NSW Department of Education and Communities

Opportunity classes
Opportunity classes (OC) were introduced in 1932 and were formed to prepare upper primary, intellectually gifted students for academic pathways in secondary school and subsequent university education. In NSW there are currently 74 primary schools with 117 opportunity classes in Years 5-6. There are 1,785 places available for Year 5 opportunity class entry in these schools. These classes exist in schools throughout NSW. They provide intellectual stimulation and a rich educational environment for students in Years 5 and 6 who might otherwise be isolated from a suitable academic peer group. Further information about this provision and the location of schools with opportunity classes is available at <www.schools.nsw.edu.au/ocplacement>.

Selective high schools
Primary students in NSW who are in Year 6 can sit for the Selective High Schools Test, which qualifies students with high academic ability to enter a selective school. Selective high schools have a long tradition in NSW with the first, Sydney Boys' High School and Sydney Girls' High School, being established in 1883. For Year 7 entry in 2009 there were 17 fully selective high schools, ten high schools with selective classes, and four selective agricultural high schools in NSW. For Year 7 entry in 2010 a further 14 partially selective high schools were established in disadvantaged and

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with selective classes, and four selective agricultural high schools in NSW. For Year 7 entry in 2010 a further 14 partially selective high schools were established in disadvantaged and more remote communities. A virtual selective high school (xsel) was also established in Western NSW. The virtual school started in 2010 with 30 students in Year 7. Lessons in English, mathematics and science are delivered online to selected students in their home school. Information about the xsel program is available at <www.xsel.schools.nsw.edu.au/sws/view/455464.node>

These provisions enable academically gifted and talented students to access appropriate resources and opportunities for a faster pace of learning, and maximise their achievement. There are 4,126 places available for Year 7 entry in these selective high schools. A senior selective high school has also been established to continue the selective education of students at two of the selective high schools which cater for Years 7 to 10 only. Further information about this provision is available at <www.schools.nsw.edu.au/shsplacement>

Selective high schools can lift student performance beyond expectation based on the value-added information provided through the School Measurement, Assessment and Reporting Toolkit package. Placement in a selective school is a highly popular and sought-after educational option.

**Specialist high schools**
Specialist high schools cater for students who are gifted in the creative, visual and performing arts, languages, technology and sport. Currently there are five Performing Arts high schools, one Creative Arts high school, one Visual Arts high school, four Language high schools, 12 Technology high schools and seven Sport high schools in NSW. Each school devises a suitable identification program to select students.

**Initiatives**
Recent initiatives have focused not only on the expansion of the opportunity class and selective school provision but also on support for comprehensive education. Particular attention has been given to the establishment of extension programs for gifted students in all comprehensive high schools and primary schools since the release of the Gifted and Talented Policy. Information on the ways that schools can develop gifted and talented programs for students in all public schools is discussed in the Options paper available at <www.curriculumsupport.education.nsw.gov.au/policies/gats/support/index.htm>

**2. Current policies and projects**

The NSW Gifted and Talented Policy is available at <www.det.nsw.edu.au/policies/curriculum/schools/gats/PD20040051.shtml?level=>

The Selective High School and Opportunity Class Policy is available at
responsibilities of state office, regions and schools are clearly differentiated in the policy which has contributed to efficient and effective implementation.

A program of professional development has been provided through the support packages distributed to schools, regional workshops, consultancy support and through the Gifted and Talented website at <www.curriculumsupport.education.nsw.gov.au/policies/gats/index.htm>

Materials on the web pages include programs, units of work, resources including web sites, case studies, teaching ideas, research and documents outlining procedures including those for accelerated progression.

Gifted and talented students have access to accelerated progression in all government primary and secondary schools. This may be through early entry to primary school or through acceleration in one or more subjects, key learning areas or grades. The Department is supported by the Guidelines for accelerated progression (Board of Studies NSW, 2000), which are research-based and highly regarded.

Particular initiatives that were developed to support quality teaching for gifted students from Kindergarten to Year 12 are a Gifted and Talented Online Program and a curriculum differentiation workshop program, which are accredited with the NSW Institute of Teachers. These courses were designed to meet the need for teachers to have skills in identification and curriculum differentiation.

A current focus has been on supporting gifted students in the early years of schooling through the Department’s Best Start program. Information on Best Start is available at <www.curriculumsupport.education.nsw.gov.au/beststart/index.htm>

A component of this program has focused on professional support for curriculum differentiation as the Best Start assessment has revealed that many students are starting school already achieving beyond Kindergarten outcomes. A second aspect of this program is the development of a resource package to assist teachers to identify gifted Kindergarten students from disadvantaged or culturally diverse backgrounds who may not have had the opportunities to learn the literacy and numeracy skills assessed by Best Start.

A focus in the Selective High School and Opportunity Class Placement Unit and the NSW Curriculum Learning and Innovation Centre has been on support for Aboriginal students who are underrepresented in gifted education programs, particularly selective high schools and opportunity classes. In the current system Aboriginal students are considered individually by selection committees to determine whether their educational disadvantage has prevented them from showing their true academic merit. Three of the selective high schools and two schools with opportunity classes have targeted places for Aboriginal students. The Department has developed an action plan that includes research conducted in partnership with the University of

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Western Sydney to study what currently works for gifted Aboriginal students. The Department is also planning a longitudinal study to follow the educational outcomes of gifted Aboriginal students identified through Best Start.

3. Key benefits and issues surrounding current projects including any identified gaps

The importance of the teacher in improving students’ achievement outcomes is well established (Darling-Hammond & Youngs, 2002; Hattie, 2009; Rowe, 2007), as is the significance of appropriate professional development opportunities for improving teacher effectiveness (Rowe, 2002). The Gifted and Talented Education Strategy has focused on building regional capacity to drive improvements in quality teaching for gifted learners.

For example, the 30-hour Gifted and Talented Online Program has provided flexibility of access for teachers, including those in remote locations, and has improved teachers’ skills in identification and curriculum differentiation.

The Best Start program has provided evidence of Kindergarten children’s knowledge and skills in literacy and numeracy on entry to school. The development of the Best Start Gifted and Talented Kindergarten Resource Package and professional learning program is assisting teachers to develop curriculum differentiation skills and open-ended, dynamic approaches to the identification of young gifted learners. The policy recognises that the early identification of gifted students is critical to prevent underachievement.

Identified gaps
Issues relate to:

- access to teacher professional learning in gifted education in pre-service and in-service education. Effective teachers understand the nature and needs of gifted students including negative behavioural manifestations of their characteristics (Croft, 2003).
- teachers’ lack of skills in identification and curriculum differentiation and the need for continued support
- provision of valid tools for identification of gifted students particularly those from disadvantaged and culturally diverse backgrounds

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• under-representation of Aboriginal students in gifted and talented programs including selective schooling
• lack of inclusion or emphasis of gifted education professional teaching standards – see the National Professional Standards for Teachers at <www.aitsl.edu.au/>
• accreditation of teacher expertise in gifted education.

4. Definitions of giftedness and talent

The data collected for the 2004 policy revision revealed a general lack of understanding in schools of the terms “gifted” and “talented”. The majority of stakeholders recommended the adoption of Gagné’s (2003) Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent as it was agreed that the definitions should be research-based and accessible to teachers. The definitions should also have a direct and logical connection to identification programs and programming strategies. The following definitions of giftedness and talent were adopted in the revised policy:

**Gifted students** are those whose potential is distinctly above average in one or more of the following domains of human ability: intellectual, creative, social and physical.

**Talented students** are those whose skills are distinctly above average in one or more areas of human performance.

(Primary Department of Education and Training, 2004, p. 6)

Gagné’s (2003) model is highly regarded because it embraces a broad definition of giftedness and is inclusive. It includes abilities not only in the intellectual area but also in the creative, social-emotional and physical domains. Gifted and talented students have diverse strengths, interests and learning needs and vary in their degree of giftedness. The levels of giftedness and intelligence quotient equivalents adopted in the policy are from Feldhusen (1993) as discussed in Gross (2000).

An important emphasis in the policy is that gifts and talents need to be viewed from multiple perspectives reflecting the values and beliefs of different cultures.

The Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent recognises the dynamic factors involved in the processes of learning and associates giftedness with high potential rather than with high performance or achievement (talent). It therefore acknowledges that some students may be underachieving. It also embodies the critical role of teaching and learning in the translation of potential into performance and the helpful or restrictive role of the student’s personality and environment.

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5. Equity of access to program for all gifted and talented students
The policy states that gifted students are found in all communities, irrespective of ethnicity or socioeconomic background, and that schools have a responsibility to identify gifted students and educate them to their full potential.

Every NSW public school must identify and cater for gifted and talented students and develop programs to meet their needs. The school-based nature of the policy requires that principals in consultation with their school communities bear the prime responsibility to determine educational programs for these students. Reforms in NSW focusing on Quality Teaching (Department of Education and Training, 2003\textsuperscript{15}), and standards-referenced approaches to curriculum planning, programming and assessment, have shown how collegial and collaborative learning communities can enhance educational outcomes for all students including gifted learners.

The Department’s expansion of the opportunity class and selective school provision has also provided more options for gifted and talented students’ education. All students are eligible to apply for these provisions. The virtual selective high school in Western NSW has enabled isolated and Aboriginal students to access opportunities for academic extension within their own communities.

6. Addressing the issue of underperformance

The policy recognises that gifts and talents can be found in underachievers, students with learning difficulties, socio-economically disadvantaged students, and those with disabilities or from culturally diverse or non-English speaking backgrounds.

Teachers must be able to recognise underachievers in order to intervene. In the Gifted and Talented Policy, underachievement is defined as a discrepancy between a student’s school performance and some index of the student’s natural ability. Definitions of invisible underachiever and deliberate underachiever are also provided to communicate more precisely the complex nature of underperformance.

An invisible achiever is a student whose assessed potential is less than his or her actual potential and who also underperforms in the classroom (Chaffey, Bailey & Vine, 2003\textsuperscript{16}). A deliberate underachiever conceals ability in order to seek peer acceptance or avoid appearing different (see Gross, 1989\textsuperscript{17}). The policy notes therefore that specialised approaches may be needed to identify gifted and talented students. Gifted underachievers, including students from culturally diverse and lower socio-economic backgrounds, may not be identified through traditional testing procedures.

Formal testing procedures may not provide a valid assessment of the student’s ability. The factors contributing to underachievement must first be addressed. This


condition is often related to underlying social and emotional issues as well as immature cognitive and meta-cognitive processes. These issues can be addressed in an identification program if it employs a dynamic testing approach. This involves the design of interventions to improve the self-belief and cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies of students, in order to achieve a more valid assessment (Chaffey et al., 2003). The Department has trialled the Coolabah Dynamic Assessment Model in two regions to improve the identification of socially disadvantaged students. Dynamic approaches to assessment are also being trialled in Kindergarten classes using the Best Start Gifted and Talented Kindergarten Resource Package.

The policy emphasises the value of closer, collaborative partnerships between home and school (see policy statement 1.2) to enable early identification and avoid underachievement. Schools are required to organise and publicise home and school communication channels for sharing information about gifted and talented students. School counsellors also assist in the identification of under-performing students.

NSW schools and regions have an array of student data that assists with the diagnosis of student performance. School development officers assist principals and their staff to interpret statistical information regarding students’ performance and also provide support to improve school programs.

7. Overcoming negative attitudes and misconceptions

An important goal in gifted-education research has been to understand students’ and teachers’ attitudes toward gifted students and their educational provision, and how attitudes influence classroom practice.

Teachers’ personal conceptions may not match policy definitions (McCann & Henderson, 2005). On the one hand, gifted education has suffered because some educators believe that gifted students are rare in the population (McCann, 2007). On the other hand, a significant barrier to the provision of services for high-ability students in Australia is the notion that all students have a gift, a proposition that confuses giftedness with personal strengths (Gross, 1999). Those who subscribe to this view criticise special opportunities for highly able students because such provision is seen to be undemocratic and inequitable (Gross, 1999).

Limited research has been done in Australia on attitudes towards and perceptions of gifted and talented students. Australian and overseas studies show similar results in that teachers generally believe that gifted students should be catered for but there is a discernable tendency to have negative attitudes particularly towards grouping and

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acceleration (Chessman, 2010).}

A few studies suggest that pre-service and experienced teachers who have had specialised training in gifted education have more positive attitudes toward gifted students and are more confident to use various strategies with them (Hansen & Feldhusen, 1994; Megay-Nespoli, 2001; Plunkett, 2000; Rash & Miller, 2000; Rowley, 2002; S. R. Smith & Chan, 1998; Vialle & Quigley, 2001). This is particularly evident in positive attitude shifts toward the use of acceleration and grouping strategies (Gross, 1997).

Positive attitudes towards gifted students are unlikely to be sufficient to improve their learning outcomes. However, teachers with positive attitudes are more likely to develop their expertise in gifted education (Chessman, 2010). School leadership may be critical to changing teachers’ beliefs by supporting professional learning in this area.

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

- A Gifted and Talented Education Reference Group comprising representatives from peak educational and community groups was established to guide policy implementation. This has resulted in strong partnerships particularly with universities who consult regularly on resource development.
- The Gifted and Talented Policy (statement 1.6) stipulates that each region must nominate a senior officer who has responsibility for gifted and talented students as part of the statement of duties. This officer must also chair a regional committee to oversee policy implementation. Strong partnerships

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have been forged with regions who have worked with state office to roll out professional learning e.g. regional facilitation of the Gifted and Talented Online Program. Regions are required to develop management plans for gifted education and state office has co-ordinated resource-sharing among regions.

- Regional gifted education committees are active in implementing projects, which include provision of conferences, courses accredited with the New South Wales Institute of Teachers and collaborative initiatives which are substantially supported by state office e.g. the current implementation of the Best Start project for gifted Kindergarten students.

- The policy also requires each school to institute a gifted and talented committee to coordinate educational provision and provide a point of contact for regional liaison. It is mandatory that school plans include the goals and strategies for teacher training in gifted education. The Gifted and Talented website provides training materials for regions and schools to use in professional learning.

- Selective high schools and schools with opportunity classes have well-developed school networks at executive and teacher level. Resource sharing is facilitated through purpose-built websites.

- Resource development has been consistent with the definitions and approaches discussed in Gifted Education Professional Development Package developed by the Australian government in 2005 and available at <www.dest.gov.au/sectors/school_education/publications_resources/profiles/gifted_education_professional_development_package.htm>

This has resulted in an effective use of limited resources to support teachers’ skill development in identification and curriculum differentiation.

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

An important consideration highlighted by the policy research conducted in NSW is the need to include parents and caregivers in the identification of gifted and talented students and educational programs. This was acknowledged by the inclusion of policy statement 1.2, “School communities have a responsibility to foster home-school partnerships to support gifted and talented students”. This requires sensitivity to the values and communication protocols of different groups, notably Aboriginal communities. Please refer to Working with Aboriginal Communities: A Guide to Community Consultation and Protocols (2008): <ab-ed.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/files/working-with-aboriginal-communities.pdf>