

CORRECTED VERSION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the education of gifted and talented students

Melbourne — 25 July 2011

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Mr M. Bond, Vice-president,
Mr P. Double, Committee member, and
Mr M. Smith, Committee member, Victorian Association for Gifted and Talented Children.

The CHAIR — We welcome the Victorian Association for Gifted and Talented Children to the public hearings of the Education and Training Committee in its inquiry into the education of gifted and talented students. We have a number of people appearing in front of us: Ms Carmel Meehan, the president of the association; Mr Michael Bond, the vice-president; Mr Paul Double, a committee member; and Mr Mark Smith, another committee member. Welcome to all of you. I point out that at this inquiry all the evidence taken today is protected by parliamentary privilege. However, any comments made outside of the committee are not, so feel free to share whatever you wish within these four walls and you will be protected by the same parliamentary privilege as the parliamentarians. As you can see, Hansard will be recording all of the evidence today, and we will provide a proof version for you to read. If there are any typographical errors, we are happy for those to be amended as well.

I also welcome the observers. Some have joined us just recently. This is a very important area and we welcome the input and involvement of the people that have made submissions and those that are joining us today. We thank you for your contribution.

We will give you the opportunity to make a short presentation. Can I stress that you need to keep it as succinct as possible, because we have got a number of questions that we want to get through with you today. We have until 12.30 p.m., so we have an hour in which to get 10 to 15 minutes from you and then the rest will be a whole lot of questions that we want to cover, and if we could keep those to the point, that would be great. I now hand the reins over to you for your initial presentation.

Our technology does not always work when we want it to. However, we do have the good old-fashioned paper version of the slides in front of us.

Overheads shown.

Ms MEEHAN — Thank you very much, Chair. We really appreciate the opportunity the committee has given us to talk about the state of play that exists in Victoria at the moment in an area that for many reasons a lot of good words have been put down over time. We have had both state and national symposiums and Senate committee inquiries into gifted and talented children. For whatever reason, things seem to get a little momentum and then they die off, so these students are still not having the kind of justice in their education that we believe they should be receiving.

Gifted and talented children quite often have someone in their school who has a passion for advocating for them, so they — as a matter of justice — look to the needs of those children, but quite often that is an ad hoc situation. When that person leaves the school or that person is unable to continue, they get a tag at that school, which is ‘special needs’. There are many special needs in a school, and some of them are very obvious and certainly need to be addressed, but at the same time, because the needs of gifted and talented children are often subtle and not understood by the teachers and the schools and the systems to the extent that they should be, some schools decide that it is just a little bit too difficult for them to do what they need to do. You get the situation where somebody — a teacher — will say in a classroom, ‘I know you know it, Johnny, but we will let the others have a turn’. So Johnny, who knows and who has been reading since before he even came to school, dumbs himself down to be part of the class and to please the teacher. That kind of injustice is the situation we are looking to rectify for our students so that they are heard and educated in the way that they should be educated.

We have an earth that is very much in need of good problem-solvers. We have a state that is need of good problem-solvers. We have a lot of issues that we are struggling with, and we have students at our schools who have the potential to solve those problems. One of the things that gifted students really enjoy doing is problem-solving, and some of the very best problem-solvers are those people who make those quantum leaps and are allowed to make those quantum leaps. A lot of us, as some people tell us, march in little lines. We conform, as ants do, but there are other people who are like the fleas of this world, as Jason Clarke would tell you, and they make those quantum leaps and solve outside the box the problems that are facing humanity in all kinds of different ways.

We celebrate people like Cadel Evans. He had a problem that he has solved in a physical way, and we have him on the front page of our papers today. We have people like Gustav Nossal and people who are working in stem cell research in our universities and who are doing brilliant work, but we do not see much of that on the front

page of the paper. Our gifted and talented students are the resource that we have to solve those problems and the people who tomorrow will be at the cutting edge of helping humanity to survive.

We have some misconceptions in education, and I guess Australia especially has this tall poppy syndrome. I was saying to my colleagues that my father used to say, 'He blows his own bags; he is always talking about himself'. We do not promote as we should, but also gifted students can present themselves in various ways. Sometimes their giftedness is not understood, so teachers in our schools as a whole, with some very good exceptions, do not understand how to identify what they have in the children who are showing that spark. Identification lags behind, and sometimes those people who are very sensitive to the plight of other people are seen as being 'drama' types rather than being people who have a deep sensitivity.

I know from my experience that today there are going to be a lot of school counsellors, a lot of teachers who are trying to help their students come to terms with what happened in Oslo on the weekend. We had so much difficulty, and some people will never get over what happened in America with the 9/11 situation, so really our gifted students feel very deeply, they understand very deeply, their development is asynchronous — they may be high in mathematics and low in something else — so that very seldom do we have the same straight line in giftedness.

If a child is lucky enough to be a gifted student and finds themselves in a school that has a gifted education coordinator, that has a principal who understands giftedness and has followed a planned and purposeful program for the gifted student, then you will find that that child will flourish. They will be given the stretch they need to take things to the next level, and the level after that, and to feed their passions. They might find in the culture of that school a celebration of success — success in the academic area as well as the sporting area.

Excellent teachers embrace a culture of co-learning: 'I am learning, you are learning, we all learning from each other' rather than 'I am the teacher and you are the students'. A culture of co-learning celebrates excellence and pushes students to find out more, to learn more.

Gifted students in an excellent program will have enrichment. They will go, perhaps, to another neighbouring school; it might be a primary school student going into a secondary school and using their laboratories. They may be doing some extra outside fieldwork. We are saying that those extra activities should be formally reported on so that you can see the breadth of understanding and acknowledge what these students have actually been exposed to and been working with.

We acknowledge our sporting heroes. We have a very good model for acknowledging excellence in our sporting domains. That could be transposed very easily into celebration of academic excellence, problem-solving, music and arts. In this country if we have good leadership in acknowledging gifted and talented people and celebrating their successes in the way that we celebrate our sporting heroes' successes, then we are well on the way to having a very smart next generation coming through.

What we are looking for is equity for all the fields, whether it be in sport, arts, dance, mathematics and science, or whatever. In a level playing field let us celebrate it all, not one at the expense of the other.

Mr BOND — Looking at the slide entitled 'Recognise', it is important that we recognise that not all gifted students are the same. Gifted students are not necessarily achieving the best results in classrooms, nor are they the most engaged students in the school setting.

An article by Betts and Neihart refers to the different types of gifted students that present in classrooms and talks about the successful student who many of us see in the classroom and who is easily identified because they present so well, but we also have the challenged gifted student who is bored, resents school and is frustrated with the system, who often does not get identified. We see the underground gifted student who is trying to weigh up between being accepted in their peer group versus excelling academically. We have the dropouts who intellectually divorce themselves from the curriculum because it is not at their level. We have the double-layered gifted students who have teachers who often focus on their disability rather than their gifts. And then we have the autonomous loner who does have a strong self-concept, is successful, will collaborate with teachers and will embrace the whole opportunity to be gifted and excel in the school setting.

It has been widely reported that gifted students often learn the least if we measure their growth within a year. They are skipped over by the system in many regards. Because they are getting high test scores on NAPLAN

and other assessments we make the assumption that they are learning the most, whereas that is not necessarily the case. As a committee we are quite concerned to hear that schools are using NAPLAN at this point in time as a tool to identify gifted students. There have been articles published in the paper recently to indicate that up to 60 per cent of students will answer some of the more difficult questions on NAPLAN, so clearly this assessment has not been set up as an identification tool, nor was it designed to be that type of tool.

Many schools have set up high-ability programs. Often this is avoiding the responsibility to identify gifted students. It is meeting the needs of students who are already achieving at a high level yet has the potential to skip over students who are gifted in our schools. It is important that we come to a consensus about how we identify gifted students in our schools and that there is a model that can be recommended to schools across the state to provide that framework so that we do not run the risk of having schools using just the NAPLAN or these narrow assessments to identify students.

In terms of facilitating, as a committee we talked about how we can best prepare our teachers to be able to identify students in our schools. We felt that it was important that gifted education be taught at an undergraduate level. It is the case at the moment in Victoria that it appears more in the postgraduate classes rather than at the undergraduate levels. Many of our teachers are entering schools without having the knowledge about how to differentiate the gifted students. Our graduates are taught about meeting the needs of other students who have special needs, how to modify curriculum, how to pace appropriately, how to change activities and how to appreciate their learning styles. But that same appreciation has not been put in place for gifted students. We recommend that undergraduate teachers be trained in how to identify and how to recognise the needs of gifted students and how to best meet those needs.

In terms of implementation of gifted programs in schools in Victoria, we would recognise at the moment that this can really vary a lot from school to school and from sector to sector. We acknowledge that some schools are doing a great job, be it in the private sector, the Catholic sector or the state sector. But at the same time within those sectors some schools are doing great things and in other schools there does not appear to be anything in place that really meets the needs of gifted students. We are made aware of this through our website where parents will email us and say, 'At my school I have a child who is gifted. My school is not doing anything. What do I do? How do I talk to my principal? How do I let my teacher know that my child is gifted?'

We think that there needs to be at least a recognised best practice in terms of gifted education and what that looks like, but certainly at the moment there does not appear to be anything that schools can access and get an appreciation of what they should really do to meet the needs of gifted students.

The CHAIR — Can I suggest that, as all the information you have provided to us we will be taking as evidence, if there is anything specifically that you want to point out in addition to what we have got here, please do so in the next minute or so, and then we can get straight into the questions and maybe elaborate on some of the terms. It gives more ability to you to be able to have more information canvassed as part of the submission. Is there anything in addition to what is here that you want to plan or something that you want to highlight in the rest of the sides?

Mr DOUBLE — I am going to talk about the practical application of putting programs in place in schools. From that point of view I have got a few things that I would like to say as I am the next speaker. I will try to use that as a reference point, but then go more towards what I have to say with my extra notes, if that is okay with you.

The CHAIR — If we could just limit it to a couple of minutes, because we are probably going to cover a lot of that stuff in our questions to you anyway. That is where we will start to flesh a bit more out.

Mr SMITH — I also have a bit of additional information, but I am sure I can summarise that into a couple of minutes.

The CHAIR — Great. We will do that.

Ms MEEHAN — I have something to table which you might find interesting. It is the statement of information from the Australian Association for the Education of the Gifted and Talented, to which we belong. We are in the melee of what is going on in Australia in gifted education.

The CHAIR — If we can keep it to 5 minutes, then we will go straight into questions.

Mr DOUBLE — We shall do that. As Carmel mentioned, we see the ad hoc nature of what is happening at the moment as something that needs to be avoided at all costs. We need to streamline the applications for gifted and talented students within the state as much as possible and make them more permanent than they have been. From that point of view we see Melbourne as the central base. Obviously that has its advantages with centralisation, but it also has grave disadvantages for our regional cousins and friends from the point of view of accessing resources and information for gifted and talented students.

I would see Melbourne as the coordinating base, if you like, for gifted and talented services with a view to regionalising as much as possible the services that are provided for our country friends. I would suggest that it is done in such a way that Melbourne is the coordinating body that sets up cluster groups, as was done in the late 1990s, which all died very quickly with a change in government; that we set up cluster groups and coordinating facilities within the regions that are resourced and set up via a central committee within Melbourne. The decentralised units then continue providing for their gifted with the backup and support of the Melbourne central body. For example, the Melbourne central body could distribute information packs and regional information packs with standard information on where to get help, what to do and where to go and on units that are provided within each region for assistance with parents, students and teachers in gifted and talented education.

I would also see the Melbourne body as perhaps supporting identified students to come down from the regions for a two-day visit to Melbourne for the utilisation of the Victorian Space Science Education Centre or the museums or the research facilities or the major hospitals that we have available here in Melbourne, which are not easily accessible to our regional friends.

I am very involved in running a Boroondara cluster for the Boroondara municipal area, which I think would be a very good model that could be undertaken in a regional sense. Schools come together, gifted and talented tagged. Gifted and talented coordinators come together and offer half-day and whole-day units at their schools. So if you have a place such as Mildura, Mr Crisp, you would have St Joseph's, Red Cliffs, Irymple, Henderson, Merbein and Chaffey secondary colleges coming together and coordinating gifted units. The schools would then go to other schools and use facilities that the state has provided in the sciences or the humanities, whatever block state-of-the-art facilities are there, for the benefit of the other gifted and talented children in half-day and whole-day enrichment activities. If each of these schools — one, two, three, four, five, six schools — offers one half-day or whole-day unit, there is economy of effort. If one school organises one, you get the benefit of six other options at least for your group, and that would be just one option being offered.

I see a range of services coordinated from a central point in Melbourne but very definitely focused on the decentralisation of activity so that we can cater for all our gifted and talented students within the state.

The CHAIR — That would be great. Mark, just quickly.

Mr SMITH — Gagné's model is central to the VAGTC philosophy. Central to talent development is the quality of teaching that a student receives, and this development requires motivation, perseverance, self-confidence and self-esteem. Gagné's model is outlined in one of the slides towards the end. This model looks at natural abilities or gifts. These children are identified through psychometric testing. They are found to be in the top 10 per cent in one of the six domains there. There are mental and physical domains mentioned. These domains provide information on a student's potential unrealised. The part along the bottom of the model, the developmental processes, is a critical aspect in this model because it determines how a student will actually go in becoming competent in their aptitudes or their potential areas.

The environment and intrapersonal aspects are very important in this developmental process. Obviously we have a very important role to play in terms of the environment that we provide, including the educational environment, and the experiences that we provide our children. If we look at the intrapersonal areas of values that we teach our children, whether it be parents or teachers, these contribute greatly to the developmental process and determine, in many respects, how well a child will achieve their potential. So it is very important that we play our part.

Chance plays a part as well. The circumstances that a child may experience have an element of luck involved, but certainly we play a role through the environmental options that we offer children and the intrapersonal

elements that we contribute as part of that process. Students will then develop their talent, their competencies will come to the fore and we will see what they are, but it is very dependent on us and what we provide to enable those students to do that.

We just wanted to provide some anecdotal evidence and a few examples, just a small sample of gifted and talented success stories. When we look at these, the physical skills come to the fore often before the others. We see them in the media all the time in our footballers, our athletes. More recently — —

The CHAIR — Can I pick you up there, sorry, because we are not going to get the time to answer the questions. We have already covered off a lot of that there. If we have time, we will come back to it at the end. Carmel, you have a document at the table.

Ms MEEHAN — Yes, I do. This is the information statement from the Australian Association for the Education of the Gifted and Talented, and you will see at the back page you have all the information to contact any of the other gifted and talented associations. Just to summarise we would say that the VAGTC seems to be the hub of what is happening in Victoria. We are the go-to people. People email us about their children and schools email us about in-services that they would like to do. The things that we do as a volunteer group are stultified by the fact that we do not have enough time or resources. Having said that, people do not seem to be able to find anywhere else to bounce off their troubles, their lack of understanding and their questions, ‘Where do I go, because I have this problem?’, so that is our work.

The CHAIR — Fantastic. Thank you. I am sorry to put the pressure on. We only have half an hour now, and we have a number of questions. We will now start to delve a bit deeper. I will kick off in terms of an area of terminology. There is a negative perception out there around the term ‘gifted and talented’. There have been suggestions for alternative terms including ‘children of high intellectual potential’ and ‘high-ability students’. Do you think this is a problem? What terminology do you think should be used for gifted and talented students in Victoria?

Ms MEEHAN — I might kick that one off. Internationally the term ‘gifted and talented’ is used, and we all know what we are talking about. In the research done around the world the term ‘gifted and talented’ is used, so if we are going to go into other terminology, we are going to be countercultural to what is happening in the gifted education world. If I go to a gifted educational conference — I am going to one in a couple of weeks, the world conference in Prague — I know what I am going to be hearing and I know who the people are going to be. They will be researchers and people who are at the cutting edge of understanding the best practice for the gifted and talented.

Mr DOUBLE — Can I just back that up with something, if I may? I believe that is the case at one level. I believe the practical application of the words ‘gifted and talented’ within schools is perhaps in all cases not helpful. The G and T term I personally avoid in school as far as possible. The students virtually know who they are; there are programs provided for them. But the G and T terminology goes missing as far as I am concerned amongst the programs I am offering within the Boroondara region for the very purpose that I do not think the public perception is helpful, and the personal weight and tag on the individual are perhaps sometimes not helpful either.

Mr SMITH — Certainly within many masters theses, including mine, I discussed gifted and talented children as ‘highly able’, and that may be another term that could potentially be used.

The CHAIR — In terms of identification, the committee notes that the VAGTC provides assessment services on a voluntary basis. What method do you use to assess and identify gifted children and how many assessments do you undertake each year?

Ms MEEHAN — I would not say we give that many — maybe 10. Some of our members are qualified to use some testing. We have not actually got any members who are educational psychologist, so we cannot do WISCs or WPPSIs but we do those school-based ACER tests. At different schools you use different things. Mike, what would you use?

Mr BOND — We use a Raven’s as a screener and then a WISC.

Mr SMITH — We use PAT testing. There are a range of tests there.

Ms MEEHAN — So the IQ tests are for educational psychologists to do, but there are other ones. There are key maths tests. It depends on what is available, I guess, and what your school goes with.

The CHAIR — But there is nothing specifically that you are using as an organisation?

Mr DOUBLE — We are a referral service. We will assist by referring out. We do not physically get people in and test them for a fee, or even voluntarily or for free. We refer people as best we can to other people who undertake that testing.

Mr SMITH — Currently there is a range of academic tests that different schools are using to identify their students.

The CHAIR — Some of the submissions suggested that all Victorian students should be screened for giftedness. Do you agree? If so, what age should children be first assessed, and who should do the testing?

Ms MEEHAN — Can we take it back a few steps. If our teachers were skilled and trained in identification, then they would have the knowledge to be able to see a little bit more clearly which students in front of them have the potential to be perhaps of high ability. So it really goes back to the fact that students come to school quite often reading, writing and counting. They are showing it in kindergarten. I declare my hand; I was a kindergarten teacher in the past as well. Giftedness pops out in the obvious ways. It is the masked abilities that need more training and more understanding to look beyond what is obvious and see what is underneath. That needs specific training. This is a very broad question, and it has a lot of components to it. My colleagues might like to join in on this one.

Mr DOUBLE — Certainly general ability testing is available, and through the Australian Council of Educational Research, ACER, there are very credible, well researched and thorough tests that can be provided by schools to people who actually can read the results and the data. It is no good testing and getting a whole lot of data and not knowing what to do it. So in line with the training and testing we need to give teachers the knowledge base to be able to act upon the testing that they are undertaking. With regard to general ability testing, I would be an advocate of general ability testing with children in schools.

Mr SMITH — The WISC and Stanford-Binet assessments are fantastic tests of potential, but they have to be administered by an educational psychologist. To make it more feasible for our students we need a range of academic tests that they can use and maybe even a few universal ones that work for everyone so that we have a more unified approach.

The CHAIR — So instead of across-the-board testing as such, you would recommend that we work with the teachers first, that the teachers are equipped with information to then identify and refer on?

Ms MEEHAN — Yes, absolutely.

The CHAIR — Good. Let me go to the next point in terms of the teacher's role. What kind of support do you think that teachers need in terms of educational training? You mentioned undergraduates as being important and that we need to do some work with. There has been some work done in the postgraduate area, but what specifically do you think we could be doing around teacher training to help identify giftedness, and do you think that there should be some sort of toolkit as well that is available to teachers, similar to the toolkit that has been developed in New South Wales?

Mr SMITH — A toolkit would be a possible option, definitely. I think as an introduction for teachers, they need to understand what the characteristics of gifted and talented children are. They need to have an understanding of how they present, their personality types, and once they have that knowledge, then it is helpful for them to look at identification and programming. If we perhaps concentrated on the characteristics of the gifted child and then identification and programming at the undergraduate level or even just in schools — preferably at the undergraduate level — as a universal approach, that would be a very good start.

Ms MEEHAN — It needs good leadership right down from the system, to the school leadership, to coordinators and people who all speak the same language. That is where we are falling down at the moment in that it is ad hoc, up and down and fluid, because you might get good leadership happening in the school, but of

course the nature of education is that teachers move and change, so you get a different focus in the school and that gets lost and left behind and does not become something that is important.

I think raising the profile of giftedness so that it becomes as important as any other aspect of the culture of the school then raises the understanding — people are saying the same things, speaking the same language and so they understand that this is a critical part of being an educator, just the same as it is critical to care for our high-ability students in one way and our low-ability students in another. It should not be thrown aside; it should be part of what is a good educational culture.

Mr DOUBLE — At the moment in government schools especially there is a situation where on a yearly basis they will tag somebody as being the person responsible for enrichment services or extension or whatever name they put to it, whether it be gifted and talented or whatever. What I have experienced in my 15 schools in the Boroondara cluster is that one year a school with a teacher who is really interested in the area and does his or her job properly, is really involved and gets in there and assists and supports and provides, and then with a change of the tag position to another person, while the position is accepted, nothing happens and the school drifts out of the cluster. I think that is very unfortunate. The idea of schools coming together is the meeting of the minds. They can professionally develop each other within the cluster as well.

Very often in a school a person in a tagged position, such as gifted and talented or another term you may wish to use, feels like an island within the school, as if they are losing a battle. There are all these connotations about what gifted means; people are cynical, and then they seem to give up. But if they are within a cluster and a solidified group of people who can consult with each other, even once a term, that makes all the difference.

The CHAIR — In terms of people from disadvantaged backgrounds, in particular some of these submissions also identify that these are the groups potentially less likely to be identified as gifted. Do you have any ideas or comments to make on how you increase identification in this particular group, talking of people with low socioeconomic backgrounds and indigenous communities?

Ms MEEHAN — I have worked as a school principal in western Sydney, and I have also worked in the Cranbourne area and in the diocese of Sale up as far as Orbost. I believe that it still comes back to the culture of the school. If you have a culture of excellence in a school and the teachers understand what they are looking for, it really does not matter about the socioeconomic status of the school. It is about what is happening in that school to give students stretch, to give them opportunity and to be networking. Teachers in isolation in small schools need to be networking.

We were talking about the GERRIC program from the University of New South Wales, and I presented that program around the Gippsland area. It brought like-minded people together. The light bulbs went on with teachers all over the place. We had parents who came in as well; we had a parent cluster in Bairnsdale where parents came and were giving feedback about what is happening. In those areas it is possible to celebrate excellence and to do exactly what Paul has said: to bring them to the places. Of course there is always the underlying financial situation too, but it is not impossible if the teachers are on board.

Mr SMITH — Potentially for very isolated students it would also perhaps be worth looking at some online programs that could be offered to those students. They obviously can be a little bit impersonal, but for those very isolated children, if they could tap into online programs that will meet their needs, it may also be a way of identifying children near them who are similar and provide opportunities for small clusters too.

Ms TIERNEY — In your submission you say that your organisation has experienced an increase in demand for services, so I ask: what services are in demand, and why do you think there is an increase in demand for your services?

Ms MEEHAN — For a while there, we had some schools that were trying very hard with their giftedness — state schools especially — but for whatever reason we do not seem to have that support in the state system anymore, so we have children who are popping up all over the place whom schools cannot service. They do not have the staff and they do not have the support from the head office to come down into the school and support them, so parents are asking us, ‘What school can we send our child to?’, or, ‘What can we do?’, or, ‘How can I speak to the principal to get a little bit more happening?’.

Sometimes the school will jump a child up a class, and then it is up to the next teacher to deal with the situation, but there is no conversation that is continuous, so parents feel a very great lack of support for their child. We get people who ring up or get on the website and say, 'My child has been identified as gifted, and I do not know what to do next. I am worried and I am upset. Who can I turn to and what can I say to the school? How can I talk to the principal and the coordinators to get the best education for my child?'

Because there is not that support, there is a model happening in the Catholic Education Office Melbourne where they have a 'gifted ed coordinator' who goes out into the schools and works with parents and teachers and gets clusters of people together. It is a similar model to what Paul is doing except that it is at primary schools and secondary schools. Parents can ring her up and say, 'I have this problem', and she has a network of people she can direct these people towards, whether it is an educational psychologist or a school. Our policy is not to say, 'This school is better than that school'. We just say, 'We advocate for gifted and talented children, whoever they might be'.

But that support from above is very important. The last I heard, Maurie Sheehan at DEECD had half a day to do gifted education for the state. For me that is well-nigh impossible. Teachers need that leadership support and need to have that support coming down in structures so that all the way along the line parents, teachers and leaders are in conversation about the best practice for a particular child. Until that happens we will keep getting more and more emails and phone calls from desperate people who are in sobs at times because nothing is happening in their school for their child.

Mr BOND — I think parents struggle to find out what schools are offering. It does not seem to be transparent on websites or other information, so they are emailing us to say, 'I am from this area. What school offers a gifted program?'. It seems to be that difficult for them to find that information.

Mr DOUBLE — To put it in the vernacular, the system needs bus drivers. People need to be shown and given direction as to where they might go. The VAGTC can write articles about how to choose schools for a gifted child and give people questions that they might like to ask the primary school. As has been mentioned, the VAGTC is very careful not to prioritise or recommend schools within any particular system, but we can give models of best practice.

Ms TIERNEY — So would I be correct in saying that you believe governments should play a greater role in setting gifted education policies centrally?

Mr DOUBLE — It certainly needs a coordinating body centrally, but that does not mean we cannot decentralise as well.

Ms TIERNEY — Okay, let's tease that out a little bit more. What kind of policy or other guidance is needed, and should this be at a state or federal level or both?

Mr DOUBLE — The federal government actually has a model of giftedness — the Gagné model they have adopted. The AAEGT in conjunction with the federal government seems to have a bit more structure towards where to go, what to do and assistance for people. Although people do not know how to access the material. From a state point of view we definitely need a greater role in the coordination of services.

Ms MILLER — I am talking about best practice in gifted education, and your submission states that the best practice models of gifted education are currently provided by some independent and SEAL schools. Which particular schools have the best models for gifted education and what components of these programs have made them effective?

Ms MEEHAN — Rather than naming names I would say systems. What seems to happen is that, as we have said before, some systems are getting models going — I spoke about the Catholic system — and some of those schools are now being supported down and they would be looking like places where I would like to send my child. There are some very good models. We have got Melbourne High, MacRobertson, Nossal and — —

Mr DOUBLE — Suzanne Cory.

Ms MEEHAN — We have those select entry schools. That is okay. That is up from year 9 onwards, and they seem to know what they are talking about and they have a culture of excellence. When we worked down

through some of the SEAL schools we were somewhat shocked to find that in some of the schools the teachers had not had any real formal training; they had four days where they could go and learn a little bit about giftedness.

Personally I was asked to facilitate an in-service for a day with a group of teachers who had been given the role of gifted ed. coordinator or a special needs coordinator in their school, and in that room I had about 25 people. I think only five had had any formal education in regard to giftedness. This was their first introduction to giftedness, and yet they had been given that role. So the school then really could have said giftedness was being addressed in their school, but to what degree that was actually being addressed would have been a debatable point.

Ms MILLER — With the models, though, what components of the program have made them effective?

Mr SMITH — I can talk about some of that. I think initially some of the large independent schools made efforts with their professional development to teach things like the characteristics of the gifted child to their staff, to talk about the psychology of the gifted child, to talk about identification and programming and then to train their teachers in differentiation practices for highly able children. They have gone about identifying their students as best they can, then they have started running programs, starting with differentiation in the classroom. Some of them also have pull-out programs in various areas: maybe problem-solving maths, philosophy or writing groups.

It depends very much on the needs of individual students as to the way the program will be developed. They have looked at things like mentoring — both teacher-student mentoring and in some cases student-student mentoring. A model of that may be for competitions, for example. We have some fantastic organisations that run wonderful inquiry-based competitions, such as the Mathematical Association of Victoria or the Science Teachers Association of Victoria. Some of those schools have got their children involved in those competitions. They have followed an inquiry process through. They have teacher mentors working with students to see students through from project start to completion with goal setting each week in between as a method of relationally working with these children but also catering for their academic needs and really hitting proximal zones for students through the short-term goal setting week by week.

Some of these schools have also tapped into organisations such as G.A.T.E.WAYS, Gifted and Talented Education, Extension and Enrichment, or the cluster groups arrangement to allow other avenues of passion, interest and talent for students to explore. I think the best models follow a personalised learning approach that caters for individual students, not a one-size fits all approach. These are just some of the examples that some schools are using quite successfully to cater for the needs of gifted and talented students in Victoria.

Ms MILLER — Which other jurisdictions nationally or internationally, when looking at best practice for gifted education, should the committee look at? What elements of those jurisdictions' programs make them best practice?

Mr DOUBLE — We keep getting back to the proper identification and facilitation of gifted students from a base point. There is no one size that everyone is geared towards. You just cannot say, 'That is a model for gifted education that works for everyone'. If you look at the learner profiles of gifted and talented students, there are underachieving gifted students, there are double-label gifted students, there are autonomous learners and there are successful types. There are many characteristics of gifted learners, and one size does not fit all. It is very difficult just to hold up one system or model that says, 'Well, that is what we all need to achieve'. But there are certain aspects of programs as espoused by Mark that are very valuable in the identification and delivery of services for gifted and talented children.

Mr SMITH — When run well and set up in the right way, a program can cater for a number of gifted children.

Mr DOUBLE — You will get some schools that will ask you what you can provide for gifted children. They might run a chess club and go in mathematics and science competitions, and that seems to be just what they offer. Then there are other schools that will itemise enrichment pull-out programs and differentiation and be explicit as to what it is in the classroom, in cluster groups and professional development for teachers. The teachers do not run these programs; the students actually run and organise clubs and societies themselves.

It is at various levels. It is the sort of questions that people ask that will derive the best and most thorough answers in regard to what schools are providing for their gifted and talented children.

Mr SMITH — If a mentoring program is run very well, once a child has been through the process a few times they learn a process which enables their learning to be transformed and they become quite autonomous to the point that some students even say, ‘I don’t need the mentor this time’. There are some practices in place that are really helping to find the eligible children and getting them to that autonomous level from where they can move on on their own.

Ms MILLER — Looking at early childhood programs, many submissions argue that gifted education should start as early as possible. What early childhood programs currently exist for gifted children? How can we increase identification and provision of appropriate educational opportunities for children prior to primary school?

Ms MEEHAN — Meaning preschool or school in general?

Ms MILLER — Looking at the early childhood programs and then into primary school.

Ms MEEHAN — There is a screening program that comes in when children come to school. That has come from New Zealand and is called PIPS. It is a primary entry program where children are screened. Prior to that, most kindergartens differentiate anyway, and most kindergartens do grouping. It is very easy in kindergartens for children to be given strength because the program is fluid, and it is a quite good framework for how children can flourish as they go along. However, once they hit school, it becomes a little bit more in the box, and it is not such a fluid way of looking at children’s strengths. The asynchronous development of a gifted child is well and truly catered for in a good kindergarten that has a broad, differentiated curriculum for them. That, one would hope, would go into the primary area, but it does not often happen. Sometimes it does for a little while in the prep area, and then it is, ‘Sit down, keep quiet and this is what you are going to be taught’.

Ms MILLER — How could we identify the provision for those children, before they get to primary school? Do you have any comments to make about that?

Ms MEEHAN — Identify how to provide for them?

Ms MILLER — No, how to identify them.

Ms MEEHAN — A good teacher will identify them very quickly.

Mr DOUBLE — An accurate checklist.

Ms MEEHAN — Yes. There are standard checklists to look at to say a child is exhibiting an interesting sense of humour, makes some very critical remarks and has some good ideas outside the box. All these checklists are very standard. People have put them together over many years. A teacher who understands and gets giftedness goes, ‘I think I had better get my checklist to see how this little one is going’.

Mr BOND — There are parent checklists too which give the perspective of what parents are seeing at home.

Mr DOUBLE — If the teacher and parent are given the same checklist, it often makes for very interesting reading, and you get a very good picture. Traditionally teachers are very bad predictors of gifted and talented children in their classrooms, because they go for the happy, smiling, successful, colour-between-the-lines type of child. They get quite offended by any child who is badly behaved or bored with their classroom, so they would not see that child as deserving of anything that the teacher might want to bestow upon them, and they conveniently leave them out of any identification process. In fact it is that very child, with their very quick questioning, answers out of left field and perhaps obtuse behaviour, who needs to be identified. Teachers in their training should be aware of that situation within a classroom.

Mr SMITH — Then just to gain specifics about a gifted early childhood centre’s potential, a WPPSI could be administered, which is an educational psychometric test. But that is administered by an educational psychologist and often at cost to parents.

Mr DOUBLE — For children under age.

The CHAIR — We are going to extend this session by 5 minutes, and we have about four questions we want to get through.

Mr ELASMAR — Many parents who made submissions expressed frustration with the lack of primary school programs for gifted students. If you agree there is an issue, what programs or services should be available for gifted primary school children?

Mr DOUBLE — Can I make a suggestion that they should be open-ended tasks? The very nature of primary schooling, with the extended time that a teacher will spend with a child, lends itself to open-endedness. Teachers need to be aware of all those higher thinking processes in predicting, extrapolating and evaluating work, rather than just putting a ceiling on the child's work, and of allowing the child to actually grow and develop their ideas in a way that is not just meeting the classroom standard and that is as far as it goes.

In classroom practice there could be very much more emphasis towards framing work which is open-ended, to let the child explore, and also giving the primary child options. A task is set or a project set, but the child may want to go off on a tangent and do something that is really all consuming for that child. It might have more of an empathetic type of feel about it. The primary classroom teacher should be more open towards allowing the child to go in the direction they want to go with their real field of endeavour. That would very much assist in catering for gifted and talented children in the primary classroom.

Ms MEEHAN — Some gifted children learn very quickly. They need to have compacted work so they can go on to the next thing and the next thing, not to do the same thing over and over again, which drives them completely insane. It needs to be compacted and a good assessment so that they move on very quickly.

The CHAIR — Peter, could you tackle overcoming the negative attitudes?

Mr CRISP — Yes. Many submissions said that negative attitudes were a barrier to the implementation of gifted programs, and they suggested that the community, school leaders and teachers need to be educated in this process. Do you agree that such education is needed? What components would you put in a program to overcome these attitudes?

Mr DOUBLE — I would put in some inclusive rather than exclusive ideas. Very often the idea of gifted and talented students as being a small group that already has an advantage over everybody else permeates through the system and that gives people those attitudes. I suggest a system that includes as much as possible and identifies more of a broad brushstroke of abilities and domains, encompasses as many children as possible as accurately as possible so that they are not seen as elitist programs. It obviously runs the risk of watering down programs, but, if it is structured properly, it would also make it inclusive and far more palatable for people in schools to be included and for their attitudes to change because of it.

The CHAIR — You alluded earlier to technology as being a useful tool that could be utilised. Does the VAGTC currently provide any online support or resources to families or educators?

Ms MEEHAN — Do you have our website address?

The CHAIR — We do, yes.

Ms MEEHAN — That is all that we can afford. We run twilights and conferences, and we run very close to the wind with those. We would love to have a really good website, but this is the best that we can do. We have just upgraded it, and you will find that members can go online and have a look at papers which have been written by eminent educationalists. We put on it the various things that are on at the moment and some reviews of twilight sessions and so forth that we have held before. There is an email address on our website, and it is through that that we are getting all this conversation with parents.

Mr DOUBLE — We have a biannual magazine, and we also put together a resource book which parents can use to look into online services via flicking over the pages and seeing where areas of interest are located. That is very time consuming and takes many hours for a voluntary organisation to put together.

The CHAIR — We appreciate that.

Ms TIERNEY — Your submission identifies that gifted students have particular emotional needs and that teachers, parents and school counsellors need to be trained to help support these students. What kind of training is required? What other support do gifted students need — for example, information or access to networks of like-minded peers?

Mr DOUBLE — An understanding that when a child acts up perhaps they are not being deliberately evil or bad. There needs to be a professional awareness by teachers that there may be other reasons why the child is acting up, bored or lashing out in classrooms or becoming a behavioural problem. It may very well be that his or her needs are not being met, and that may lead them to looking at some particular strengths or talents that the child has that have been stymied or frustrated within the system. Often if those sorts of areas are addressed, then some of the problems will dissipate.

Mr SMITH — Part of our responsibility as educationalists and parents is to teach our children emotional intelligence and to give them an understanding of themselves. Some schools are starting to do that really well, helping children to understand themselves and why they are the way they are, to enable them to make sense of some of the things that happen and help them to move on. That needs to be an ongoing thing, that we focus on emotional intelligence and children becoming independent in that.

Ms MEEHAN — It matters to them very much that children of lesser ability can just get through. They have a sense of injustice and they need to understand why they have got that sense of injustice. Or they look at the problems of the world and transpose them into their own lives and get very upset. Sometimes at school there is no-one to speak to on their level. They might be looking at the solar system and everyone else is looking at Barbies and there is just no conversation that can go on. They are lonely and they feel out of stage. That is where mentoring comes in, or moving them to a different group of peers or people who they can speak to. It is very lonely when people do not understand you. Little children can get quite depressed if there is nothing there to give them life. They might have one thing in the week: on Wednesday they have this fantastic science thing, so Wednesday is their best day.

We have to listen to them. We have got children, sadly, who are quite suicidal because there are no like-minded peers and there is nothing to give them the excitement of learning. Gifted children love to learn — that is their thing — and they get lots of excitement out of learning something new. They like that feeling of being uncomfortable that you get before you ‘get it’. That is what they are not getting when it is repetitious, when it has not given them the education that they need.

Mr BOND — That is why it is so important that it happens at a young age — this identification — because they become disengaged and we see that they do not want to conform to the system down the track if they have not felt like they have had their needs met over that period time. That is where the clustering Paul was talking about works so well, because all of a sudden they feel like, ‘Hey, there is someone else out there that is like me, feels like me and thinks like me’. But if they do not get that experience at an early age, it almost becomes too late because they have disengaged from the system.

Mr SMITH — And the well-administered mentoring program can really help as well because it enables the children to have someone who understands them, who can set goals for them and help them to understand themselves, to be very purposeful in moving forward in their education.

Ms MEEHAN — Share their passions.

The CHAIR — Unfortunately we have come to an end in terms of our time. We could be sitting here with you all day if we had the time because you have certainly given us a whole lot of very useful information that we will take on board, both from your submission and your contribution here today. The committee thanks you very much for your efforts and for appearing before us. If there is any burning issue that you think we have not covered that you want to mention now, please do.

Ms MEEHAN — We have some publications that you may find useful. Paul has got a DVD here.

Mr DOUBLE — It is especially for parents.

Ms MEEHAN — It is called the *Gifted Puzzle*, and the AAEGT have also published two books from their conference in Sydney last year. One is *Giftedness from an Indigenous Perspective*, which you will find there,

and *Dual Exceptionality*, which is really what we are talking about in our conference. We are very happy to have any other conversations with you along your track in trying to find out what could possibly happen to make life a little better at least.

Mr DOUBLE — We look forward to seeing you at our conference.

Ms MEEHAN — We do; we are excited at that you are going to be able to be part of our conference so that we can continue the conversation. Thank you for the stimulating time we have had.

The CHAIR — Thank you for coming along today. We really appreciate it.

Witnesses withdrew.