

CORRECTED VERSION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the education of gifted and talented students

Bendigo — 20 September 2011

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Mr D. Pearce, Principal, and
Ms M. Fettling, Assistant Principal, Bendigo Senior Secondary College.

The CHAIR — Welcome to this public hearing looking at the area specifically of gifted and talented students. What we will do today is ask a series of questions. We will also give you the opportunity, if you would like, to make some opening remarks. Your evidence will be recorded by Hansard. You will have the opportunity to have a look at the transcript and if there any errors, to fix those. The other thing is that the evidence you give today is covered by what we call parliamentary privilege, which is the same privilege that MPs are afforded, but that privilege does not extend outside the hearing today. So say what you like within the room, but when you go out, go back to what you normally do.

We want to thank you for appearing before the committee. It is important for us to get a perspective on some schools and what Bendigo Senior Secondary College is doing in this particular area. Do you have any opening remarks you would like to make?

Mr PEARCE — We will keep it brief, because I understand you have lost a little time. If you gain some in our session and the one that follows from our students, that would be good for you. We are really pleased to have the opportunity in the first instance to make a submission and, secondly, to be here today. In relation to our responses we would like you to understand that whilst each school is unique, we are particularly unique by virtue of the focus of our curriculum, being a years 11 and 12 school only and being the size that we are. We are a very large school, and we are in the position of having to cater for all manner of students. I think the data will show that our very best students are as good as those anywhere in the state, but we are also catering for students at the opposite end of the spectrum, if you like. We need to provide a considerable breadth of programs and opportunities for students, not the least of whom are those of high ability and gifted students, on whom you are particularly focused. We appreciated the list of dot points. It is a good guide for us to start with.

The CHAIR — Specifically looking at the A++ program you run, what are the main components of it, and how did the program come about? Could you tell us how many students are involved in the program, how you select them to participate and why you chose this model over, say, a SEAL program? That is a lot of questions — tell us about A++.

Ms FETTLING — I am happy to start. It was originally put in place and was called the Aim High program in 2005. One of the reasons we decided we would introduce a program like this is that when we looked at our school data, which comes to us from the VCAA, we realised that we were perhaps not extending some of our high ability students as far as we would like to and perhaps not nurturing their learning as much as we could. We got a team together, which was pretty cross-sectional of the school — it included careers, curriculum and wellbeing — and we sat down and said, ‘What could we do with a group of students to nurture some of those abilities and extend them in ways beyond the classroom?’. We were always trying to extend within, but this was something we could add on outside of the classroom. We came up with what we called the Aim High program.

Because we had the unique situation of our year 10s all coming in from — at that stage it was — five secondary schools it was very difficult to have data which underpinned the selection of those students coming into our college. We had some data around our year 11s going into 12s from their results in combination with appealing to the high-end students. We asked teachers to nominate, we asked students themselves to nominate and we also looked at academic award recipients at the end of that.

We ran a program that gave them some workshops. We put a budget line beside it, and we employed some high-end people from Melbourne who came up and ran focus workshops with these groups of students. There were about 60 students in the first year, and the workshops were run during the school day. They were run three times a year — so we got them together three times a year. We provided the students with opportunities for role modelling. We would link them up with a role model somewhere in the community. That had a fairly low uptake. There was some work experience, and that was done during the holidays — again, not a huge uptake on that. When we evaluated it at the end of the year, what the students said to us was, ‘We really liked the workshops, but we did not like missing classes to go to the workshops’, because their minds were very focused on being in classes. So we modified it somewhat the following year and said, ‘Let’s not limit it just to those students who are high achieving. Let’s offer it to all students to try to increase their ability’.

Strangely enough we have come back around again. We have reinvented it as the A++ program, and we are really targeting those students who are high-end students. Our year 10s are those who have been identified by their schools by winning an award. We contact all of those students and our year 11 award recipients as well, and then again staff are given the list and asked to nominate any others who should be on the list. We run the

workshops pretty much outside of school times now so that it does not cut across that time, and that has been well received by our students. We have a lunchtime meeting where we set up study groups, and we provide information to students around the importance of study groups and that sense of working with people of similar ability and how that actually builds up your results. They self-form into teams. Because students will do five or six subjects, they choose a subject they want to form a study group for, and that becomes a little bit self-fulfilling. It has been very successful and is supported by our staff, who often touch base with those study groups.

Supported enhancement workshops — last year we used Mental Blank. This year we have used someone else. They come up from Melbourne and run those workshops twice a year, usually in a Tuesday afternoon timeslot when classes have actually finished. They have professional mentors on request. We have some students who have requested that, and we would like to see the uptake of that much more. Some of that is about time. We run those focused very much in the first term to get them settled in and get them working, and then we touch base with them throughout the year. Then we track them. For last year, for instance, I have the success rates. We track their ATAR scores against the number of students in the A++ program, and the results — do you want a quick snapshot of what they are?

The CHAIR — Yes.

Ms FETTLING — We had 48 year 12 A++ students in 2010, and 98 per cent of those received a first-round offer. The average ATAR of those year 12 students was 81.85, with the lowest ATAR being a 42.5, which is probably significantly lower than we would anticipate, but the highest was 98. The average study score was 34, which is well above what our school average is, and that includes the year 11s who have chosen a unit 3 and 4 subject as well. Ten of those students ended up with an ATAR of 90 or beyond, and 21 were between 80 and 90. Did we add value? We do not really know, because those students may well have achieved those scores without that program, but the feedback that we gained from the students was really very positive. They really appreciated those opportunities.

Mr PEARCE — This is a self-select model, so students are not compelled to participate. When you look at the data that Meredith has just run us through, at the very top of our results some of our very high performing students, including our dux, were not actually in the A++ program.

Ms FETTLING — And probably just chose not to be.

The CHAIR — Do you find some of the students who are self-selecting may struggle with the program?

Ms FETTLING — It is not so much that they struggle with the program. Perhaps they may see themselves in the very top level but are not necessarily in that top level. That is probably indicative in an ATAR of 42, but that may suggest anything. There could have been a personal trauma for that student through the year. It could have been anything.

Mr PEARCE — Of course we are also having students coming into the school. We enrol, in round figures, 950 new students in the school every year. One of the losses of information in our system, or within any school's system, is when students move from one school setting to another. When students move from primary school into year 7, or in our case from year 10 to year 11, the data that moves with them does not always give you an accurate indication of the level of ability of those students. Inevitably you fall back on teacher judgements. What we know about teacher judgements is that they are not necessarily broad enough. There may well be students who have received academic awards or done particularly well but may not actually be really high-level ability students. I think that is reflected in some of the data as well for the kids in that program.

The CHAIR — Getting back to the SEAL options, did you look at SEAL as a potential when you were evaluating programs?

Mr PEARCE — The difficulty for us with the SEAL program is that it is more traditionally a cohort of students who travel through, take the journey together and have a great degree of commonality in the subjects that they choose. The only common subject within the VCE program is English, and even within English there are three choices: literature, language or traditional English. Identifying a group of kids, putting them together as a cohort and packaging them under SEAL is something that is too difficult within a years 11 and 12 environment. I think there are other options available in terms of specialist programs that might target students

from particular curriculum areas or strengths, and that is something that we have identified as a priority in our strategic plan for the next four years.

Ms TIERNEY — We understand that you provide options for accelerated learning for students in years 7 through to 10 from neighbouring schools. Can you tell us about what kinds of accelerated learning opportunities you provide for those students and how that program came about as well as provide us with an indication of the number of students participate in the program and what the selection process is?

Ms FETTLING — I am happy to start. We work collaboratively with our 7-10 colleges. We run a common five subjects at a VCE 1 and 2 level across each of those four studies. Some of those schools actually include options for additional VCE subjects on top of that. That allows students to do a VCE unit at year 10 at levels 1 and 2. Some students do two of those subjects and then will follow through to us and do a year 12 subject in their year 11 year. We have about 450 of our year 11 students, which is probably about 48 per cent of students, doing a year 12 subject in year 11. Maybe about 300 of those would have done a unit 1 and 2 sequence at a year 10 level. It is quite significant and quite valuable for many of those students.

The criteria has changed a little bit. We used to have a little bit more control, and when I say ‘control’ I do not mean that in a controlling sense. Schools can now independently offer a VCE subject and put that into their VASS system without having to come through our school, whereas previously they would be enrolled with us so we would have some sense of setting up criteria. Now the year 10 schools themselves will make a decision about whether or not the student is able to do a year 11 subject in year 10.

We do have some advice for some of our students coming through — for example, in a literature subject we would encourage students, based on previous results, to leave the year 12 literature until they get to year 12, simply due to cognitive reasons. However, that is negotiated on a one-to-one basis based on a student’s ability. The criterion is really that if the student wishes to do a year 12 subject in year 11 through the transition process, they will have conversations and counselling sessions with our student coordinators and their own year 10 coordinators. If there is a sense that, yes, they will be able to do it, then they are able to. At the end of the day if the student insists on wanting to do it, we do not stop them from doing it.

Ms TIERNEY — And the numbers?

Ms FETTLING — Across the year 10 schools we would probably be close to having 300 or 350 students doing a year 11 class. We will then pick up some year 11s coming in who perhaps did not do a subject the year before but will pick it up at year 11. So we have about 450 year 11 students doing a year 12 subject.

Mr PEARCE — In my estimation that would be pretty close to what you would find in most parts of the state. The number of year 10 students undertaking VCE subjects is probably around 50 per cent, I would have thought.

Mr CRISP — I am going to talk about teacher training and professional development. The Goldfields LLEN submission indicated that adequate teacher training had the greatest impact on learning. My question is on training needed by teachers. What kinds of training do pre-service and in-service teachers need to cater for gifted students, and do you think some training in gifted education should be mandatory for all teachers?

Mr PEARCE — I would say that it is not a strong enough component in teacher training courses at the moment. The issue is understanding what high ability and particularly giftedness actually look like and then being able to have strategies in your repertoire and ranges of assessment that allow you to meet the needs of those students. I think there is a significant need in terms of teacher training that does not exist at the moment in pre-service training.

It is also really difficult and challenging within a school setting. This is the age-old battle of teaching to the middle and teaching across the range of abilities that you have in a particular classroom. High ability, particularly giftedness, can be hidden. It may not be evident. I am sure in the testimony you have received from parents and from other people you will be aware of that. Opportunities for teachers to undertake training in this area exist, but very often they do not translate into too much in terms of teaching practice in classrooms. I think there are genuine issues in that area.

Ms FETTLING — I can answer that. We know that our gifted and talented students are not an homogenous group, so I think teachers would know when a student is actually very intelligent and very clever and excelling very well. But for some of the other areas where there are gifted students, as Dale said, it is hidden, and I think our staff would have a fairly low level of ability to identify the gifted students in their classrooms. They would know who their high-ability students are.

The other thing that I think is really important, too, is an understanding that you actually need to teach gifted students in a slightly different way. A lot of the time they get through the work very quickly and so they are given 'busy work', which tends to devalue. They become unmotivated, and they become bored. A lot of work is needed around those higher order, open-inquiry type of approaches, which would enable those students to develop the problem-solving skills they need, to create and develop things and to really feel as though they are being challenged. That is an aspect that really requires some support and help for teachers.

Mr CRISP — That takes me into the next area, which is professional development. Do you provide any professional development for your staff? The committee understands that you work with local schools in providing professional learning for teachers. Can you tell the committee more about this? What kinds of professional learning do you offer for those teachers in, I presume, feeder schools? And, which is what we are all interested in here today, what challenges do teachers in rural and regional Victoria face in accessing professional learning for gifted children? I would like to explore that PD issue a little more.

Ms FETTLING — Specifically for gifted and talented students?

Mr CRISP — Yes.

Ms FETTLING — Probably not very much, to be honest. One of our focus areas is around differentiating the curriculum within the context of the VCE, which can be particularly challenging at a year 12 level, perhaps more so than the year 11 level. That initiative is certainly on our strategic plan and our annual implementation plan, and some direction has been made with that. Have we specifically focused on the gifted and talented? No, probably not. We are looking at ways and we are certainly heightening the awareness of the importance of things like higher order questioning as well, but I would have to say that we probably have not done a great deal around building the capacity of our teachers to meet the needs of those students or even to identify who they are, to be honest.

Mr PEARCE — I think one of the significant issues there is that the curriculum, and particularly the assessment regime of the VCE, effectively mitigates against some of those approaches being adopted. It is — particularly in year 12, as Meredith has indicated — a high-stakes environment, and we feel, and our parents and our students tell us, that we have a significant responsibility to try to ensure that students achieve the highest possible study scores they can and that they get the highest ATAR rankings they can in order to set them off on their pathway. With more flexibility within the VCE curriculum, and particularly assessment, I think you would see schools better able to meet the needs of a wide range of students.

Mr CRISP — I move on to teacher recruitment and selection. The committee has been told that it can be difficult to recruit teachers with the appropriate qualifications to work with highly able students. Has this been your experience? Do schools in regional Victoria face particular challenges in recruiting staff with experience in gifted education? And are there any specific characteristics that a teacher of gifted or highly able students should have?

The CHAIR — If I could just extend from that, particularly with your A++ program, are you looking at teacher recruitment to assist in that program? Or are they teachers who — —

Mr PEARCE — Not specifically, no.

Ms FETTLING — But we believe we probably have the expertise already in our school to challenge those students.

Mr PEARCE — I would say that Bendigo fares a little better in terms of being able to recruit teachers than outlying areas do. I came to my current position from my previous job as head of a much smaller year 7–12 school about 100 kilometres west of here. There is no doubt that teacher recruitment is more difficult as you move away from the regional centres. In some instances it is a matter of, for many of those schools, taking what

you can get. Your ability to discriminate at the point of selection, which ought to be used as an additional filter, in practical terms, does not really exist. You are looking for someone with qualifications and preferably experience and a good track record of success in the delivery of a particular area of your curriculum. With the number of resumes, interviews and selection processes that I have been involved with, a prospective teacher having brought to the table evidence of training, qualifications and experience in meeting the needs of gifted and very talented students is almost non-existent. It is not a feature of selection processes.

Ms FETTLING — There are some areas, in terms of curriculum, that are more difficult to fill than others. Sometimes you have to have somebody behind a class, and so there is not always the capacity to choose from a bank of applicants, either. The number of people interested in coming to country areas and teaching there is often very low.

The CHAIR — It has been suggested to the committee that technology could be utilised and be a particularly effective tool for learning opportunities for gifted and talented students in rural and regional Victoria. Do you agree with this? If so, what kinds of programs and resources do you think could be provided online for gifted students in rural and regional areas?

Mr PEARCE — It is an area that we have great interest in and in which we are doing a range of work in at the moment, some of which is funded from outside the school and some of which is at our own initiative and cost. I would say that this is an issue even within some metropolitan and regional schools as well as those further away from the regional centres and metropolitan Melbourne. If you look at the data, you can see that in terms of breadth of curriculum and curriculum access for high-ability students, there are schools in Melbourne that, for example, do not have critical maths or cannot find a teacher of specialist maths. It is very common. If you move further out into the regions, it is an absolute characteristic of many small schools. The range of curriculums they can offer to their students, and therefore their capacity to really meet the needs of and extend many of their students, does not exist because of those issues. It is about teacher shortage and a lack of curriculum breadth.

What can we do in terms of technology? It is of interest to us that the department has just rolled out a whole suite of videoconferencing across schools. In our view that will do very little to address that issue. Videoconferencing is a synchronous solution. Linking up schools requires all students to be free at the same time, and in practical terms that cannot and does not happen. As this body moves around the state it will hear that in certain parts of the state there are conglomerations of schools working very closely together. When you interrogate that, what you generally find is that it is one school delivering directly to another school rather than at scale. The reason for that is that it is a synchronous solution, and you cannot get students and teachers free at the same time.

The solution for that is online delivery and the creation of content to deliver. I am talking specifically about VCE here; you need whole courses and you need to invest in the creation of that content, and that has not been a priority within Victoria, let alone within Australia. The evidence is fairly clear. If you look closely at the work that was done by The Learning Federation and by various other bodies around Australia, you see that it has been primarily concentrated on P-10. The pointy end of the curriculum has been ignored. There has been no investment in the area, and it is an area that requires serious attention.

We are in the middle of the third year of a project where we are developing a virtual curriculum for the department, to be served out ultimately over the ultranet to schools anywhere in the state. We have concentrated on high-stake subject like physics, specialist maths and so on. That has got the capacity to be scaled, and it has got the capacity to meet the students in a whole range of locations, including students of different ability levels, because it allows students to move forward or back at a pace that actually suits them. It allows students to move forward much more quickly. There is certainly a role for technology. In my view there is goodwill and good intent within our department but perhaps a lack of understanding as to how to progress in that area.

Ms FETTLING — The other thing I would say is that the use of technology would actually allow those students to self-pace and move more quickly through the curriculum. We have a second campus, which is a NETschool campus, and we have students, some of whom have degrees of Asperger's, who are actually quite intelligent and can work through online material and get through a course much more quickly at their own pace. Technology actually provides a facility to do that. I would say, though, that what Dale is talking about is really important. The curriculum should not just be static documents that are put online; they need to be rigorous and

have opportunities for students to extend. They need to have higher order thinking built into them as well, otherwise students will disengage with the course and the technology itself.

The other opportunity that the use of technology offers is diagnostic testing. Students get really disengaged when they are going over material that they know — if it is down there, and they are up here. If we are actually able to have some diagnostic testing tools whereby students could determine where they are in the point of learning, they would not need to go back and do all of that; they could link in exactly where they are. I think there is huge capacity for technology to be put in there.

There is also just using the machine — the hardware itself and some of the software — as a way for students to show their creativity in designing, creating and presenting things in a way that is much more engaging than the non-use of technology. The use of technology could also be a great way of setting up links with mentors. Students can connect to anywhere in the world and with really high-end practitioners in a range of places, so they can get some mentoring support through the use of technology as well. I think it absolutely critical for these students as well as for others.

Mr PEARCE — One of the issues is that, particularly in smaller schools, gifted and talented students are even more isolated. They are less likely to have critical mass around them, so the use of technology through platforms such as the ultranet to be able to create connections between students in different locations can be quite powerful.

The CHAIR — We are going to have to wrap it up there. Thank you, Dale and Meredith, for coming and presenting to the committee. It is much appreciated. Keep up the good work.

Witnesses withdrew.