

CORRECTED VERSION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the education of gifted and talented students

Bendigo — 20 September 2011

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Witnesses

Patrick, leader, Student Council, and year 12 student, and

Oscar, year 11 student

Lara, year 12 student, Bendigo Senior Secondary College.

The CHAIR — Welcome to the Education and Training Committee review that we are conducting today. Our inquiry is specifically looking at gifted and talented students and programs that are currently being run in schools and also opportunities for enhancing some of those. Just to explain the process of today, we have a series of questions that we want to ask you. It does not mean you all have to answer every question, so feel free at any time to come in on the questions that you feel you want to contribute to. Hansard will be recording the information today. You will only be identified in the transcript by first name. You will have the opportunity to review the transcript as well, and if there are any typographical errors, you will have an opportunity to fix them.

I need to point out that today's hearing is covered by what we call parliamentary privilege, which is the same privilege that members of Parliament are afforded, so feel free to say what you like within these four walls. However, you do not have that privilege once you leave the hearing.

We might get straight into it. I might kick off the first question and look specifically at the A++ program that your school runs. I am wanting to ask, firstly, whether you are an A++ student. Are you in the A++ program? If so, what are the benefits of the program for high-ability students? What are some of the challenges of being in the program, and what changes or improvements to the program would you recommend?

LARA — I guess we are all in the A++ program.

PATRICK — Yes, all three of us are.

The CHAIR — Maybe you can answer one by one. Lara, tell us some of your challenges, experiences and improvements.

LARA — I think we have had about three meetings this year. They were all at the start of the year, and the first one was just introducing ourselves and getting a run-down of what the program actually was. The second one I actually missed. We had a speaker come in and talk about study skills, and then he came back a few months later to check on our progress. I guess I would like it to be a bit more hands on. Maybe instead of three times a year we could get together once a month, because it is not really as hands on as I thought it would be at the start of the year, given what they explained the program would be.

PATRICK — I think I would probably agree with those comments in that the continuity of the program throughout the year has not really been there. I was in the program last year, and I think it began and finished with one meeting of the group, which was quite unfortunate, really. Going into it, I thought it had the potential to bring together students who had similar aspirations and levels of work ethic and things that I guess set them apart as those who were selected for the program.

I think the initial speaker we had was really good. It was about providing the members of the group with some extra skills and pointers on how they could maximise their natural talents which were what had identified them as part of that group. But I think certainly the continuity of the program is something that could be improved, and making it a frequent, continuous thing throughout the year is a way in which it could be really improved. The issue is that there are just not the resources in terms of time for the people running it.

Also I am completely in agreement with what Dale said about the structure of the curriculum, particularly at year 12, which limits the ability of students to be involved in something that is run outside of the classroom as an extra thing. All three of us have extracurricular activities as well, and that is adding an additional one. Maybe it could be integrated more into the things that we already do.

OSCAR — I would like to see a bit more follow-up. I thought the guest speaker provided some really good tips to help us get through school and study, but after that there was not anything to see how we were progressing with it or if we had taken any of it on. There was not anything to keep us a bit motivated to keep practising what we had been taught.

Ms TIERNEY — We have been told that the college provides an accelerated learning program between years 7 and 10. Did any of you participate in that?

OSCAR — No.

LARA — I am from New South Wales, so no.

PATRICK — No.

Ms TIERNEY — Did you know about it?

PATRICK — No. My initial experience with accelerated learning or a version of that in self-directed learning would have been at the beginning of year 11. Certainly there was nothing in years 7 to 10 that I experienced.

Ms TIERNEY — If there is nothing else on offer in terms of advanced learning, what do you think could be put in place that would assist you, as students with high abilities?

OSCAR — That is an interesting question. What I expected from reading about the A++ program at the start of the year was that we would be able to have access to specific tutors pretty much any time we liked. I guess it is possible at the school right now, in that we are able to see teachers and have tutorial sessions after school and in free blocks and things like that. However, being able to have access to some more materials or resources or people who can clarify things for you and help you get through your work would be pretty valuable.

PATRICK — I think the kind of concept they had in mind for the A++ program was this kind of bringing together of a community of students who had similar aims for their schooling and were of similar abilities, breaking down the borders of perhaps being located in separate classes — doing the same subjects but being located in separate classes — and being dispersed through the school. It is an opportunity to bring those students together outside of the classroom. I think something that would improve the opportunities for more highly achieving students would be to provide the self-directed opportunity but then also to have more extension built into a program like that. I certainly did not take on any self-directed subjects because it is a small selection of subjects and none of my subjects complied with that. A number of the subjects I do have one class or two classes, whereas the subjects that are offered through self-directed learning are really large courses with lots of classes where there is more likely to be high demand for a self-directed program.

Even though you can engage in that program at your own pace, it is still the same material that is taught in everyday classes. I think it would be good to provide access to more mentoring and people in the field of the subject and then also to have opportunities for extension built into self-directed programs — I guess that is what Meredith was talking about, that open inquiry kind of learning — so that people can go in, do them at their own pace and then excel. If you are teaching in a regular classroom, though, it is very difficult for the staff to provide those opportunities to one or two students when they still obviously have an enormous responsibility to the rest of the class. Throughout all my years of schooling, from prep to 12, there has been so much more focus, time and energy devoted to the students in the middle to the bottom. Even in classes where the general standard was much higher, it was still all about pushing those children from the bottom up, whereas the ones at the other end were left more to their own devices.

The CHAIR — That is a good point. In terms of self-selecting in the A++ program and any other things you have done throughout your schooling, have there been any negative attitudes associated with the fact that you are identified as gifted or the ‘smart kids’? Have you found any negative experiences with that?

LARA — I guess there is always a hint of jealousy or confusion when people find out you are in such a program, and there is a negative connotation to being gifted, especially in smaller communities such as Bendigo or rural areas. You do not really want to tell people that or focus on that. The reaction may be negative because some people may feel that you are favoured, and you do not feel accepted in that way.

PATRICK — That was part of the idea of the A++ program.

LARA — To bring together a group.

PATRICK — That was one of the things we initially spoke about in that group — creating an environment that was different to the everyday classroom, one where people felt comfortable to show their talents, really excel and not have to worry about that kind of thing. Not so much in VCE but certainly during years 7 to 10 the social constraints in those years are more intense. As people are finding their place in the school and finding their place in the community, I think those constraints are much stronger. They are probably in more need of being addressed in years 7 to 10 than in years 11 and 12, but I think it is certainly still a factor.

OSCAR — Because at the senior level it is such a big school that you do not really have the cliques or you do not see the cliques. You do not really get that kind of interaction with those people that might try to put you down for it. With the 7 to 10 school being a bit smaller, you definitely feel it if there is jealousy or anything like that towards you. It can be seen, but I would like to think that we can overcome it.

The CHAIR — In terms of living in a regional area, how has that impacted upon your ability to access quality opportunities for learning? Do you travel long distances to attend school? How can high-ability students in rural and regional Victoria be better provided for?

PATRICK — I think Lara should answer this question.

LARA — I live in Echuca, so I travel here every day. I get on the train at 7.00 a.m. and get home at 6.30 every night. I would say that it has affected me a lot, just travel-wise with the exhaustion. As soon as I get home I just want to drop off and go to sleep. I do not feel the motivation to study due to that stress. Also I feel like we miss a lot of opportunities. People in Melbourne can go to lectures all the time, but we have to weigh up our options — ‘Should I go to this lecture? How much time will I lose if I go?’. For example, during the holidays I would like to go to a lot of the year 12 revision lectures, but it would take a day for me with the travel time. I would have to leave at 5 o’clock in the morning, and I would get home late at night. It is just not possible to attend all of these lectures because of the distance. The constraints from that just makes it disappointing.

PATRICK — I would certainly agree with that. Again, though, with the opportunities for students who need support, I do not think living in a rural area limits that at all. I think there is plenty of support there — plenty of alternative school options and things like that. Meredith spoke about the NETschool. That is an incredible opportunity for people who may be disengaged or need some sort of alternate program to keep them in school. For extension and things, however, I think we are hugely limited. In relation to that sort of stuff about accessing extra tuition and things outside of school, it is all just supply and demand, really. You have a small community and fewer students engaging in subjects. Organisations just do not have the capacity to provide those options in a place like Bendigo. That certainly limits the opportunities that we have.

The CHAIR — The committee has been told that technology could provide effective learning opportunities for high-ability students. How does your school currently use technology to enhance learning experiences? What kinds of online programs and learning opportunities do you think should be provided for high-ability students in rural and regional Victoria?

LARA — Wikispace?

PATRICK — At the moment I do not think there is anything with the particular goal of assisting high-performing students. I do not think there is anything that has particularly been implemented to address that.

The CHAIR — Lara, do you think what you mentioned before about some of those lectures you are unable to access —

LARA — They do offer some of those lectures online now, but instead of, say, 6 hours at Melbourne University it is reduced down to 2. So you are still limited in that respect. I think the school has the goal of having programs online for gifted and talented students so that if they want to, they can extend their learning, but as of yet that has not been implemented.

The CHAIR — Do you think that would be useful?

LARA — Yes, definitely.

The CHAIR — Oscar?

OSCAR — I was just considering the extranet. We have some workbooks, work pages and things like that. It is available for any student. You find that students who are getting better marks or are ahead of everyone in the class find their way to that just to keep themselves busy, but there is nothing specifically for gifted students.

Ms TIERNEY — In its submission the Goldfields LLEN suggested that a supportive home environment can be very important for high-ability students, but of course I do not expect that that would be the case for all

students. What kind of support can parents and families provide students of high ability to enable them to deal with the challenges they face due to their high ability?

PATRICK — The key aspect of a supportive home environment is that difference between the school and home environment that we talked about before — any kind of ability and any kind of success is just wholly celebrated in a home environment. That is more of a factor in the early secondary years, but that sort of tendency of high achievers when they are at school of not wanting to be seen as an achiever or to put yourself out there as somebody who has exceptional skills or whatever, is so different to what it is like at home, where — you would hope — people feel free to be who they are and achieve what they can. I think you are right: being supported at home is key to any student's success, regardless of their level of ability.

In terms of things that parents and families can specifically do to support students, I think they are probably already doing it if those students have been identified as being high achieving. I do not think that people get to that level without support from their family. They do not feel free to express that level of achievement without coming from a home that already supports it.

LARA — I guess so. A focus in the younger years is to have access to your parents, and in this day and age parents work more and more and you see them less and less. From kindergarten through to year 6 you need to be able to go to your parents and ask for their help and set up regular study routines that can carry through the rest of your schooling life.

Mr CRISP — I am going to finish off looking at what happens when you finish school. Are you planning to go to university, and if so, what do you hope to study and where do you hope to study? Will you be leaving Bendigo?

The CHAIR — You definitely will!

LARA — Yes, I will definitely be leaving Bendigo. I would like to go to Melbourne University and start in the arts component of the new Melbourne Model. I would like to major in economics and anthropology and undertake a diploma in French.

PATRICK — My first preference has already been submitted for a double degree in commerce and economics at ANU in Canberra — it is obviously not in Bendigo — just for the opportunities and the reputation of a world-class institution that we obviously do not have access to locally.

Ms TIERNEY — And you have deliberately chosen that over the Melbourne Model?

PATRICK — Yes, certainly. I have never really agreed with the model for me. I think it is great for some students, but I have a very clear, very solid pathway I want to follow after university, and ANU really caters to that well. It is also the centre of the physical place where I can get experience in the industries I want to work in.

OSCAR — I plan to do a bachelor of health science and a masters in paramedicine at La Trobe, Bendigo — so staying at home. I checked out all the other options; it is either here or Melbourne. Melbourne has a lot of bachelors in paramedicine. I thought, as an undergraduate, being able to go straight to a masters in the same time I would be able to do a bachelors in Melbourne — saving a little bit of money as well by living at home — was a better option for me. I would like to get into the health profession anyway.

The CHAIR — This is off topic, but in the long term, down the track, do you hope at the end of your degrees to live and work in Bendigo or in Echuca or move on somewhere else?

LARA — I would like to work internationally.

PATRICK — I cannot see it happening, as much as my parents do not want to hear that. Internationally is where I want to be.

OSCAR — Internationally. The course provides a lot of placements overseas, so I think it sets me up pretty well to go over.

Mr CRISP — Well done.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for coming in and contributing to today’s lot of hearings. Good luck in your future careers. We will be watching you.

LARA — Thank you for the invitation.

PATRICK — Yes. Thanks so much for having us. We really appreciate it.

Witnesses withdrew.