

# CORRECTED VERSION

## EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into the education of gifted and talented students

Bendigo — 20 September 2011

#### Members

Mr P. Crisp  
Mr N. Elasmar  
Ms E. Miller

Mr D. Southwick  
Ms G. Tierney

Chair: Mr D. Southwick  
Deputy Chair: Ms G. Tierney

#### Staff

Executive Officer: Ms K. Riseley  
Research Officers: Ms M. Scott, Ms A. Madden  
Administration Officer: Ms N. Tyler

#### Witnesses

Ms T. Jacobson, Assistant Principal,  
Ms K. Kirkpatrick, grade 5 teacher, and  
Miss N. Sellick, grade 4 teacher, Kennington Primary School.

**The CHAIR** — I welcome you to the committee hearing this afternoon. As you are no doubt aware, we represent the Education and Training Committee, which is conducting an inquiry into gifted and talented students, and programs that currently exist and opportunities to enhance programs and options for gifted and talented students. To explain today's process, we will give you the opportunity to make any opening remarks if you want to, but as we want to ask you a number of questions, please keep that reasonably short. Hansard will record all the information today, and you will have the opportunity to look at the transcript. If there are any typographical errors and what have you that need to be changed, you will have the option to do that.

I also need to point out that today's hearing is covered by parliamentary privilege, which is the same parliamentary privilege that members of Parliament are afforded. It means that you can say whatever you like within the room, but it is attributed to only within the room and not outside. So you cannot go out and call a press conference or do whatever afterwards, but feel free to vent inside these four walls. Thanks for coming. Do you have anything you would like to say?

**Ms JACOBSON** — No, we thought we would just answer questions, if that is okay.

**The CHAIR** — Good. I will kick it off. Firstly, what programs do you provide for gifted students in your school? For example, do teachers at Kennington Primary School differentiate the curriculum or provide individual learning plans for students?

**Ms JACOBSON** — I might start with the general, and then we have a list from our staff. We do expect a differentiation of the curriculum in all of the grades — from prep right through to grade 6 — and in any grade, whether it is a multi-age, composite or straight grade, it is reasonable to say that there will be a variety of levels in all of the curriculum areas. The expectation is that teachers cater to the needs of the kids and move them from where they are to where they need to go. We have individual learning plans for lots of children. They might have a social basis, they might have a transition basis, but lots of them have an academic basis. If children are performing six months below the expected level or six months above the expected level, the expectation is that they will have an individual learning plan, which is revisited termly or as appropriate. Parents are involved in that as well.

In addition to some of the things that Kim and Nat will read, there are some children in the school who are accelerated for areas of the curriculum. In grade 2 there are quite a few children who move from their regular grade 2 maths program into a grade 3 program. Whilst it is not widespread — it is something we could expand on — it certainly does happen.

**Ms KIRKPATRICK** — Just with the differentiation, it is expected at our school and is written into the planning, too. You just cannot say, 'Yes, we differentiate'; you actually have to show how you differentiate within each level and subject area. I will list some of the things we do. We have project-based learning this year; it has been terrific in the grades 5 and 6 areas. That is where children have had a chance to put down an area of interest. There are small groups. We have specialists and uni students coming in as well. There are children in groups of 10 to 12. It is very diverse. We have a maintenance crew, which has been washing cars, and I have been doing a science and magic group — which is, interestingly enough, all boys. We have done a lot of science and been to the discovery centre and things like that. Then there is drama, music, art, cooking and the environment. That has been really good for catering for individual needs.

**Ms JACOBSON** — That is 2 hours a week every week for two terms for each level.

**Ms KIRKPATRICK** — Yes, that is every Wednesday and Thursday.

**Miss SELICK** — We also do a number of standardised testings that cater for them and are adaptive — I think that is the term that is used — so it goes on. We do the on-demand testing, which not only identifies but helps us to extend further. Sometimes you may be thinking that your child is there and aiming for here, when they can actually jump two of those. Lots of those testing things help them jump the two levels instead of just the one you are aiming for. We also use the ultranet to gain data. We also have things like the school band and the instrumental program, and lots of sporting activities. The kids are extended in the sporting activities quite well. I think that is something that Kennington does really well. We also use the Athletics program, which Kim knows a lot about, to extend them and to differentiate.

Within the grade 3-4 unit we are moving towards team teaching. We do not actually move them from rooms to do maths, but we do the differentiated maths within the classroom. When we are doing the planning for the unit we are planning for our grades, as an example, from 1.25 in VELs right up to 3.5, so we are catering for all those in that.

We also do whole units, and we have got four grade 4s at the moment. We are working on a space project that has lots of open-ended activities where the students can take it where they want to go as well, which we are finding quite good with the motivation levels and things.

Obviously we have our NAPLAN and online numeracy and literacy things as well. I think some of the students go out for the ICAS testing.

**Ms JACOBSON** — That is an optional one too. Do you know about the ICAS through the University of New South Wales? Parents can opt in to do that as part of the extension program, and that is in five areas, from writing, spelling, maths — —

**Ms KIRKPATRICK** — Computers.

**Ms JACOBSON** — Computers, yes, so that is an optional one as well.

**Ms KIRKPATRICK** — That is one that a lot of the parents take up if they want their children to go to private school, because a lot of kids from our school go to the private school, Girton, in grade 6 and for secondary. A lot of the kids who go there tend to do these tests. It is good exam preparation, I suppose, for what they get later on.

**The CHAIR** — Coming back to the gifted students, in terms of numbers, how many would you say are identified as gifted at your school? How often are you contacted by parents with gifted students who are looking for a primary school for their child? Also, do you have any gifted students at your school who have disabilities, and if so, how do you cater for those students?

**Ms JACOBSON** — I cannot really give you numbers, and that is probably what we are interested in as a result of the inquiry, to find out how better to identify them. I know on the DEECD website — and whilst we are familiar with that, we are not overly familiar with it — there are tools there to help that we could build in with our identification process, because I think we probably do it really well at the other end of the spectrum where, for kids who are at risk through underperformance, there is probably a greater focus on those kids than those at risk at the other end of the spectrum who have that capacity.

With our ILPs there would be a percentage of the kids in each grade who are that six months ahead, but you are probably looking at 12 months to two years ahead in the definition of giftedness.

**Ms KIRKPATRICK** — That is our ILPs for grades 3 to 6 that are for 12 months ahead. Most of us would have perhaps two or three students per grade that we would say were 12 months ahead.

**Ms JACOBSON** — What was the other part of that question?

**The CHAIR** — Children with disabilities who would also be identified as gifted.

**Ms JACOBSON** — We have got quite a diverse school population. We have got students who are funded under the PSD. There are not many of them, but there are probably about five kids who have got funding. None of those funded children would classify as gifted or talented. We have probably got 15 children with a diagnosis of ASD and another 10 who are on that journey, so out of the school population of 560, 25-ish is a fairly high proportion of kids on the autism spectrum. There is one in grade 6 who is, without a doubt, gifted and talented, particularly in technology, but fortunately we have got one of our grade 6 teachers — and again the emphasis is on team teaching, so the kids are quite fluid through the flexible learning spaces — who is very talented herself with technology and is able to challenge that child but also put restrictions on him, because he has the capacity to get into our networks and break the networks, and so she is guiding him really well. It is not funded, but certainly there is an ASD diagnosis.

We have also got other groups within our school, which is head of the deaf facility for the region as well, but none of those children are on the gifted and talented program. There are some clever ones, but I do not know that they would be gifted and talented. Then there are other cohorts within the school like our ESL.

**Ms KIRKPATRICK** — One in my room is extremely talented, and she has got an ASD diagnosis.

**Ms JACOBSON** — She has got an ASD diagnosis as well, and it is an interesting one. We were talking about her before. While she is certainly gifted and talented in a lot of areas, for the first time she is experiencing some trouble in maths, because it is the first time she has needed to go outside her comfort level. She is challenged by that; I think she will be able to work through it.

**Ms KIRKPATRICK** — I think it is the difference between heading into the upper school and where, in the grade 5s, as Nat said, we differentiate. There is a session a week where I take either the low ones or the high ones, and one of the other teachers takes the rest. There is more focus on moving her along. She has got to think instead of cruise. She has cruised for a while. Probably two stand out as having a diagnosis of something and who would be in that category.

**The CHAIR** — Is it too early to say, in terms of parent reputation, that parents are starting to identify your school? Are parents of gifted children coming to your school?

**Ms JACOBSON** — Yes.

**Ms KIRKPATRICK** — It was interesting this year, because I did a tour for a family and they had a daughter coming into prep. The grandfather felt she had a particular talent for music and drama, so that was what he was focusing on. He was looking at a school that would provide what would best suit her.

**Ms JACOBSON** — Our performing arts program is a really good program. We have got a music teacher, but we have also got two choirs. We have also got a signing choir because of the Auslan component. We have got about 120 kids who participate in the instrumental music program. Some of those are in the school band. We also have a production which the grade 5 and grade 6 kids can opt to be in, and it is by audition. So again, traditional emphasis has probably been on sport, and we do a whole lot in sport, including a morning club which starts at 8 o'clock a few times a week, but for the performing arts, it was interesting because for the last two years we have said, 'It is based on merit; you will try out', and it is an opportunity for the kids who will excel, or who have a gift and a talent in this area, to be in it. It put some noses out of joint because traditionally it was a year 6 production and now it is a senior school production. Some parents of the year 6s felt that they should have priority over younger children, whereas our argument was that this is an opportunity for these children to excel. It is a change in thinking.

To take that back to the tours, I think for every tour I do most parents think their child has a gift or talent in something and are interested in what we offer. We talk through the performing arts, we talk through the phys. ed. programs, and then there are a few pull-out programs like our visual arts program and things. Then I talk about the differentiated curriculum from prep to grade 6.

Yes, all parents are interested in it. Are they choosing us on that map? I do not know, but parents are certainly shopping around. I would not do any tours when parents have not looked at multiple schools.

**Ms TIERNEY** — Do any of your students participate in the Able Learners' Enrichment Program?

**Ms JACOBSON** — We certainly promote it. The one from La Trobe?

**Ms TIERNEY** — Yes.

**Ms JACOBSON** — We promote it, and I am not sure of this year's take-up, but we promote it through our link for all our students, but I think in the grade 5-6 area we almost round it off.

**Ms KIRKPATRICK** — We gave it to specific children as well.

**Ms JACOBSON** — And targeted kids.

**Ms TIERNEY** — Have you had any feedback about the experiences that those children have had?

**Ms JACOBSON** — In the past it has been fabulous, absolutely. We were also talking about what they were offering, and Latin is one of the offerings for this year. How do you know that is going to be of interest, unless perhaps you know that is an interest through the family? It is not something perhaps that we would pick up on, but again some of our kids on the spectrum who have some unusual interests might be able to pick it up.

**Ms KIRKPATRICK** — Parents who are particularly interested in encouraging their children's talents always take us up on it.

**Ms JACOBSON** — On the extras.

**Ms KIRKPATRICK** — Yes, on the able learners' program or the Daedalus program, as it used to be called. I know quite a few kids who have done it.

**Ms JACOBSON** — Yes, we have probably been involved in that for about 12 years, I think, at least.

**Ms TIERNEY** — In terms of entry into primary school, many parents who have made submissions say it is difficult to have a gifted child gain early entry into primary school. Do you ever offer early entry? If so, how do parents go about having their children admitted to your school earlier than the normal time?

**Ms JACOBSON** — It is possible; it happens, but not very often. Basically our cut-off, as you would know, is if you turn five by 30 April. Sometimes parents will come through and say, 'My child at four is ready to start'. We need to direct them to the regional office, and they need to have a letter that says, 'Yes, we have given special permission for this child to start'. I think it has happened once in the last few years.

The other thing that has happened has been at the other end — we have had a very gifted grade 5 child who we have accelerated through to year 7, because that met his needs. I think he is probably past year 12 now, but it works really well for him.

**Ms KIRKPATRICK** — Yes, he is. He is in second year uni.

**Ms JACOBSON** — It probably is difficult. I guess there is a good relationship between parents and early childhood workers to say, 'Yes, this child is performing above'. We would support it if — yes, absolutely — it were possible.

**Ms TIERNEY** — Because we have had some differing evidence on that from teachers and principals, essentially, but also parents with one group or one school of thought saying early entry on a case-by-case basis is good and it should be more streamlined and not as bureaucratic as they say it is. Others are for and against acceleration at the primary school level, because of the importance of the social and peer issue.

**Ms KIRKPATRICK** — That is my only issue with it, because I have taught prep for a long time and the social issue is so important at that time. I could see a four-year-old coming in for sessions, but I do not know about being at school full-time.

**Miss SELICK** — It is a lot to ask of them at four, even though academically they are ready. I have had younger students in a prep class as well, and they are the ones that typically tire out a lot quicker. Their social skills are not quite up there yet. It is actually asking quite a lot of them to stay the whole day, participate and behave like a five or six-year-old.

**Ms JACOBSON** — I think it is probably a case-by-case situation.

**Ms KIRKPATRICK** — It is not just about the academic, because even now we have children turning five in April and you have got children who are already six, so there can be that huge 14 or 15-month difference between ages. You can certainly tell the difference in the social.

**Ms JACOBSON** — In the academic it is not so much, because if you are teaching at point of need and if you are teaching a multi-age class — say it is prep to year 2 — often you do not know who is a prep, grade 1 or grade 2, because you are just flexibly grouping the kids all of the time. That is happening a bit with the grades 3 and 4, isn't it? You do not necessarily know. The chronological age obviously does not need to match. My understanding was that the regional office was the one that had to okay it, not the schools.

**The CHAIR** — Just looking at educational opportunities in rural and regional Victoria, the committee has been told there has been a lack of educational opportunities for gifted students in rural and regional Victoria. What challenges do schools in rural and regional areas face in providing appropriate learning opportunities for gifted students?

**Ms JACOBSON** — We talked about it a little bit before. What might be really useful is almost a database linked to the DEECD website that says, ‘These are all the things that are on offer’. It could be the Tournament of Minds and the science one we talked about. I know there are metropolitan spell-a-thons and competitions that are on, but often we do not know about them. That could be ignorance and not researching enough, but if there were a database of them, that would be very useful, but it is accessing them. Are you familiar with the Tournament of Minds project, for example?

**The CHAIR** — Yes.

**Ms JACOBSON** — It is a magnificent project, but as with many of them for the regional schools, it can cost the schools a fair bit to do them. So you need to budget for them. Bendigo is probably better off than some of the schools in the Loddon Mallee because the first round of competitions are at Bendigo at La Trobe University. The next ones are, I think, down at Bundoora in Melbourne and the finals this year are in Tasmania. Part of you wants the kids to excel, but then you have to find the money to fund the kids. Is it reasonable to expect parents to do it? It is also on weekends, so staff need to be prepared to commit to a weekend for those sorts of things. Money in the school budget can have an impact on it. Not knowing what is out there can be another impact on it.

**Ms KIRKPATRICK** — There is just the distance, too, because things like maths games days, which I get information about, would be fantastic — it is mainly private schools in Melbourne that do them, but government schools are welcome to participate — but to go down there and be there at 9 o’clock ends up being a big day.

**Ms JACOBSON** — Or you pay for accommodation the night before.

**Ms KIRKPATRICK** — We were part of a TV program. Our kids were in a spelling program called Spit It Out. Trudi took a group down there, but there was accommodation.

**Ms KIRKPATRICK** — It was transport. There was the potential of several nights accommodation if they kept going well. You want the kids to have that opportunity. Probably in a bigger school we have got more flexibility to budget for it, but it is still a matter of making it work.

**The CHAIR** — The Goldfields LLEN submission highlights the importance of the early identification of giftedness in children. Looking at support for teachers, what sort of resources do teachers need to help them identify giftedness in students — for example, identification checklists and professional developments?

**Ms JACOBSON** — Yes, absolutely.

**Ms KIRKPATRICK** — Both of those.

**The CHAIR** — Tick and tick.

**Ms JACOBSON** — Yes, absolutely. We talked about that. ‘Professional development’ is an interesting term. We try to call it ‘professional learning’ at school, because there is an old model that you think you need to go out to have professional development almost done to you, but we have had a model at school for a couple of years where lots of it is internal. Glenda, who is our principal and is on leave at the moment, is a member of the GLEN. As a result of that project the project-based learning has been a result of that interaction.

We have an assistant principal who has a coaching role; we have a prep teacher who has a coaching role. It is almost a model where it is working in mentoring with teachers, demonstrations and reflection. That model works really well across our literacy and numeracy. It is almost as if you need someone who has skills in gifted and talented identification to almost upskill that person who can then do it in schools to help with the identification, because we have got a few things in place to help us identify kids at the other end of the spectrum. Do they need a cognitive assessment? Is there an intellectual disability, or is it a processing issue? We have got heaps of things in place, and a fairly rigorous process that teachers need to go through to support those

kids. I think we need it on the other end as well. Are these kids masking their achievements? Are they just trying to blend in so we are missing them? That is quite possible.

We had a bit of a look at the DEECD checklist, and that looks quite good; we could probably adapt that. We just basically have not used it. Again, that is something we could do.

**The CHAIR** — There is no training at the moment? For your teachers, there is no training in that identification area?

**Ms JACOBSON** — No, we have not done it. Probably 15 years ago gifted and talented was really big. Then I think, from my perspective, we have expected teachers to differentiate. As a classroom teacher you teach from each child's A and B, there is point-of-need teaching and there is flexible grouping. So it is catering to all needs rather than really trying to pinpoint those kids who are at the other end of the spectrum as far as that.

**Ms KIRKPATRICK** — There has been no PD offered in Bendigo.

**Ms JACOBSON** — No, not that I am aware of.

**Ms KIRKPATRICK** — Or professional learning activities outside the school.

**Mr CRISP** — I would like to extend that training a little bit. As part of the Goldfields LLEN's submission they say adequate teacher training has the greatest impact on learning development and wellbeing of our gifted students. What kind of pre-service training do teachers need to effectively cater for gifted students? Should some training and gifted education be mandatory for all pre-service teachers?

**Miss SELLICK** — I think university is still quite removed from the classroom. Even though you might do a gifted and talented program or unit at university, it is still quite removed from what it looks like in the classroom and how it runs. I think it is definitely important for them to be doing the theory side, but also it is very important for them to hop into the classroom and see what it is like to look at that child, assess where they are at and monitor them as well.

**Ms JACOBSON** — Some of the tools that teachers use are about the on-demand testing. All of those things are helping us to really work out where kids are at. They are substantiated with other bits of evidence too. I guess taking it to the uni side of it, it is an issue of probably an emphasis on differentiating curriculum and being able to pinpoint where kids are at. So if our uni students came away with knowledge of how to use the whole range of assessment tasks, that would help to key them into identifying the gifted and talented. But I am not actually sure how much they do on it. Our uni works really closely with us. We have lots of university students.

**Ms KIRKPATRICK** — They used to do studies where they went out in schools, and the schools had to identify a child and they put them through tests and then did a report. But that was quite a few years ago, and I have not seen it happen since.

**Miss SELLICK** — I know that we had a student come through not long ago from Deakin University in Geelong, and she had to do that: she had to collect the data that I had collected and also do some of her own. There is some work going on around writing individual learning plans and things like that, but I think a lot more of that sort of thing would really — —

**Ms KIRKPATRICK** — Even knowing the definition of a gifted or talented child is important, because you sort of say, 'Great! I have these kids who cruise along and who you do not have to worry about'.

**Ms TIERNEY** — It has been suggested to the committee that regional networks or cluster groups should be developed for schools in rural and regional Victoria so that schools can share resources and expertise and professional learning opportunities would be more dominant. Do you agree with this, and if so, how would those networks work?

**Ms KIRKPATRICK** — We have already got networks. Within Bendigo there are a number of networks, and that is exactly what we do within those networks — share resources.

**Ms JACOBSON** — There is almost that collective system responsibility, so as part of the network we are in the principals do work really closely together on a lot of things. Are you familiar with the roles of the NLIO and the ultranet coaches?

**Ms TIERNEY** — No.

**Ms JACOBSON** — A NLIO is a numeracy and literacy improvement officer, and the ultranet coaches are obviously for the ultranet. They have been regional positions in the past, whereby they have been employed at a regional office across different clusters to work with schools, and that is a shared resource. It has worked quite well. Next year a different funding model is being used whereby schools are making a per head contribution to support those roles for the next period of time. I cannot remember how long it is for. That is all about improvement and improving student outcomes based on numeracy, literacy and also the ultranet.

A similar model could probably work across a range of schools if someone had the expertise to upskill people in the schools so that it would be a sustainable model down the track. But also if, to go along with that upskilling, there was perhaps a financial contribution from the department, the department could say, 'Here is money to support gifted and talented children in whatever area they are performing'. Whether it is participating in the TOM program or representing Victorian primary schools in cycling, there would be some money to acknowledge that it is harder for kids in regional areas to access those programs.

**Mr CRISP** — You touched on this question a little earlier, but I would like to have it clarified: what kinds of support do teachers and schools need to enable them to effectively cater for gifted and talented students — examples being policies, guidelines, access to information about giftedness or even expert advice?

**Ms KIRKPATRICK** — All of that.

**Miss SELICK** — Yes. We spoke earlier about upskilling and empowering the teacher to know where to go and where to find those checklists. When I looked at the website, that was the first time I had seen those checklists. It comes down to a time issue. You say, 'Okay, I can tell that this student is working up here. Where do I need to go to get those checklists? Where do I need to do those things?'. Upskilling and empowering the teacher really helps with that.

**Ms KIRKPATRICK** — We thought it would also be great if there could be someone designated within the school. I am the numeracy coordinator at our school. How good would it be to have a designated gifted and talented person who has extra training and access to networking with other similarly trained teachers?

**The CHAIR** — In terms of technology, it has been suggested to the committee that technology could be particularly effective in providing learning opportunities for gifted students in rural and regional Victoria. Do you agree?

**Ms JACOBSON** — Yes, we do.

**The CHAIR** — If so, what kinds of resources and programs would you — —

**Ms JACOBSON** — At the moment we have probably nearly 200 children in our 5 to 6 area. All of those children have an individual Netbook with the 24/7. You are probably familiar with that across the schools. Our grade 3s and 4s have banks of them to share in their flexible learning space. There are two sets and 25 in a pod, so there are 50 to share amongst the grade 3s and 4s. The teachers are using those really well with things like Mathletics and other interactive programs. I think the next thing is obviously iPads for a variety of reasons, such as their interactivity and ease of use. We are looking at using them for our kids on the spectrum as well to extend and challenge them.

I think there is potential for communicating with other children who have similar interests and/or talents and/or expertise through Skype or whatever it is, but it would involve a level of upskilling teachers to say, 'These are here'. We are upskilling a person in a school or a network to say, 'Let's use the ultranet for this'. It may be that the ultranet coaches can help with that. Maybe the NLIO coaches can help with the numeracy and literacy.

**Ms KIRKPATRICK** — We are having a link in a couple of weeks with a meteorologist. We are doing weather, so some students from La Trobe Uni are coming in to work with the kids in science. They have access

to a meteorologist, so that should be good. That is going to be live — he will be on Skype. That will be really good.

**The CHAIR** — That concludes our questions for you today. On behalf of the committee I thank you for coming and sharing your experiences with us. We wish you well in your continued work.

**Ms JACOBSON** — Thank you for the opportunity. We look forward to reading all the answers.

**Witnesses withdrew.**