

# CORRECTED VERSION

## EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne—10 October 2011

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#### Witness

Ms B. Stubbs, Principal, Distance Education Centre Victoria.

**The CHAIR**—Bronwyn, thank you for coming in today and appearing before the committee. Today we will be hearing evidence in regards to gifted and talented students. As part of the Education and Training Committee everything will be recorded today by Hansard. You will have the opportunity to look at the transcript and if there are any typographical errors, to change those. I must point out that the hearing is also covered by what we call parliamentary privilege which is the same privilege afforded to members of parliament. What you say is certainly protected but if you say anything outside of the parliament you may not be afforded such privilege.

We will get straight into it. We have a number of questions for you today. I will kick it off with looking at specifically the gifted education at the DECV and, firstly, what kind of educational options are available for gifted students at Distance Education Centre Victoria. The second part is what are the criteria for students before they can study courses, what criteria must they meet? Do many students take courses at the DECV for extended learning, in addition to their schoolwork at their usual school? A bit of a background, if you could.

**Ms STUBBS**—There is a whole range of issues embedded with enrolment in DECV. Currently under the enrolment guidelines it is not a school of choice. You have to meet enrolment guidelines in order to be able to enrol. The exception to that is our online philosophy which we run from year 7 through to year 10, and that is something we fund. We ask for \$75 per student from government school students, and \$150 from private. But, of course, we have a limit around the numbers that we can take and we fill those numbers every year. We currently have 71 students that are school based doing the philosophy from year 7 through to 10. We have 22 year 10 students who are school based who are accelerated into year 11 subjects, and we have 21 year 11 students accelerated into year 12 subjects that are school based. In terms of the number of gifted students within our own environment, that is really difficult to tell for the reason that, yes, they do have a chronological year but it is based around the work that they are doing, it is not based around whether they are year 11 or year 7.

If they are undertaking year 12, it is very difficult for us to track back and say whether they are chronologically a year 9 student or what they are. That is some of the advantage of environment. Schools biggest weakness in terms of providing for gifted and talented, to me, are around the strictures of timetables and arrangements around teachers. Having been in a mainstream school you know that the funding means that you need to put 25 bodies into a classroom in order to meet funding and enable a whole range of other things. Therein lies a significant problem for dealing with gifted students.

For me, if I went back to a mainstream school, I would require 50 per cent of course programs to actually be online because unless we start putting stuff online, the ability to provide differentiated curriculum, which is the key for both remedial students and also gifted students, is really problematic. Also pacing is a significant issue for gifted and talented students and they need to move at a different pace than perhaps the middle of the field or whatever it is. The online environment provides a lot of flexibility. It is very difficult within the normal classroom structure. I am not sure I am fully answering your question but—

**The CHAIR**—In terms of the centre, how do students and parents find out about the centre, and also what is the geographical spread of the students in terms of where they come from? Are there more from one particular area over another?

**Ms STUBBS**—I will give you a breakdown of our school. DECV enrolled students are about 50 per cent of our cohort numerically, and the other 50 per cent are school based students accessing year 11 and 12 subjects. As a general rule it is not their choice to do a DECV subject. A lot of schools will make it very difficult. There is a whole range of reasons around that. I am trying not to put a value judgment around it, but those attitudes are about the school, they are not about the student. It is hard because where we have the school based students, they tend to be one subject. When we talk numbers we have an EFT of 1,186, I think it is, and it goes up across the year. How many of those would be gifted and talented students, again it is quite difficult. It takes us time. A lot of the students that we know are gifted and talented come to us either because they have behavioural issues that they have shown within the mainstream environment, and therefore moving them out of the mainstream environment is the best solution for the school, or they come to us with social and emotional issues.

We have a lot of those social and emotional issues where students are coming to us from out of the school; they tend to be around bullying. Can we tell whether that is about giftedness and talent, no, we cannot. We do not have enough of that data. We do not get enough background when they come to us because again our enrolment structures are through regions and they are approved to be enrolled with us through the regions and then they come to us and then we go around and find out about issues.

**Ms TIERNEY**—Are you able to identify how many are gifted?

**Ms STUBBS**—Of our DECV students?

**Ms TIERNEY**—Yes.

**Ms STUBBS**—No. We certainly have gifted and talented students within the school, but numbers I cannot tell you.

**Ms TIERNEY**—How do you provide support for those students?

**Ms STUBBS**—In terms of their emotional wellbeing et cetera?

**Ms TIERNEY**—As well as academic.

**Ms STUBBS**—Their academic program can be varied. We have more flexibility than any other school because we do not have a timetable. We have a lot of contact with parents because generally it is the parent who is the supervisor of the student. There is a lot of communication between the parent and the teachers, as well as a lot of communication between the student and the teacher. In that process there is a lot of filtering of how the student is going, whether they need to be extended, whether they need to be accelerated, whether they need to have the course made more compact, which is not skipping a level, it is about, say, instead of having to do 16 weeks in order to complete a unit, they might do it in 12. With a gifted student, frequently if you have 10 questions, if they can do the last one, why make them do the previous nine if you have an order of sophistication within it. You can make courses compacted.

**Ms TIERNEY**—That is in terms of the academic area. In terms of those students that are gifted and talented in performance or sports, are they catered for?

**Ms STUBBS**—We have students from the Victorian Institute of Sport, AIS. We have Olympic athletes as well. We have snowboarders, golfers, all of that type of thing. The way in which we work is to work with other people, as well as we have a wellbeing group who are trained counsellors within the school. There is a lot of contact and discussion that goes on with regard to the needs of students. If you think about a social-emotional cohort, teachers have to be quite significantly trained to make sure they can work with students, they can work with parents to modify, adapt according to the individual needs.

**Ms TIERNEY**—Do you have gifted students that have learning disabilities, and how are they catered for?

**Ms STUBBS**—Yes. Unfortunately we cannot access the disabilities and impairment funding that students have within a mainstream school. We have to do it through the Commonwealth home based Special Education Program. If there are specialist needs then we work with various specialists. We have a significant cohort of autistic students and some of those are savant and have mixing issues. Therefore, it is a matter of whether we use our own people or whether we work with other specialists if there is funding available for those.

**Ms TIERNEY**—Thank you.

**Ms MILLER**—In your submission, Bronwyn, you said that year 11 acceleration, subject level acceleration and curriculum compacting are all options for students at your facility.

**Ms STUBBS**—Yes.

**Ms MILLER**—How are students selected for acceleration or curriculum compaction and are there any age restrictions on these schooling options?

**Ms STUBBS**—The only age restrictions are those imposed by VCAA, not by us. I think 15 years of age is the earliest you can access VCE. We are bound by all of those rules. Outside of that there is no limit to what a student can do.

**Ms MILLER**—What about selection, how are they selected?

**Ms STUBBS**—They actually select, rather than us. We will give advice and guidance. Because we do not have those structures around 25 students to one teacher, we can pretty much do anything we want that meets the needs of that student. Our employment has to have a significant cohort of teachers that are on contract because we have a rolling enrolment process. As of 1 December we have zero students and we have to re-enrol everyone again. I maintain 80 per cent ongoing and then 20 per cent contract because we do not know what subjects we are going to have because we do not know who the students will be. Within that it is more about student and parent selection. The school itself will provide careers guidance around what is advisable but ultimately it is the parent and student's choice.

**Ms MILLER**—If they get it wrong, is that identified by the teacher and the school?

**Ms STUBBS**—Yes, and then there will be discussion and they can be very readily moved to something that is more appropriate.

**Mr CRISP**—Bronwyn, what particular challenges are faced by students who live in rural and regional Victoria?

**Ms STUBBS**—Connectedness. There is a lot of research that says that the best environment for students at whatever level is peer support. It is a critical part of the teaching and learning process. We learn so much from our peers and the interaction with our peers. However, the research also suggests that they need to be near peers; that is, if there is too much gap in talent or aptitude then the fact that they are peers is irrelevant. You need to be close enough in order for the challenge and interaction to be functional. That becomes a problem in rural and regional areas. Within a school you may have only one gifted student. The assumption that you put a group of gifted students together and that they will interact positively is a nonsense. As was said previously, they have their own personality attributes et cetera. The ability to connect is crucial for rural and regional students, and the online environment is the way to go.

The other thing I think that is also really crucial in the gifted and talented area is frequently—and it happens at university levels—what we do is we pull our gifted and talented into the metropolitan area and we take them out of the rural and regional areas. All of that aspiration and modelling and those things that can go with that are pulled out of a community. Going back to sports—I have a physical education background and it drives a lot of my understanding of the development of skill and that type of thing—in the past we had league footballers. They would come into Melbourne, they would play league football, then they went back and provided models within the rural and regional communities. That does not happen any more with the AFL, and what we find with sport is that there is a diminution within rural and regional areas. The same concept applies with gifted students. Modelling is a key part to changing some of the negative attitudes around gifted and talented. We got over it in terms of the arts and sport because society recognises those and it is okay to aspire to that, but we have not got over that in an academic sense.

**Mr ELASMAR**—Talking about challenges, what are the biggest challenges in teaching high ability and gifted children, particularly through distance education?

**Ms STUBBS**—The challenges around gifted students are about differentiated curriculum. Not every mathematically gifted child is good in English. They might have a specificity in their giftedness or their talent. One of the problems we have within our SEAL programs is that unless you score high enough across the board you are not put into a SEAL program. Also SEAL programs tend to sift out year 7 and

they do not enable students as they mature emotionally and therefore be prepared to show their gift or their talent or finally get recognised. We do not have any in and out process of being able to move in and out of gifted and talented as is appropriate.

To go back to the teaching and learning process, the teaching and learning needs to be based around knowing the student and being able to assess appropriately, to be able to provide a differentiated curriculum that is appropriate to each individual child, and to provide a whole range of ways in which students might demonstrate, because there is not one methodology that is appropriate to every student, even within the scope of gifted and talented. We need teachers who can provide that diversity. What the online environment enables you to do is to work as a team of teachers. One person provides this range of strategies. You can pool the capacities of teachers by using the online environment, and make sure you have a broader base of provision for students within the school.

**The CHAIR**—I was going to ask you a question specifically dealing with your experience using online learning as a delivery mechanism for gifted students. What would you say are the key advantages of using web based online learning and CD-ROMs as a means to educate? Also, are there any negatives associated with using technology?

**Ms STUBBS**—The structure that we have around the online philosophy is perhaps the best demonstration of what the online environment can do. It has big picture tasks that students engage with, and when they submit work, they do not actually submit it to the teacher, they submit it for other students to discuss. There is a clear expectation about how students will behave and what they will do within that environment. Students do not even log in if they are not prepared to buy into that. That is one of the key things I found with students, where they buy in, you do not need to monitor them. We do, but we have been running the online philosophy for six years. We have not had any instances of bullying or complaints from students about how they are being treated by others. There is a really clear expectation of what students will do, and they are doing the subject and logging in because that is what they want to do.

The online environment enables kids to pull out, whereas you cannot do that within a classroom. You do not get behavioural issues in there. People are going in there because that is what they want to do. One of the things I found with the online environment is that students are a lot more confident at all different levels within there because if we have a classroom discussion we have to feel confident enough and articulate enough to put up our hands and then make our comment. Not every child is in that emotional space at an appropriate time and also it is like those occasions when somebody says something and you give a response and then as you walk away you wish you had said something different. It is that immediacy of being able to respond. We cannot all do that appropriately. Whereas the online environment enables you to put your idea down to edit until you are confident with it and then you submit it. We find there is a really high level of discussion that happens with children and young adults in that environment.

**The CHAIR**—Looking at that a little bit further, the committee understands that online learning is used in some other Australian states to provide for gifted students in particular utilising it as a selective entry school. There is a virtual school in New South Wales where there is an online selective entry program in a virtual environment. Are you aware of this program? Have you looked at such programs? If so, what makes these programs good? Are you aware of any other programs in other states where there are other models that are cutting edge when it comes to utilising technology as a mechanism to support gifted and talented students.

**Ms STUBBS**—I have not seen any of the data out of the New South Wales virtual high school but I certainly know of the Dotcom Kids that has been run by the Brisbane School of Distance Education—that has had some excellent results—but it is for students in mainstream schooling. That has had some high level results. In fact it won an award this year for last year's performance.

**The CHAIR**—Dealing with gifted and talented or in a broader—

**Ms STUBBS**—Gifted and talented kids.

**The CHAIR**—Do you know specifically what areas of their program were key in what they did well?

**Ms STUBBS**—I can get you the information if you like about it.

**The CHAIR**—Yes, that would be good. That would be great.

**Ms STUBBS**—I am president of the Australasian Association for Distance Education Schools so—

**The CHAIR**—If you could do that for us that would be great.

**Ms STUBBS**—I can probably get you some information about the New South Wales one as well.

**The CHAIR**—Thank you.

**Ms TIERNEY**—Are gifted and talented children able to meet and interact with one another, and how does that occur?

**Ms STUBBS**—Web 2 technologies. It happens synchronously and asynchronously. By that, synchronously is in real time. There is a range of technology—Illuminate is one of the things we use. We run a program with students in New York and also here in Melbourne and that has happened through Skype and Web 2 technologies. There is a variety of online conferencing tools that are around. Also we have recently run a program in secure space of Second Life around graffiti art, and we have linked up a graffiti artist in Queensland with students in Cairns, Brisbane and Victoria.

**Ms TIERNEY**—What have been the benefits of having that?

**Ms STUBBS**—Well, the connectedness with students of like interests. There is an actual physical product that has been at the end of that; high-level work, and the feedback from the students is that there is a level of engagement that they have not had in any of the other programs.

**The CHAIR**—To clarify, you are using Second Life as a—

**Ms STUBBS**—It is a secure section.

**The CHAIR**—A secure section—Second Life as a way of educating.

**Ms STUBBS**—Yes.

**The CHAIR**—To follow on from the earlier question I asked, if there was a virtual type program that was offered to gifted and talented students across Victoria, would you see your organisation as being a potential group that could deliver it?

**Ms STUBBS**—Yes, we certainly have the capability and the experience that no other schools in Victoria have. In fact, in terms of using a number of the virtual spaces, we are the leader. Like, we ran this collaborate program around the graffiti art, and one of our people has been working with South Australia to assist them in being able to do it. We do not look after the distance education section of language but what we are doing with the Koori Education Unit is looking at how we can use that space for the storytelling, engaging Koori in language as well, because it is a real time space. There are also a lot of opportunities to link students through that space, and with their avatar with, say, students in South America, if you wanted to look at Spanish speaking—and they will have students in their own schools being able to communicate with native language speakers of their own peer group. There are a lot of opportunities that lie within this, and we are only limited by our own imagination.

**The CHAIR**—Great, thank you.

**Mr CRISP**—In your submission you said the students are identified as being gifted on the basis of behaviour rather than aptitude.

**Ms STUBBS**—Frequently in a normal school, yes.

**Mr CRISP**—I am wondering what you mean by that. In your experience are teachers and schools skilled in identifying gifted students, and what procedures, if any, does the Distance Education Centre Victoria have in place to identify gifted and talented students who are studying through Distance Education?

**Ms STUBBS**—I do not believe that across-the-board teachers have the understanding of giftedness. The measure of IQ I think is very problematic in terms of being a measure. It depends on your attitude, as well as a lot of your background as to whether you can engage. It is very much the language of the middle-class. But IQ is not an effective way of measuring. I think as a general rule the activities that teachers set limit the level of work that students can perform at. The other thing we do not do is we do not show students what good work looks like before they undertake a task. Therefore they do not know what to aspire to. It is this black box of 'We're not going to let you see because you might copy.' If it was art, all the masters started by imitating the master that they were working with and then they developed their own style, but we do not allow that to happen within English or any of those other subjects. There is a whole range of issues that teachers need to come to grips with about how to identify giftedness.

**Mr CRISP**—On that, what education support or resources to teachers need to help them identify giftedness? For example, would the Toolkit for Teachers, that has been developed in New South Wales, be useful?

**Ms STUBBS**—I am not familiar with that. I cannot really comment on that, but we certainly need to train teachers out of the mould of, 'This is how I was taught,' and move them into a framework where they set big picture tasks that enable students to achieve at a whole range of levels. When we have that and not a lock step, 'This is the sum that you'll come up with at the end,' then we will start to be able to provide bits of work that teachers can see that students are achieving at a much higher level than were to be expected.

**Mr ELASMAR**—The committee has been told that some gifted students can achieve a high level without ever being challenged by their schoolwork, and consequently some gifted students do not know how to learn. How does the Distance Education Centre ensure that gifted students are learning at the level which is challenging enough for them?

**Ms STUBBS**—A lot of it is about the conversation that includes the child. As to whether that ensures that all students achieve to their right level, I would be hesitant to go that far, but I would suggest that the greater flexibility that is provided by the environment enables students a lot better. The biggest issue for us is that frequently students are coming to us with a background of failure because we wait until their behaviour is so bad or we have moved them to one, two and three schools if we can in a metropolitan area, or in the country there is no other option for them. It is a model failure for a lot of students. There are a lot of attitudinal issues that teachers have to work with those students around. I would say that given the backgrounds that a lot of students come to us with, we do a great job. Our teachers do a great job.

**Ms MILLER**—What about support for the parents of a gifted child? What sort of support mechanisms do you offer the parents?

**Ms STUBBS**—It is a work in progress. Schools are only really coming to grips with how important parents are in the education program.

**Ms MILLER**—Are we talking the last five years, for example, or two years?

**Ms STUBBS**—I think notionally it has been there for some time. Secondary schools are not as good as primary schools at valuing parents, but we tend to deal only with parents when there is an issue, rather than keep them involved along the way.

**Ms MILLER**—It is more reactive than proactive at this point?

**Ms STUBBS**—That is right, yes.

**Ms MILLER**—What about regional versus metropolitan students in terms of parental support? Is that where your online capabilities would kick in?

**Ms STUBBS**—I do not think there is really any differentiation because none of the students are within the school, they are within the home environment. I would not say there is any difficulty at all. Some teachers are much better at it than others. I would say the teachers at DECV, because they talk to the parents so frequently, the contact regime we have attempts to have as much contact with the parent as it does with the child.

**Ms MILLER**—Is that because those particular teachers are a little bit more educated in gifted and talented identification?

**Ms STUBBS**—Perhaps more there is an understanding of the integral role that the parent plays in the success for the child. Particularly, at primary level, there is a handbook for parents about how to support their child through the learning. It is not as prevalent at secondary level. Part of that is the cohort; at primary level it tends to be about 80 per cent travellers. They are either travelling around Australia or they are working somewhere else in the world. Getting people together in a real life environment is quite problematic. Through the online environment we have what is called the parent van where we connect parents with each other. They can go in and they can talk about particular issues that they had together, and they also connect with the teacher as well.

**Ms MILLER**—That sounds like a bit of a key factor here. You indicated parents have more involvement at a primary level, not so much the secondary. But if they were more actively involved then it would obviously help the student but also help the parents, as you said, because they are working with each other.

**Ms STUBBS**—It becomes a confidence factor with some parents at secondary level because the curriculum might start getting beyond where they have a level of confidence. We also have issues around maturation, and the students do not want as much control from parents. This is at the stage when adolescence kicks in and they want to be more independent. It is a fine line about where the parents should be involved and where they should not. It becomes quite complex with those adolescents.

**Mr ELASMAR**—The committee has been told that it can be difficult for teachers in rural and regional areas to access professional development in gifted education. Do you think this could be used to provide professional learning for teachers in rural and regional areas, and how would this work?

**Ms STUBBS**—We certainly could be part of the professional development. What we can do is offer expertise about how to use the online environment for learning, and that can be adult learning as well as student learning. There might be somebody who is an expert. If I were to deliver to you face to face as a professional learning experience for you, it would be very different in the way in which I would structure it in the online environment. We have expertise around that and we certainly have expertise around some elements of teaching and learning in the online environment, and we have run PD around literacy for teachers in the Wimmera area. There was an ongoing PD about literacy strategies across the curriculum. Certainly we could be part of the solution but I would not suggest that all of the expertise resides within us, and it would certainly need to be utilising broader aspects of the system.

**The CHAIR**—Bronwyn, we have concluded our time. Is there something that has not been covered that you think either today or certainly in the submission that needs to be covered?

**Ms STUBBS**—I think it has been fairly broad-ranging. There is nothing that comes to mind to say we have missed out on anything.

**The CHAIR**—Thank you again for coming in and assisting today. Also if you could follow up—we will follow you up—those two cases in New South Wales and Brisbane would be of interest to the committee as well.

**Ms STUBBS**—No problem.

**The CHAIR**—Thank you again for appearing before the committee.

**Ms STUBBS**—Okay. Thank you.

**Witness withdrew.**