

# CORRECTED VERSION

## EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne — 12 September 2011

#### Members

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

Mr D. Southwick  
Ms G. Tierney

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Deputy Chair: Ms G. Tierney

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Research Officers: Ms M. Scott, Ms A. Madden  
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#### Witnesses

Mr L. Bamblett, General Manager,  
Ms L. Moore, Programs Manager, and  
Ms M. Darvall, Policy and Research Manager, Victorian Aboriginal Education Association  
Incorporated.

**The CHAIR** — The committee welcomes the Victorian Aboriginal Educational Association. Just by way of introduction on how today works, we are the Education and Training Committee and we are investigating the support of gifted and talented students and ways in which we can develop programs and a policy around this. In terms of today, we have a series of questions that we want to ask you, and everything will be recorded by Hansard. It is a public inquiry and we use the information that we are able to gather from you today as part of our evidence. You will receive a copy of the transcript at some point. If there are typographical errors that have been made, there will be the opportunity for you to correct those.

I also need to point out that the evidence that you give today is covered by parliamentary privilege, which means you should feel free to say what you wish. You will be covered in the same way a member of Parliament is covered in Parliament, but anything that is said outside of this room is not covered by the same parliamentary privilege. We also give the opportunity for each group to make an opening statement, so if there is something specifically that you would like to say to kick it off, it is over to you, and then we will go on with questions.

**Mr BAMBLETT** — Thank you very much. I need to apologise for our president and vice-president. Our vice-president, Dr Mark Rose, unfortunately took ill, so he was not able to make it today. Geraldine Atkinson, the president of VAEAI, had to attend another meeting that she could not get out of, so she asked me to attend as the general manager of the organisation.

I am the general manager of the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated. Lowana Moore is our programs director and Matilda Darvall is head of our research area. What we have done is we have copied some papers. I do not know whether we are able to hand those to you.

**The CHAIR** — Yes, absolutely. We can table those.

**Mr BAMBLETT** — It is surprising in that Victoria actually is leading the way in Koorie education, Indigenous education. I have to apologise up-front; I keep referring to Indigenous as ‘Koorie’. We use that word to identify ourselves, so it is quite common throughout any presentation that we make that that word is used, and it is to refer to Aboriginal people in the state of Victoria.

In the state of Victoria, I think from an education experience, we are probably leading the way in regard to Koorie education, Indigenous education nationally, but in saying that, we are still far below every measurable benchmark that there is, and we are looking to address that. In one sense, I think pre-2008 we negotiated with the previous Labor government and also the system to look at putting in place a strategy to address Koorie education into the new millennium. There was the review of the state of play of Koorie education in the state of Victoria that was looked at. There were three components to that. One was the bringing in of some expertise from South Australia, Professor Peter Buckskin and Dr Paul Hughes, who are very well known in Indigenous education nationally, who led a review on the state of play of Koorie education in the state of Victoria; also Dr Chris Sarra from Queensland, who did a review on dedicated provision, and David McCrae, the head of What Works, who did a desktop review on Indigenous education nationally in the state of Victoria, and internationally. That led to the formation of a negotiated strategy which was called Wannik. I know most recently there was an Auditor-General’s report that was not too favourable, but in saying that, we believe that that strategy is the way that we are looking to advance the education opportunities for our people in the state of Victoria, and we have great faith in that strategy. The implementation of it needs to be addressed a little bit, but the intent behind that strategy is what we are looking at.

I need to go back to where we came from here in the state of Victoria. We have been in place now since 1976. There was the formation of an unincorporated body that was an advisory mechanism to the state department, at that time called the Victorian Aboriginal Education Consultative Group. It became an incorporated body in 1985. The way our organisation is shaped is to grow participation from across the whole state, where we now have local representation, I think, from 33 local Aboriginal education consultative groups for local communities that come to form our committee of management.

We are a community-based organisation, an incorporated body, with a committee of management. They employ me as the general manager of the organisation, and then we have a staffing load of 24. Our primary focus as an organisation is one about advocacy for our community, being in a position to allow our community to participate in the planning processes, and then also to probably carry that message forward to the department on what we are looking for in regard to education.

**The CHAIR** — We might kick off with some questions. Certainly the information that you have provided to us in this document will be used as part of the evidence, so thank you for that. Firstly, in terms of the identification of gifted and talented Indigenous students, the committee has been told that many of the assessment tools used to identify giftedness are not effective in identifying giftedness in Indigenous children. Do you agree with this, and what strategies should be put in place to improve the identification of gifted Indigenous children?

**Mr BAMBLETT** — It is a bit of a complex question. Whilst we think the majority of the testing regime has a decided bias, and a monoculture bias, and it does not really address diversity in this country — and that also counts for Koorie people as well; there is that component — but there is a greater issue here, and that is that what we have been trying to address through that Wannik strategy. It is about the low expectations of students' abilities to achieve. The report done by Professor Peter Buckskin and Dr Paul Hughes actually showed, I think, that about nearly 80 per cent or 70 something per cent of our students attend school regularly, and very regularly, so if that is the case, why are we so far below every benchmark? I have asked that question of senior bureaucrats, I have asked it of ministers and I have asked it of the teachers union as well. The general feedback we get is that our students are not being taught in that sense. What they are doing is being welfared, nursemaided and looked after as welfare cases. In actual fact, if you have a look at every policy there is in relation to Aboriginal people in this country, they all stem from a remedial basis, every one of them.

The only one that does not, at the moment, is that Wannik strategy and probably the new MCEECDYA document, which is called the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan. That probably has a proactive base to it as well. What we are looking for here is that the system lives up to its responsibility and that they teach our children the same as they teach every other child; we say it very clearly in that document. That is what we are looking for. If we lift the expectations of a student's ability to achieve, we can start accessing, we believe, a lot of the potential that is there for gifted and brighter students. If you have a look at the select entry schools, for example, we are not aware of one Koorie student accessing that program. They are public schools; they should be available to all students in the state of Victoria. At present we are not aware of one Koorie student accessing the program.

We can look at distance travelled. We know that in 1984 there were two year 12 graduates in the state of Victoria. The reason I know that is that was the year I was appointed to this position, and I was instructed by the committee to write them congratulatory letters. This year we have in excess of 900 students in years 11 and 12. There has been this increase in education participation, and it has grown. We also have a high number of students accessing TAFE at present.

We have done a major body of work throughout the state in promoting to our community the need for and ability of people to access education and training, and it is showing dividends. What we are looking for now is to actually get the educational achievement levels up to the levels required, and that is what is not happening at present.

**Ms TIERNEY** — Lionel, I think you have answered some of this in the answer you just gave, but it has been suggested to the committee that in a lot of Indigenous communities there is often a celebration of gifted artists, dancers and musicians, but academic giftedness is not necessarily held in the same way. Do you agree with this, and if so, what can be done to promote more positive attitudes to giftedness in Indigenous communities?

**Mr BAMBLETT** — I do not believe that that is a deliberate action. What has happened is that there has not been a hell of a lot to celebrate, to be quite honest. But in saying that — and I think I will use Central Gippsland as a positive example here — the Morwell Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group, in partnership with the regional office of schools in that area, has, for a number of years now, had a day where they bring students together to highlight their achievements. It started out that they were recognising children who had completed year 10. I think they never had any going beyond that at the time they began the process. Since then it has grown to the point where they are celebrating success, and they are bringing students together from all over Gippsland now, not just Central Gippsland. They are bringing students there for a day out where they acknowledge their achievements and their completion of years 10, 11 and 12.

Most recently there was a student in Drouin who was dux of the school, so there was a major celebration around that. There is the desire to do that. Two years ago there was a celebration of students in the northern

metropolitan area which, incidentally, is home to the largest sector of the Aboriginal population in the state of Victoria. We had a major community evening where we celebrated the success of students who had completed year 12. We are looking to do that again, and we want to do that across the state. So there is a desire to do that, but in the past there has not been, I suppose, the opportunity to do that.

**Mr ELASMAR** — It has also been suggested to the committee that gifted Indigenous students need Indigenous role models to show that excellence can exist in the Indigenous community. Do you agree with this?

**Mr BAMBLETT** — Yes.

**Mr ELASMAR** — How can role models be used to create cultural and Indigenous communities that celebrate excellence in academic achievement?

**Mr BAMBLETT** — Obviously if we have year 12 completion rates like we did to the point where they were celebrated by the Aboriginal Advancement League. Each year we have a community graduation celebration for students who have completed their degrees at Deakin University. That is done at the university, but we also have a community day here at the Aboriginal Advancement League where we bring those students down and their parents come from interstate — it is not only for students from here, but interstate — and their success is celebrated. That is positive role modelling. It stands to reason that, if you have a sibling or relative who has achieved a higher education degree, diploma or whatever the outcome is, and if we celebrate the success, it says to their siblings, relatives, extended community and the community itself that, ‘Hey, that person can do it. If they can do it, why can’t you?’. That is what we are hoping to do, and we are hoping to show that. We want to do that in a more meaningful way.

Coming up this month we have an evening where the minister is invited, along with the VAEAI president and officials from our organisation, and we recognise achievements in TAFE and employment outcomes. We also recognise prime employment strategy in industry. That is called the Wurreker awards. We have that every year, and we celebrate that this month.

**Ms MILLER** — You have talked a bit about the celebration of acknowledging the milestones and the achievements of the students. Are there any other types of support that are required to ensure that they fulfil their potential?

**Mr BAMBLETT** — If you have a look at the way Aboriginal education — and we will talk just on Aboriginal education — is structured nationally, it is about catching up and bridging the gap. I personally have this firm belief that if that is your target, you are never going to reach it, because whilst you are aiming to get here, the group that is there is aiming to get there. So if that is your target, you are never going to bridge the gap. Basically what we want to do is look at putting in place proactive programs that are going to speed up the process.

**Ms MILLER** — What additional support is needed?

**Mr BAMBLETT** — I think the Wannik strategy actually does lend itself to that. One of the bases of the Wannik strategy is that every Koorie student in the state of Victoria will be in receipt of an individual education plan. That is a twofold action. It is about the student and the teacher together planning the educational benchmarks they want to achieve, but it also brings into play the family caregiver parent. The caregiver is also part of that planning process. You are then broadening the scope and the notion of support for each of those students’ educational achievements. What we are looking to do is support the student in the classroom with the teacher and also with the parent at home. As we all know, a large part of your educational activity needs to take place at home nowadays, including homework and all those types of other activities. What we need to do is look at how we are actually going to support that.

**Ms MILLER** — Can I just take a side view? Obviously what you are saying is that the individual plan is one thing and support from the family is another thing, collectively. I will take the AFL. There are some very talented Aboriginal footballers. Is sport part of the curriculum that you are talking about?

**Mr BAMBLETT** — Sport is. We welcome anything that will grab a student’s attention and get them to the classroom and to a learning environment. But we also want to look outside the sporting arena. Not every Aboriginal person is going to be a sports star. They are not going to be. We need to broaden the view on that

and look at some high academic achievers and put them forward as role models — for example, I do not know whether too many people are aware of this, but in the state of Victoria we have a young woman who has a doctorate in microbiology. She did her degree here at Melbourne University and went off to an international university — it might have been Cambridge or Oxford, I am not quite sure — to do a doctorate, studying under the guidance of a Nobel Peace Prize laureate. Her name is Dr Misty Jenkins and she works over here at the Peter MacCallum Centre in the research area. She is a fantastic role model, but we do not see her name being bandied around too much as a role model. There are other people in that vein as well. What we need to do is broaden the scope.

**The CHAIR** — You mentioned the parents as having a key role in the Wannik strategy and engaging them. How do you do that in terms of ensuring that parents are supported, particularly parents of a gifted student? Also, in that early identification area, which we spoke about right at the very beginning, a lot of kids tend to be identified by their parents. How does that happen, particularly in, say, an Indigenous family, where a parent may not have had any of that experience or that sort of expertise before?

**Mr BAMBLETT** — It is done in many ways. We are actually working on a program, and it is in the document I have given you, the academy notion and also the Aurora project. They are two programs that are going to look at the identification of those smarter, brighter children, children with potential. We are looking to do that. One of the other ways, obviously, is that it is the very nature of the structure of our organisation; it is why we put in place LAECGs — local aboriginal education consultative groups — because it is about the community growing its own. What we have to do is support that local base to be able to support those parents to be more greatly involved in the education process.

We are looking at ways and means of doing that. In actual fact we have just set aside a position within the organisation, and the person is going to concentrate very heavily on that into the near future and look at how we grow. We want parent forums, not only local LAECGs, because that is the structure and that is looked at now as being part of a system. What we want to do is broaden the scope so we have the opportunity for parents to come together — with students and with teachers and with school principals — to talk about educational opportunities for their children.

**The CHAIR** — As a follow-up to that, if you combine the fact that some of the testing at the beginning does not necessarily suit many of the Indigenous communities in terms of building in the diversity elements, with, say, parents not having the expertise in identifying some of these kids, do you think there are a number of Indigenous kids falling through the cracks who have not been identified at the early stages and who we are missing out on? It is hard to quantify that, but do you think that that would be a significant number?

**Mr BAMBLETT** — Yes, I think it is a great number, actually. The basis behind the notion of that academy is something that we have thought of now for a number of years. We have thrown the idea around and toyed with the idea, and it has taken various shapes. But basically it is this: for example, you might have someone who is an AFL footballer, or you might have a Lionel Rose. They are gifted people. They are gifted in their way, but not only in their sporting endeavours. You see, they are encouraged to do sports. For too long in this country, and particularly in the state of Victoria, we know for a fact, the majority of Aboriginal students have been encouraged to attend school on sporting days because they are good at sport. Imagine if that sort of promotion also occurred in the academic field. There is no reason that if you can have a world champion boxer, you cannot have a Nobel Peace Prize laureate. It is about endeavouring and it is about focusing attention, and we need to look at how we are going to do that. Sometimes we get a bit cross in our community about this focus on the sports star, because there are people who have academic ability.

When we did that study about the Wannik strategy, in the state of Victoria there was one practising doctor, who happened to be educated interstate and came here. There was one practising barrister in the state of Victoria in 2008. That is an absolute disgrace. What we have to look at is how we can challenge the systems to move our students to the point where they are achieving academically. That will give us the captains of industry, and I could come here one day and across the table there would be a Koorie person sitting over there. You could have a member of Parliament, you could have a captain of industry. There is no reason that cannot be achieved, but there needs to be a shift in the dynamics of the systems to allow that.

**Ms TIERNEY** — My question is about the Aurora project, but I think I have the answer already, in terms of the document you presented. With the pilot program due to commence its Victorian trial in October this year, I assume students in the schools have been selected already?

**Mr BAMBLETT** — They have been identified, yes, in the main.

**Ms TIERNEY** — What other involvement has your organisation had in setting up this project?

**Mr BAMBLETT** — A major involvement. What we have actually done is brokered, I suppose, that relationship with the parents of those students. The schools in particular, the identification of those schools, is a primary focus, and also we will be supporting the development of the program as it continually rolls out.

**Ms MILLER** — It has been suggested to the committee that many of the educational programs for Indigenous students focus on basic literacy and numeracy skills, particularly during the early years of schooling. Do you agree with this, and if so, what can be done to better identify and cater for gifted Indigenous students during their early years of schooling?

**Mr BAMBLETT** — I think it is a work in progress. We are getting children in larger numbers in the kindergarten area, preschool area. We figure that allows for the greater development of school readiness. There are obviously some issues about transferring and sending them into a structured education program. Most of our students, or most of our population in actual fact, talk what we would call Koorie English. So when our students are enrolled in school, in the prep years and the first years of schooling, that comes into play. You are immediately judged, when you enter into a school environment, around standard English. That can actually cause children to be identified with issues and problems and not be looked at in the sense that they have that higher potential. There is that barrier immediately, which begins from the first day of school, to be quite honest. We are looking at ways, through the strategy, of addressing that, and then probably through the notion of those individual education plans. They should go a long way to the identification of students with that higher potential.

**Ms MILLER** — Do the teachers have insight into spotting or identifying a potential student?

**Mr BAMBLETT** — Maybe you want to answer that, Matilda?

**Ms DARVALL** — I was thinking about that earlier on and the cultural intelligence of teachers. I think there needs to be a lot of professional development done in that area — not only with existing teachers but with preservice teachers as well. That again relates to what Lionel was saying before about the culture of low expectations, but also in terms of picking up examples of when students might appear to be disinterested or that sort of thing but actually it is because they are gifted and talented rather than it being a deficit model situation in need of remedial help. Cultural intelligence training I think should be across the board for teachers and all education staff.

**Mr ELASMAR** — The committee has identified that Indigenous students are not well represented in specialist or selective entry schools in Victoria. How can these schools be made more accessible to high-achieving Indigenous students? Have you received any reports or feedback from Indigenous students about their experiences of specialist or selective entry schools in Victoria?

**Mr BAMBLETT** — No. As I was saying before, we are not aware of any Koorie students within those select entry schools at present. If they are, we are actually not aware of it. We are aware there are a number of students who have been offered scholarships in the private schools. That is in fact growing. Trinity Grammar School, for example, has a number of students enrolled in its school. I think the Catholic system as well is offering scholarships around academic achievement levels.

**The CHAIR** — In terms of mentoring Indigenous students, the committee has been told about the Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience, which provides mentoring and tutoring to Koorie students. Are you aware of this program, and has it been successful? What are the benefits for mentoring Indigenous students?

**Mr BAMBLETT** — That is the AIME program. We are aware of the program.

**Ms MOORE** — It is too early though.

**Mr BAMBLETT** — We are aware of the program. We have been involved in the development of the program, and while — —

**Ms MOORE** — It really is just too early to tell. It is only in its first year.

**The CHAIR** — Do you know how many students have been mentored?

**Ms MOORE** — There is a large number. It is across Melbourne.

**Mr BAMBLETT** — There are pockets. It is out in the southern region and also in the northern region around Reservoir, Thornbury and Darebin secondary college. They have a relationship with RMIT. Out in the southern region they have a relationship with Monash University. I think they are looking over to the west as well to begin a program there. As Lowana said, it is in its early stages. But also that is about the short-term mentoring program and the introduction to students of the possibility of university life or participating at university. It is showing some value. The feedback we are getting from places like Reservoir and Thornbury is that there is some real value in the program.

**Mr ELASMAR** — Are you aware of any programs in Australia or overseas that are successful in either providing programs or supporting gifted Indigenous students? If so, what components of these programs contribute to the students and success?

**Mr BAMBLETT** — In Australia probably Victoria, as I said earlier, leads the way in Aboriginal education. But we are still far below the benchmarks, and we want to reverse that obviously. There are some really good programs coming out of New Zealand that we want to look at. Those programs we think have a base in the early years. There is a language program that incorporates Maori and English into the program. That is used right through the system. It is now starting to bear fruit. That was introduced probably about 20 years ago. It is now starting to show some real outcomes where their number of PhDs is so far and above every other country in the world for Indigenous people.

**The CHAIR** — Do you know the name of that program?

**Mr BAMBLETT** — I will find out.

**The CHAIR** — Can you follow that up for us?

**Mr BAMBLETT** — Yes.

**The CHAIR** — That would be terrific.

**Mr BAMBLETT** — We want to actually go out and look at that program. We have been aware of the program now for a number of years. If you have a look at all indicators for Maoris in New Zealand, they are far outweighing every other country in the world, to be quite honest. Morbidity rates are much lower. The gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous is so much lower — incarceration rates, education achievement levels and right across the board. I think we need to actually look at that and take some learnings from what they are doing over there.

**The CHAIR** — That has concluded the questions we have for you. Is there anything you think we have not covered through the questions or not picked up in the submission you would like to add?

**Mr BAMBLETT** — No, I think we have nearly covered everything. One of the things I would like to reinforce, I think, is the notion around what we are trying to do with that academy and our support for the Aurora program. The academy really has never been tried anywhere in the country. We are really pinning some faith onto that. We are getting some good support from the regional office out in the northern metropolitan region about that. The whole basis for that is that we can identify an individual who probably is, say, a good chess player. We would link that student with a good chess player — a teacher or someone who is potentially a state master at chess. For that student to continue in the program they then have to obviously achieve academically around the three key areas, which are literacy, numeracy and science, because unless you have those three subjects, you are not going to get into most universities in this country unless it is through negotiated entry. What we want to do is address that. One way we can see that happening is by locking into that individual and giving them the supports that are required to achieve academically whilst also catering for their own

particular interests. If we can do that and do that well, there is no reason why it will not work. They are doing it in America through their sports programs — in their college basketball and college sports programs. There is no reason why it will not work in this field as well. That is what we are looking to do.

**The CHAIR** — We certainly wish you well with that new exciting initiative. Congratulations on the work you have been doing thus far. Thank you for appearing before the committee.

**Mr BAMBLETT** — Thank you very much.

**Witnesses withdrew.**