

CORRECTED VERSION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the education of gifted and talented students

Melbourne — 19 September 2011

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Witnesses

Ms M. Tyler,
Ms T. Hackett, parent, and
Ms K. Fieldew, parent, Wonthaggi Interest Group.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much to the Wonthaggi Interest Group for appearing before the committee. I have a couple of things to point out. Today we are looking at the areas of gifted and talented students, programs and policies that are currently in place and also opportunities for enhancing programs for this cohort of students. As you are aware, today's hearing will be recorded by Hansard, and you will have the opportunity at some point to review the transcript and, if there are any typographical errors or what have you, to correct those. The evidence you give today will be covered by parliamentary privilege, which is the same privilege that members of Parliament are afforded, so you can say whatever you like within these four walls, but the same privilege is not afforded outside of here today. We will get straight into it, and I will ask the first question, which is about identification. How can the identification of gifted students in rural and regional Victoria be increased?

Ms TYLER — Teacher training really needs to happen. There are very good resources on the internet and through government sites, but teachers often do not realise that they have the responsibility to go and find out that information. I think there is a lot more emphasis on identifying children with weaknesses rather than children with strengths. It is also very difficult for teachers who have not had exposure to working with gifted children to actually identify them. I have worked with gifted children for over 20 years — if I walk into a room, they just stand out — but for people who have not had that exposure it is very difficult. I think that some of the people who do know how to identify them need to help and mentor younger teachers and teachers without experience to enable them to be able to do that.

Ms HACKETT — It is also important for teachers to be taught about the importance of identifying gifted children. I think a lot of them just do not know that, as Moragh said, while it is important obviously to identify children who are struggling, it is very important to identify gifted children as well.

Ms MILLER — What kinds of primary school programs or opportunities are there for gifted students in the Wonthaggi area? What kinds of programs or opportunities should be introduced for gifted primary school students in the area?

Ms TYLER — I think there is very little in the primary school area. There is one primary school that does Tournament of Minds. The next nearest one is Foster, so that is quite a long way away. There is one secondary school that does Tournament of Minds. I do not know of any schools that are really taking advantage of the maths programs, like the maths olympiads. They do the competitions, like the New South Wales competitions, but do not actually offer learning experiences for children, so there is very little happening. It is very teacher dependent. If there is a teacher who knows something and offers things in their classroom, it happens; if they do not, it does not happen.

Ms HACKETT — I think there is quite a lot out there that could be used, but again it is about trying to encourage schools to actually use those. Certainly at the school my children attend there is very little in the school, even co-curricular activities, to intellectually stimulate children. However, if I get on the internet, I can see that there is a lot out there. It is just getting teachers to actually use that.

Ms MILLER — It has been suggested to the committee that there are too few SEAL schools in regional and rural Victoria. Are there any SEAL schools in the Wonthaggi area? We have already answered that question. If not, what programs or educational opportunities are available for gifted secondary school students in the area?

Ms TYLER — Wonthaggi does have a SEAL program. My current experience of having children brought to me for testing is that sometimes the SEAL programs do not meet the need. Just doing the curriculum of the year above does not meet the need for a lot of gifted children. I spoke to a school and there was a student accelerated by a year, and that is the first time that has ever happened in Wonthaggi, and they were on the SEAL program. We are still having issues with primary schools accelerating, and there really is not anything. That is why we formed this informal group. It was really the desperation of the parents that this came from. The fact that the parents do not really want the schools to be part of that network, in the same forum, is an indication of their desperation. They really feel that they need a forum for themselves to just express and share their frustrations and pain.

Mr ELASMAR — Your submission suggests linking gifted students with local resources such as libraries and theatres. How would such a program work, and what is needed to implement a program like this? Are you aware of any successful similar programs that link gifted rural students with local resources?

Ms TYLER — I am not aware of any. I moved to the area six years ago, and I have never lived or worked in an area with such high levels of intellectual adult community activities. There are a huge number of retired or semiretired people with a lot of expertise who are willing to share it, but they are not invited into the schools, and schools do not set up things for them, but they would be very happy to do that. I think that in rural communities you need to start getting the schools working together. I reflect back on being a part of networks when the VCE was introduced, when there were regional networks and we broke down the differentiation between schools. Catholic schools worked with state schools and independent schools, and I see that as a way of moving forward in rural areas. It is too big a problem for one school to deal with. If we all joined together collaboratively, I think we could supply amazing resources for children in the area, but it is very hard to do it in a one-school setting.

Mr ELASMAR — Your submission suggests that technology should be used to provide effective learning opportunities for gifted students in rural and regional areas. What specific kinds of educational programs or services could be provided online for gifted students?

Ms TYLER — I suppose that I see a big picture, a very big umbrella set-up, where you would have passwords issued to families or students and teachers through schools, through distance education and through different avenues. You would have a security kind of set-up. I think you could set up a system where teachers could access very easily the resources that are available. There are resources out there; it is just having the time to source them. If somebody else did the sourcing for teachers, they could get prepared lessons, there could be activities and there could be cooperative learning experiences. The work could be done for the teachers, and it could be set up. There could be opportunities to network between teachers, but also for students. If you spoke to some gifted students, they would be able to tell you what they could get out of a social network, while also having access themselves to sites with maths problems that they could work on online — poetry, writing and all sorts of things. I think you could have a really big network that supplied the needs of parents, students and teachers.

Ms FIELDEW — I think of huge benefit to so many of these kids would be some sort of forum where they can get together online as well as physical places they can go to be together with like minds and break down that sense of isolation they often have about feeling like they are different, unusual and things like that.

Ms MILLER — Your submission recommends programs to improve attitudes towards gifted children in school communities. What kinds of programs should be introduced outside of these forums, if you can think of something? How would they be provided or delivered?

Ms HACKETT — There just needs to be more of an acceptance, some kind of social education in schools that it is okay to be different. I think especially for rural children, a lot of these gifted children are very different — they are very different in the way they think, they are very different in the kinds of interests they have and all sorts of things — and it is very difficult in a rural school sometimes if you are different and especially if you do not have contacts outside. I think there needs to be education within schools that it is okay to be different and it is actually very important to be different.

Ms MILLER — And that would help break down those barriers?

Ms HACKETT — Exactly.

Ms TYLER — I think part of the frustration of the parents is that often when they go to schools there has been bullying. Out of the children who are working through the interest group, every single one of them has said they have been bullied, and they are not all children who have social inadequacies; they are very sociable, very friendly, really beautiful children who can cope well in the world — but every single one has said they have been bullied.

Ms MILLER — Just following on from that, the submission suggests that gifted children should be given social training to help develop resilient behaviours. What specific kinds of training do gifted children need to develop that resilience, and what would be the best way to provide this training?

Ms TYLER — Personally I think that a whole school approach with something like You Can Do It or something like that is a really good way to go. Often what happens is if a gifted child is bullied, what I am finding at the moment is that schools turn it and say that it is the child's social inadequacies that are the problem rather than the fact that they are bullied. I think that if you have a whole school approach, where all children learn tolerance and acceptance it is best. With something like You Can Do It, where persistence and working hard and enjoying learning is something that the gifted children do well, you are actually getting a bit of both things, so it is not just the gifted children who are seen as the problem.

Ms HACKETT — I have also experienced that. My daughter was being bullied, and then they found out that she was gifted, and it was sort of said, 'Oh, well, that's why she's being bullied. It's obvious she's going to be bullied'.

The CHAIR — From the teachers?

Ms HACKETT — From the principal of the school. The principal implied that her giftedness was the reason she was bullied. So I think that the whole attitude needs to be changed — that bullying is not appropriate. Even if you are gifted, you should not be bullied.

Ms FIELDEW — Making gifted children's successes more mainstream: every single week at school there is some sort of sporting achievement that is celebrated at assembly or whatever the forum happens to be, yet it is only in Science Week or Maths Week or some sort of one-off special event where a lot of gifted kids get to shine and show their talents. So in terms of programs, I would maybe suggest some type of chess club rollout or something like that that becomes very mainstream, and those children's successes can be celebrated as an achievement equivalent to winning the footy game or whatever.

The CHAIR — I will just footnote your comment there: lots of parents groups in the gallery were nodding when you made that comment.

Ms MILLER — In your submission you say that opportunities should be provided for gifted students to spend more time together. What kinds of programs could be put in place to enable gifted children living in rural and regional areas to connect with each other?

Ms HACKETT — I think it has to start in the schools. Certainly in the school my children attend there are lots of opportunities in sport but there is nothing provided like a book club or a chess club or a music group — something so that the gifted children within the school can find each other. I think it also needs to be in the community as well, as Moragh said, between schools, because I think it is very nice for the gifted children to have contact with one another and identify each other so they do not feel like they are the only weird person on the planet.

Ms MILLER — What do you think from a rural or regional perspective about having maybe annual forums or weekend conferences where rural students from all over could congregate and start developing those networks, which would then flow on to online relationships?

Ms TYLER — Yes. And we were on the internet the other day and we found out about a gifted camp; things like that would be amazing just to give them an opportunity, but also sharing between schools, which could be done on a weekly basis. It does not have to be on a term basis or a yearly basis. You could actually have it weekly; it could move around schools. If you actually set up a cross-school network, you could share the resources and expense in quite a few things.

Ms FIELDEW — As Moragh said, there is so much expertise in the community, lots of sea changers and retirees and parents who are more than willing to share that with the kids. If you have got some sort of umbrella organisation, too, to link in and draw in all these resources, that would be fantastic and provide a physical space where they can go. The first Monday night of the month could be science night, and next week it might be a

music night. You could have regular things where these kids can get together often and form strong friendships rather than just having a one-off camp, which is fantastic as well, but I think it needs to be a continual process.

Ms TYLER — I think the thing about like minds is really important. We run an hour's writers workshop on a Saturday and maths ones and writing ones in the holidays. For a gifted child to be able to be writing and to squeal with joy because they have come up with an unusual word and not to feel as though they are going to be humiliated or embarrassed but feel happy to share that because they know other people will appreciate what they have done is really important. I think in the school setting they do hide and they do not have that chance to enjoy their learning.

Mr ELASMAR — Many Victorian parents have told the committee that they receive very little support or guidance in nurturing and supporting their gifted child. What kind of support do parents living in rural and regional areas need, and how can that support be best provided to them?

Ms HACKETT — I think we need a lot of support. My child was gifted but was not identified until year 5, and when she was identified there was very little that was offered to me. I had to do my own research and things to find out how to cope with this. Also with any sorts of changes I want to make in my child's education it is very much up to me to approach the principal of the school to talk about it. I think parents in all places, but especially in rural communities, need a lot of support, first of all to help them identify their child and secondly to help them decide what to do after that child has been identified.

Mr ELASMAR — In your submission you suggest that there should be more professional learning for teachers in identifying and catering for gifted children. Do teachers face any particular challenges in accessing professional learning in gifted education?

Ms TYLER — Yes, they do. If you have to come into the city, you have to have somebody to replace you. It is not as though you can come in after school or things like that, so it would be good if some of that professional development could happen in the country, and that is why I think the networks could be quite important so you could share the cost and you could actually get experts to move down or just to go and talk to a group of teachers down there rather than them having to come up to the city. I think there are so many demands on teachers, I am certainly not being critical of them for not meeting this need. I think there are demands, and it is just about prioritising the needs of gifted children. There is still the myth that if you have got a gifted child, you should be happy and you have not got any problems. There is not the understanding that they are at the other end of the normal curve and they need as much help as children at the other end.

The CHAIR — If I could just ask a little bit about your group. How do parents find out about you, and roughly how many kids and parents do you support within the area?

Ms TYLER — Basically I moved down six years ago, having worked with gifted programs in the city, and was just absolutely amazed there was nothing down there. I put an advert in the paper. People came, and we have just developed from there. We are an informal group and we try to keep the costs as low as we can, because money is an issue in the country. You have people balancing dancing, sport and having to travel up and down to the city, so cost is a real issue in the country. So at the moment probably there are 20 children coming in and out of the workshops and probably by email 20 parents, but we are not advertising. We have not advertised since the first time because we know if we do, the need is greater than what we can actually meet.

The CHAIR — Just in closing, are there any further comments you wanted to make that have not already been covered as part of your submission? Obviously what you have given us in terms of your submission will be included as part of a report, but are there any additional comments you would like to make?

Ms TYLER — I suppose, from me, it is really about awareness that gifted children really cannot do it by themselves. They need talent development, and I think the onus is put on parents. I think in the country there are issues of some parents not knowing they have gifted children or not being in a position financially where they can foster that giftedness. I also think that for those who do, it is parents who are carrying the load at the moment. The schools are not helping with gifted education in the way that they do even in the city.

The CHAIR — Tonya or Kate?

Ms FIELDEW — Just the whole bullying issue. The attitude, as Moragh said, is that schools tend to put it back on the child — that your child needs some social training — when in fact they are quite all right. It is just that they do not fit into the footy club mould, and really it needs to be across the board, with more programs available.

Ms HACKETT — As I say, I think the schools really need to push intellectual co-curricular activities as hard as they push the sporting activities to make these children feel welcome and to give them an environment that is good for them to be in as well.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for coming down. We appreciate your travels to be here today, and congratulations on the work you are doing in Wonthaggi. Keep up the good work.

Ms TYLER — Thank you very much.

Witnesses withdrew.