

# CORRECTED VERSION

## EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne — 19 September 2011

#### Members

Mr P. Crisp  
Mr N. Elasmarr  
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 K. Harrison, Compass Centre Coordinator,  
Ms B. Gerondis, Director of Learning Support, and  
Ms A. Rome, Director of Staff Learning, Methodist Ladies College.

**The CHAIR** — Thanks for coming in on your holiday, and welcome to this inquiry. As you are aware, this inquiry is looking at the specific areas of gifted and talented students. We represent the Education and Training Committee. We are looking specifically at programs and activities that are currently available and opportunities for enhancing these sorts of programs and options for gifted and talented students. We have a series of questions to ask you. We will also give you the opportunity for an opening comment if you would like to make one. We are recording everything via Hansard, and you will get the opportunity to have a look at the transcript and fix any errors there may be. The evidence that you give today is covered under parliamentary privilege, which is the same privilege afforded to members of Parliament, so you can say what you wish within these four walls. However, the same privilege is not afforded outside of today's hearing. Welcome. We will get straight to an opening remark. You do not have to give one, but if you have got something you would like to say first up, I will hand it over to you.

**Ms HARRISON** — I am Kathy Harrison, and I coordinate the Compass Centre at MLC. It is important that you understand the roles each of us have. Beth Gerondis is the director of learning support, which caters for the huge spectrum of special needs that we have at MLC, including our deaf integration unit. Annette Rome is director of staff learning, and considering how much we have heard about how important the role of professional development is for teachers, Annette's role is very important too. As a team we come before you. I realise you have had a really long day, so I am just going to highlight a couple of things from our submission that are important to us. I will do that briefly.

What we do in the Compass Centre is in light of the individual differences between students, and that is really important to us. The partnerships and expertise we have across the college help us to cater very much for the incredible range of differences that we do cater for, double exceptionalities included. We assume that there is differentiation within the classroom; that is standard practice. What we do in the Compass Centre is in addition to that. We would attempt in the Compass Centre what cannot reasonably be done within the classroom.

Professional development is a critical issue for us, and we do favour some of the models of professional development that are a bit more ongoing. Within MLC every staff member is engaged in reflective practice and action research. Within the Compass Centre we would go a little bit extra as well. We do a lot of mentoring of teachers, one another and teachers in the classroom. We certainly have an action research approach to professional development. I was really keen to hear, in the presentation before last, mention of follow-up on professional development. They were advocating getting people from overseas to come in and present, but then following up with workshops. I would see that as a critical thing too. If you are going to maximise your use of some of these experts, you do need to have follow-up and some reflection that is shared, whether that is across schools or within a school. Certainly I think that is important.

At MLC, technology and the use of IT really underpins a lot of what we do. We tend to take it a little bit for granted, because we have been a laptop school for so long. In fact we were the first laptop school. We have a lot of our technologies developed in-house, so we have specifically tailored systems. I am happy to say more about that later if you are interested in that. Those technologies actually support teaching and learning strategies that are very good in gifted contexts. For example, it is really good to support some of our autism spectrum disorder students who do not relate well face to face. If we are using online technologies to interact, they are often more confident and more extensive in their responses.

Technology is really important for gifted kids because it challenges and stretches them beyond the limits. If you do not give them a direct answer straightaway and make them struggle with something for a while, it helps them to get into things in greater depth. We find that using technology — email and things like that — is really good because you can actually delay an answer to a child and make them really struggle with it for awhile, sometimes a day or two.

The last thing I would like to highlight is our need to network as gifted education practitioners.

Often there is only one of us or a couple of us in a school, so we really need one another across schools to support and to share creative ideas and practice. I particularly value, in our local area, the Boroondara network, that we link very closely with other schools and that we each provide different workshops that we share across the schools. It is not just for sharing programs; it is also for sharing that professional practice as well.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you very much. The first part of my question you have probably touched on to an extent. I was looking at the educational programs and extensions that the Compass Centre currently runs, so maybe you could elaborate a bit further on that. How many gifted students actually participate in the programs at the Compass Centre, and how do you select students to participate in the programs and opportunities at the centre?

**Ms HARRISON** — That is a number of questions. Regarding the first question about how many students participate, we cater for around 200 to 300 students at any one time, which is roughly 10 to 15 per cent of our student population. That is flexible. Students come in and out of the programs, and we do not necessarily have a fixed group at any one time. We recognise also that, depending on what we are running, it may be more or less suitable for different students.

We have multiple ways of identifying students, and we recognise that that is essential. In the first instance we have entry testing. We have general ability testing that is applied at years 6, 7 and 8. If you have a single test, quite often a child may not perform well at any one time. Also some gifted behaviours emerge over time. We believe to just test once and rely on that is not adequate, so we have three years of that testing available to us. Once we have that we also would consider assessments that students have — WISCs, Stanford-Binets or whatever — along with parent referrals, teacher referrals and quite often peers referring themselves. We consider all of those.

**Ms GERONDIS** — Can I just say something about the testing? I think because we have such a high socioeconomic student body, we have access to things like the WISC and Stanford-Binet. They are quite expensive to get, but they are incredibly useful for us to have. Looking at identification of students we would use those, and making them available to a range of students would be a really good thing, I think.

**Ms HARRISON** — We aim to collect as many pieces of evidence as possible. We have a database where we register all of these things against any student, so anything we know about them we have at our fingertips. The last thing we have been using for a few years now is the gifted rating scale, which is a behavioural checklist-based system. That is particularly useful because it also helps us to engage in professional development with staff. With the gifted rating scale they rate against six different areas: academic, intellectual, creative, artistic, leadership and motivation, and characteristics in all of those categories. We would sit with the classroom teacher and go through and actually observe a particular child and rate them. It gives you an idea of whether they are likely to be gifted, highly able or whatever. That is very powerful, because you enter a discussion with the teachers then, and a lot of the mentoring that we do happens in those situations.

**Ms GERONDIS** — It helps the teachers focus on those behaviours that they can observe in those potentially gifted learners. It helps them be more aware of that in the classroom as well.

**The CHAIR** — At what age do you start the testing process?

**Ms HARRISON** — The formal testing for ability happens at years 5 and 6.

**The CHAIR** — Do you have earlier testing?

**Ms GERONDIS** — Some students come with WISCs or with WPPSIs. Their parents have actually identified them; they think their child has some needs, and then they bring them along to us.

**The CHAIR** — Do you work with those kids in the centre in the early years? What is the youngest?

**Ms HARRISON** — We start at year 3 with withdrawal programs into the Compass Centre. From prep to year 2 we have a consultancy role with the special ed staff, or the learning support staff who are in that part of the school, which is across the road a little bit. We have had a lot of involvement in helping them to identify students and with providing support for the staff down there to cater for the kids and assess children for school readiness. We have had a few who have applied to come for early school entry, and we would go and observe them in the classroom for a day.

**Ms MILLER** — Following on from the Compass Centre, how is that technology actually used for those students?

**Ms HARRISON** — It is used right across the college, not just in the Compass Centre, so these strategies would be in place for all classrooms. We have a system of wikis, where teachers can put up a whole lot of material — it is web-based technology like *Wikipedia* in some ways; are you familiar with it?

**Ms MILLER** — Yes.

**Ms HARRISON** — There are also other things you can do. You can actually put up material for students to access in a timely manner. You can control when it goes up and when it comes down, and kids can submit work through it. They can also have shared learning spaces, where they will engage with a particular issue and will all be able to discuss it, contribute to ideas and modify one another's understandings as they go. They are very effective for gifted learners, because they can think quite deeply and put up their shared understandings there.

Some of these spaces are not teacher driven. I had a year 8 maths class, and we were working on Olympiads. We celebrate our 'Aha' moments, and they wanted to record how it was that they had breakthroughs in thinking. They wanted to share all of those breakthroughs in thinking and compare them with one another, so they started up a wiki to do that sharing and to log all of these ways of understanding and visualising. They were drawing diagrams and all sorts of things.

**Ms MILLER** — That is a creative thinking kind of model?

**Ms HARRISON** — It is, yes. I think student control is very important there, too; that they are initiating this.

**Ms MILLER** — Your submission also says that you provide differentiated instruction for all students to cater for their individual learning needs. How does MLC provide personalised learning for gifted students? Do you provide individual learning plans for all gifted students, and do you undertake any pre-testing in subjects?

**Ms HARRISON** — There is a lot in that question too. Pre-testing does not necessarily happen in all subjects, but we would do pre-testing when we know that it is required, particularly with students who we know probably already know this stuff. With the individual learning programs we have a number of what we call our strands of practice. We have five different strands that we engage in. One is subject-specific extension, where we take children out of the classroom. If we know that they can learn quickly — for example, in year 7 and 8 mathematics — they would have five 80-minute lessons in a two-week period. They only attend three of those lessons in the classroom, and they will cover all the material from the five lessons in those three.

In the other two lessons they will come to Compass and do things which are broader and right off the curriculum. They can also elect to do special and voluntary projects. That would be instead of an elective or maybe a subject. In that case they would come to the Compass Centre and negotiate an entire subject tailored to them with their mentor, who is appointed. It may be for one child, or it may be for a small group of up to three students. They do a lot of their work there autonomously. They might have their mentor every second or third lesson, when they will spend a lot of time with them, and the rest of the time they will go off and do research. They will email at the end of every session, though.

We also have our open entry programs, our Alpha to Omega program, where students can self-select. We run that after school and at lunchtimes, and they are usually things like chess, philosophy, and our science-fiction and writers club's. We have had a science experimenters workshop; all of those kinds of things. Any child with an interest can self-select. Often we may not pick up on a child's giftedness, but they can come and demonstrate to us through those special entry programs.

The last thing about the individual learning programs that is really important is that when a child requires some of these interventions we will assign a case manager from Compass to that child. That case manager will follow them all the way through their time at the college. From semester to semester we can brief classroom teachers on the special needs of that child, on their learning strengths and on where they might need support. We can advocate for them for acceleration in particular subjects, or we can advocate that they be withdrawn from a subject that does not suit them at all and that they come and do a special project. There is a lot of flexibility, although we do not necessarily have to do those specialised programs for all of the 200 or 300 students who we deal with. There would be a lot fewer of those particular students.

**Mr ELASMAR** — Your submission suggests that it is beneficial for teachers to be trained in how to recognise gifted students. What kind of education do teachers need to be able to identify giftedness in students,

and what other support or resources do teachers need to help them identify giftedness? For example, would a toolkit for teachers, as has been developed in New South Wales, be useful?

**Ms HARRISON** — Yes. You have already heard a lot of advocacy for pre-service and in-service training workshops and things like that. I would very much reiterate the need for those. With our own practice at MLC, every year the Compass Centre will provide professional development for targeted areas of the college, often with the junior school, one of the many schools at junior secondary, the middle school or whatever. We would give a presentation, essentially, on how to identify gifted children. We also like to use samples of what a gifted child looks like and what their work looks like. We will highlight case studies so that the teachers will actually know a child who they may not have identified as gifted, but we will tell them about these children. I think people learn a lot through stories. Those stories are very powerful in helping our staff to understand effective learning for our students.

**Ms GERONDIS** — Because we do have quite a lot of students, percentage-wise, in our school, a lot of teachers will have experience with gifted learners somewhere along the way. That gives us an in already, because once they have had experience with a gifted learner, then it is much easier for them to identify future students and to cater for their needs more quickly.

**Ms HARRISON** — Following up, too, I had mentioned before that we then get alongside teachers and work with them with these behavioural checklists. We do not actually leave them to go and implement it on their own. I think that mentor relationship cannot be stressed enough in terms of its value.

**Ms ROME** — If I may add, too, I am fairly new to the school, but it has struck me about the school that there is an absolute culture of learning at the place that does not exist at all of the other schools I have worked at. I think that really facilitates what Kathy and Beth are saying. All teachers have to undertake what is called a ‘professional learning plan’, which has distinct outcomes associated with it and which in some cases is certainly linked to promotion and is linked to appraisal in a couple of cases. Often the foci of those professional learning plans can easily encompass some of the things that we are talking about here. The one for 2012, for instance, is ‘taking notice’. One of the reasons I am here today is because part of that taking notice is taking notice of where the children are at and how they best develop.

**Mr ELASMAR** — Your submission says that you are involved in school networks and shared projects and their formation, including the Boroondara Gifted Network. How do these networks operate, and what are the benefits of these networks for your school?

**Ms HARRISON** — Schools in the Boroondara region across all of the sectors — state, independent and Catholic — are invited to participate in that network. Each school would offer at least one unit a year and maybe more, depending on their expertise. Some of the things that we have offered, for example, have been astronomy — we have some rather lovely telescopes, so we have astronomy nights. When solar activity is going well, we can do them during the day as well, as we have solar filters. We also run the Da Vinci Decathlon from MLC, and we run that at a year 8 level specifically for Boroondara. We are also helping to run British parliamentary debating, and we outsource some of that to the Melbourne University Debating Society, which comes and helps us.

Other schools will facilitate writing days. There is a rather lovely writing day at Tay Creggan at Strathcona, where the students go in and get into the old building and lose themselves in the attic and things like that and just write. There is a huge range of things. There was one last week on the mathematics of infinity — exploring what infinity was all about along with the philosophy associated with that. A huge range of things are available, and we would provide one to everybody. There is no cost associated with it. Each school undertakes to provide at least one.

The other thing we do is that we get together once a term as gifted ed coordinators and share what we are doing and talk about some of the issues we have. Next year I would like to see us engage in some reflective reading, and there has been some interest in establishing that next year, whereby we would look at journal articles and come back and do some more in-depth study. Does that answer your question about the network?

**Mr ELASMAR** — Yes, thank you.

**Ms MILLER** — You also talk about the challenges faced by gifted students with disabilities in your submission. How many twice-exceptional students are there at MLC, and how do you cater for the needs of these students?

**Ms HARRISON** — They would be our high-level case management students. At any one time there would be up to about 10 of them. Currently the sorts of double exceptionalities we have include autism spectrum disorder along with giftedness. We have some visual thinkers who are struggling with producing, I guess, and some children probably have some psychological problems and may be school refusers who are definitely underachieving. There is a huge range of things we deal with, and there are always some. I think once you get a reputation for dealing with them, you tend to get extras.

**Ms MILLER** — That could be a good thing or a bad thing.

**Mr ELASMAR** — Your submission says that the Compass Centre provides advice to parents of gifted students when it is required. What kind of information, support or advice do parents need from schools to cater for their gifted children?

**Ms HARRISON** — I think in general parents need advice on how they can go about advocating for their children. Parents are good evaluators of the children's needs, and they know them. I believe strongly that the education process is a partnership between the home, the school and the child, so the discussion needs to involve all of them. For some parents that becomes problematic, so where that breaks down they would need advice and help as to knowing where to go.

At MLC we have the flipside, too, of parents overestimating their children or thinking that because they are gifted in one area they are globally gifted. Sometimes we need to gently go through what is a realistic assessment of the child. Some of the things we would do would be helping parents to access things outside of the school and access other opportunities that would be appropriate for their child. It is centred on that awareness of individual difference. The needs that parents have, too, are quite individual, and I think we need to be responsive to those individual needs.

**The CHAIR** — MLC offers the International Baccalaureate program. Do you find that program useful for gifted and talented students, and how many gifted and talented students at MLC take up an IB?

**Ms HARRISON** — How many of the gifted ones take up an IB?

**The CHAIR** — Or kids who work in the Compass area that you are dealing with.

**Ms HARRISON** — One piece of advice we give to gifted and talented students when they come to select IB versus VCE is that they need to assess where their passions are. If you have a child who is already certain of their passions and their specialities, VCE may be a much more appropriate selection for them, particularly if they are going to do uni enhancement studies. The IB is a fabulous program that is more global, and the international focus of it and also the service part of it certainly suits gifted students. I think there is an incorrect assumption that IB will cater better for gifted students. Again, I come back to the individual differences. We need to know our students well. Yes, IB certainly has potential because it is global and stretches them in so many different ways — I recommend it, but not always.

The other thing about IB that I think is particularly good for gifted students, particularly where they have global understandings — a lot of gifted students are very sensitive to issues of social justice and issues of the world — is that I think IB highlights those things for them. It also empowers them through the CAS system — through the service side of the learning. Probably one thing I have not mentioned is that the students who have these heightened sensitivities to what is happening around them can become distressed by that, but the good thing is that we can empower them to actually make a difference in the world. I think that is where some of our energies need to go, considering that social justice and making a contribution to their society is part of their learning program. IB does cater for that.

**The CHAIR** — That concludes our questions. Is there anything we have not picked up on today that you feel — —

**Ms ROME** — One comment I would like to make, if I could, is a general one, and that is the cross-sectoral communication, or lack thereof, in education in Victoria. I am very involved in the Australian College of Educators outside of my MLC job, and it is of increasing frustration that there is so little communication between sectors. This area, I think, is one example where that is the case, and it would be terrific to see whatever results come out of this inquiry be accessible by all sectors to an equal degree.

**Ms HARRISON** — The last thing is that we are very happy to provide any further information, should you need it.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you very much for coming in and sharing the work you do at MLC and particularly for coming in during the holiday break.

**Ms ROME** — I do not think any of us are actually not on holidays.

**Ms HARRISON** — I am!

**The CHAIR** — Thank you.

**Ms HARRISON** — I just wonder if you want a copy of our strands of practice overview?

**The CHAIR** — Absolutely, that would be great. We will include that as part of your contribution. I also thank the parents who have been with us and the support by the interested parties in being with us for most of today — some of you for all of the day. Thank you for your continued interest.

**Committee adjourned.**