

# CORRECTED VERSION

## EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne — 12 September 2011

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#### Witnesses

Mr D. Huggins, Assistant Director, Student Services, and  
Dr S. Nikakis, Education Officer, Gifted and Talented, Catholic Education Office.

**The CHAIR** — Welcome. By way of introduction, as you know we are conducting an inquiry into the area of gifted and talented students and how to assist in advancing this area. We have a number of questions we want to ask you, and, as you can see, everything will be recorded by Hansard. We will give you the opportunity to review the transcript, and if there are any typographical errors, you can make those changes. I also point out that the hearing is covered by parliamentary privilege, which is the same privilege that members of Parliament are covered by, but that privilege is not afforded to you outside the hearing; it only covers what you say in here today. I will give you the opportunity to do a short introduction, and then we will get straight into the questions and answers.

**Mr HUGGINS** — We appreciate the opportunity to contribute to this important inquiry. It is a good opportunity to stop and reflect on this particularly critical area. It is an area that has been a focus of inquiries previously. There was a Senate inquiry in the earlier part of the last decade, which again we welcomed, but through this inquiry we are looking for ways in which we can enhance the performance of educational systems and teachers in this critical area. It is a complex arena because it ties in the issues of inclusion. Clearly there are a range of issues for gifted students in our schools, and we would like to quickly outline what we define as the problems we are facing in this context and to quickly consider what some of the solutions are that link to our submission. Is that an appropriate way to go?

**The CHAIR** — I ask you to do it as briefly as possible. If you have a document, we are happy to have that tabled as part of the hearing as well.

**Mr HUGGINS** — We understand that this is a question and response format.

**The CHAIR** — Yes, no problems.

**Mr HUGGINS** — We simply want to outline the fact that, as we said in our submission, there is a real issue about teacher confidence in the arena of gifted education. We are concerned about the issue of student underperformance, which you have outlined in terms of PISA data. We want to ensure that we start to utilise some of the tools that are being considered in teacher training, particularly the AITSL profile, which is the Australian institute for teaching standards, which we think gives a really good entry point for us to consider the competencies and skills of teacher education and quality.

We see that the policy arena requires some clarity on the issue of selective schools and programs, and then there is the notion of inclusion and whether those elements fit together. We see a connection between some of the responses we have made in programs such as those for students with additional needs and the mental health needs of young people, including the group of young people we are actually focusing on. We are starting to see some linkages between the health needs of gifted students and the resourcing and support that is provided by programs such as those for students with additional needs.

We also wanted to focus on the fact that there is a disparity or an equity issue that we see is clearly evident in the context of where a young person lives, the nature of the services based around the socioeconomic context that school is in and also whether there are other attributes such as the multicultural background of that environment. They are the sorts of issues that we see as really pertinent and critical, and we have written those into the submission. That is our landscape at this point.

**The CHAIR** — Excellent, thank you. We might kick off by looking particularly at the area of assessment services. In your submission you state that the Catholic Education Office in Melbourne provides support for schools in identifying gifted students via a referral service. Firstly, how does this work? Does the Catholic Education Office in Melbourne carry out any assessments to identify gifted children, and if so, what methods do you use to identify and assess gifted children?

**Mr HUGGINS** — We receive a grant from the state government for the provision of services that are tied to allied health provision under which there are psychologists involved. In terms of early identification we essentially utilise the state grant to give families access to referrals to psychologists. Some of our students — in fact quite a number — have had early preschool access to psychologists and psychological services, but again that varies according to where they live. That grant was established in the mid-90s. It is a grant that we have argued now needs to be expanded, given the complexity of the community we are actually working with. Our provision is limited by the access that parents have to psychologists in particular, and psychologists have been

an important way of determining student need, as your previous group was discussing in relation to the span of IQs.

Parents, interestingly enough, from our experience often have a greater understanding than teachers of the attributes of their children in the early years. It is often difficult for teachers to predict the level of giftedness of a young child, so you have a variation in the referrals that come in. Some teachers in an early referral would say that a student was gifted, but they may well not accurately identify the attribute of that young person, and that is understandable in those first five years.

**The CHAIR** — Do you use assessment tools as part of that referral service?

**Mr HUGGINS** — We do. We tend to use psychometric tools as one method, but as Susan will outline we use Gagné's broader approach in terms of identification of talented and gifted as well. The use of an allied health service is part of that service system. It is essentially restricted by the amount of resources we have from that state grant, which has been part of an ongoing discussion with the government.

**The CHAIR** — Do you want to add anything, Susan?

**Dr NIKAKIS** — I have a copy of Gagné's model. I presume you are all familiar with that. Part of my work is to deliver professional learning opportunities to secondary and primary Catholic schools. I am often asked initially to come and talk about identification methods. I will refer them to our definition of giftedness and how gifts come in very many packages, and often your WISC or your Stanford-Binet — even indeed the WIAT, which was developed by the same people who developed the WISC — will not pick up somebody who is gifted in ballet or art.

We also use student identification, which is peer identification, parent identification and teacher identification — we use a variety of lists. We also use anecdotal observation, which is more in that ethnographic sort of area. We try to teach our teachers about the Gagné model — that children are often born with these gifts. I know I am preaching to the converted here. As I said, they are often born with these gifts, but unless they have these catalysts of parents and teachers they will not incorporate their talents, and this is the holistic method we use for identification. Yes, we do use formal identification measures, but we use a barrage of as many methods as we can, including a check for underachieving gifted students. We try to ensure that we have everybody we possibly can.

You will remember that Paul Thompson talked about dumbing down and nerds, and we do not want to miss some of those students. Some of them will hide; sometimes it is a cultural point. Sometimes, especially in adolescence, it is a peer pressure: they do not want to be seen as different. We try to provide our teachers with as many tools for identification as we possibly can.

**Mr HUGGINS** — That is the balancing between psychometric assessment and a model. The weakness — as I think your previous group was saying, a student with an IQ of 130 is three standard deviations above the mean, and again the context has often been about these three standard deviations below the mean as the focus. What we are endeavouring to do is make adjustments. We have stated in our piece that it is actually the adjustments that are the crucial elements to the work that is done.

**The CHAIR** — I will pick up the teacher's role in identification. Your submission suggests that teachers can play an important role in identifying gifted children and recommends that they be educated to increase their ability to identify gifted students. What kind of education do teachers need to help them identify giftedness, and what other support or resources do teachers need to help them identify giftedness?

**Mr HUGGINS** — We made mention in our submission about AITSL. I really want to strongly emphasise the importance of AITSL's framework for standards. In the standard one, which is knowing students and how they learn, we think that standard could be applied specifically for gifted students. The issue that teachers have in terms of pre-service training is that they do not have access to highly specific skill-based attributes or knowledge of gifted students. That is a major issue in our pre-service — and even our post-service — education.

Susan is in partnership with Melbourne University delivering postgraduate work in that area in the university sector, but we feel that your inquiry may stimulate a greater degree of discussion about what the profiling of

knowledge and understanding is under AITSL, for lead teachers in particular, in the area of gifted education, because the issue we are facing is that other than the work we have done with John Munro and others, this is not an area that has had a strategic focus to it. We now want to place the AITSL context into a position with universities to say, 'Let's look at attributes of the lead teacher. Can we start to identify in that first standard an opportunity to deepen the knowledge, understanding and confidence of teachers?'. That seems to be a strategy that is critical.

We have one question about that. Interestingly enough, the research community does not give us a lot of information about whether teacher education has a direct impact on student performance, so we have also been talking with John Hattie and others at Melbourne University to see whether we can get a greater sense of understanding. If we push a lead teacher strategy, we could actually get some evidence that indicates students will be beneficiaries of it. We do not simply want to do it on the basis of it being a gap; we want to do it on the basis that the evidence will give us an indication that students will actually gain from it.

**Ms TIERNEY** — I think that nicely dovetails into my next question, which is that your submission says that all teachers should have some training and professional learning to successfully cater for gifted children in the classroom. What kind of training and professional learning do teachers need to cater for gifted children?

**Mr HUGGINS** — I will open that up, and Susan can fill in the space. Again, you have to understand that teachers are at different levels. The model used at AITSL goes from 'graduate' to 'proficient' to 'highly accomplished' and then to 'lead'. We like that construct of having spaces for people to actually have their knowledge and understanding understood. There are lead teachers who are exceptional. We want to ensure that we identify those teachers. The strategy for lead teachers is that they become the resource person in the school for other teachers. They are not the referred person; they become the person who distributes the higher order knowledge that comes out of our strategy with universities.

For graduates the key thing is whether we have a mentoring structure in place that enables them to have access to high-quality teaching or teachers so they can work through the situation, as we all have in our teaching career, where they come across somebody who is highly talented and they think, 'What do I do next?'. I have experienced that in primary and secondary school systems. You need a mentor — a person who is a resource in the school.

Then there is the issue of proficiency and the gap between the two. We think there is a need to target that emerging teacher who, after the first three to five years, is starting to have access to a quality program that builds their knowledge and understanding in that area. That is why the staging in the AITSL structure appeals to us a great deal, because it is those foundations that we are seeing are not evident in teacher development at this stage, and they are not strategically put into a plan across the state.

**Dr NIKAKIS** — David has this in a document for you, which we will table later. I am trying not to be emotional, because I know it is not the place, but I find it distressing that I am asked by many universities to speak to their dip. ed. people, their second-year-out or third-year-out teachers, depending on the university structure. That is why I said yes to Professor Munro when he asked me to come and take two masters in gifted education subjects. There are not enough lecturers with the depth of knowledge about it. I have a doctorate in gifted education, but I also have in-depth knowledge about it as well as letters after my name, and I am asked by a university very close to James Goold House quite often to come over and give their teachers a lecture. The research does not support one-off professional learning, so I refuse to go once; I say I will come three times. I think it is unfortunate they do not have a staff member with that quality and that the students themselves are only getting me as a lecturer for just a few hours on giftedness.

At Melbourne University they did not have enough lecturers either, which is why I was asked, with that level of expertise, to talk about gifted education and lecture about and assess gifted education. That is why I said yes to that as well. I do not think we have enough staff within this level of expertise to teach our pre-service teachers. I think catering for the needs of gifted students should be compulsory in pre-service and post-service courses, and I do not think we have enough depth in our senior teachers at the moment that we can mentor some of our junior teachers, as David was talking about. I personally find it most disturbing that there are a handful of people who are senior lecturers in gifted education — that is a handful in the state — and I do not think that is a very satisfactory position.

**Mr HUGGINS** — We welcome the Melbourne model at the moment, which is looking at clinical practice and explicit teaching practice, because that is actually giving it a defined, nearly allied-health connection to teacher education, which is a much more focused clinical supervision of a young graduate. Over a period of time a specific focus on the individual needs of students — those explicit attributes are what is needed in this field, so we are looking for university partnerships that will actually reshape the way by which we are educating our teachers and providing postgraduate training as well.

**Dr NIKAKIS** — I just add that I am very pleased with the Melbourne model because that it is an entire subject. I am teaching two entire subjects on gifted education to masters of teaching, and it is not just a couple of lectures here and there. I think they are actually taking it seriously.

**Mr ELASMAR** — David, your submission outlines that gifted children who suffer educational disadvantage are less likely to be identified as being gifted. How can we increase identification in these groups?

**Mr HUGGINS** — Gifted education reflects the biggest issue that education itself faces — it is purely a signpost of the issue of equity of distribution of resources. We know, for example, because of the grant we have from the state about our allied health services and psychologists that there is not the distribution in rural Victoria of services that you would like to have to provide information and knowledge for parents about the development of their children. We know from the AEDI — I am sure the committee has probably looked at the AEDI, the Australian Early Development Index, which maps five-year-old children across Victoria. What it indicates to us is that, unfortunately, the distribution of resources pre-school to school is actually not an equitable distribution. As a consequence we actually know that for young people who have additional needs, whether they be gifted or they have additional needs on the basis of attributes — cognitive issues or language issues — where they are born is going to have an impact upon the resourcing and support they receive in Victoria or in Australia. That is a national issue for us. The issue that you are raising is that it is just another representation that schools that are in poor communities do not have the same resources as schools that are in wealthier communities.

I think you were raising earlier for parents the whole issue of early entry. Early entry is a great option, and there is a greater understanding in communities where you have access to preschool services. Where you do not have that, these children are arriving in school with no-one having any idea or knowledge of the attributes they may have. I will put my very old hat of psychologist on. We have children who enter at the age of five who are actually three standard deviations below the mean, and there are others three standard deviations above the mean in that same class. The teacher is sitting in that room with a developmental span of about six or seven years. That is a major issue for provision, and what we have to really focus on is how to break that circuit of equity or inequity.

In our situation we have pushed very strongly for it to be explicit. We want assessments early, we want early intervention as a strategy and we want knowledge to be established early on. We take the view, as the previous group did, that an ILP as a process is very useful as long as people explicitly know what they are seeking to achieve. If they know what they are seeking to achieve, we can manage and monitor progress. We, like any other sector, want to move into the context of asking what the rate of progress is that a child has in a school year. When we get to that space, we can be far more articulate about the models and structures that we have, but that is the issue we are facing at the moment.

**Ms MILLER** — It is clear from your submission that you support the use of individual learning plans for gifted children. What are the main benefits of having individual learning plans for gifted students? How do families, programs and support groups contribute to the development of these plans?

**Mr HUGGINS** — You can see that we have drawn from the notion of additional needs of young people. That is including disability. I have a philosophical issue about disability because of the construct. It is a health issue, and the best way to handle a health issue in education is to be explicit about what you know. What you know, whether it is from an allied health professional or from a consultant, is the information they give, and that should be placed inside a plan so that the parents understand what the assessment is, what the consequences are and how you monitor the progress of a young person. What is the guidance of the program that you have? We have always funded students with additional needs on the basis of a program, not on the basis of their attribute, because our view is that unless we change and shape the quality of the program we actually cannot change and

check the professional development of teachers in response to the needs of students. That is the critical element of why we are pushing for a continuation of that model and applying it to the gifted context.

**Ms MILLER** — So families have input to that plan.

**Mr HUGGINS** — The partnership is the important part to it. Again I am referring to the earlier group. In the early years, the first eight years of a young person's life are the most critical points of support and entry that you can develop, and it changes dramatically. We have kids who arrive at the age of five who we have no knowledge about at all. They may be highly talented, but no-one has found out anything about them until the age of eight or nine. Then you have all the social and emotional attributes that Susan knows well that are a response to learning. We are trying to build a structure that has an early intervention framework to it, that is explicit, that is clear, that is measurable and that each year is reviewed. It is being explicit that is the objective behind it. Susan may want to talk about the social and emotional side of that.

**Dr NIKAKIS** — Before I talk about the social and emotional side of it, I would also like to re-emphasise on page 5 of our submission the PISA data. The second paragraph from the bottom says that the PISA data shows 'a significant decline in reading literacy performance', and, down a few lines, that 'the decline is primarily among high-achieving students'. I think this is a disgrace; I am trying not to be emotional, but I think the word 'disgrace' covers it. We help our people at the left side of the standard bell curve, but as a matter of justice we must treat our people equitably on the right side of the bell curve.

That brings me to the social and emotional issues of giftedness. If they are not identified, sometimes students at school will be bored. The boredom will lead to unsatisfactory behaviour, and then it becomes a downward, negative, self-fulfilling prophecy. Sometimes social and emotional issues mean that they do not want to be identified as gifted, so they will dumb down, as research by Paul Thompson, the American psychologist, shows. It is different with gifted girls and with different cultures. They do not want to be identified. Miraca Gross from the University of New South Wales quite often talks about the tall poppy syndrome, which I think is a most unfortunate Australian trait. We need to knock that on the head too. We are very good at supporting our Cathy Freemans, as female athletes, and our Chris Judds, but we are not — —

**The CHAIR** — Susan, we have only a few minutes left, and I want to cover about three more questions in that time.

**Dr NIKAKIS** — The social and emotional area of giftedness is something that is undervalued and must be more valued.

**Ms TIERNEY** — Your submission says that the cognitive needs of gifted children with a disability are not being met. What special provisions need to be made for such students in schools?

**Mr HUGGINS** — Our position is that there is a need for a state plan in this context that draws upon knowledge and understanding of what is working effectively in the context of students with additional needs and the disability context. We are seeing young people, for example, who are seeking funding in the disability paradigm for mental health issues who are students who have been regarded as being in the top 3 per cent of schools. That is an attribute that we do not want to see happen. I am being brief. Does that answer your question?

**Ms TIERNEY** — That is fine. You also say that you set up a think tank in 2010. Can you give us a little background as to why you thought it was important to establish such a think tank? What are the key functions of the think tank?

**Mr HUGGINS** — There is a real need to tie this whole context together, so we are arguing for a state plan. We think that is a construct that allows the three sectors to work together in education. A think tank looks at the whole issue we have raised already about the professional development of teachers as a strategy. We also think one of the areas that is often not touched on is the use of technology, and there is a great attribute here. There is a population that can benefit enormously from a highly effective use of technology. It is less teacher dependent and more directed. We think there is great scope and opportunity at either end of the scale in terms of ability, but in this particular group there is a need to bring together a community of IT consultants who can shape and change the provision models and the knowledge base at stages of schooling for young people in this area. That is just an opportunity, but I think there are a range of opportunities, as I said, such as a lead teacher strategy. We

do not have a strategy specifically about teacher development. That is part of the process. It is one of the attributes.

**The CHAIR** — Is there some work that you have been doing within the Catholic education area around teacher development and support?

**Mr HUGGINS** — There is. We have been in university partnerships because they are a very good way of dealing with the service gap, but the key to the service gap is that you have to have an evidence structure. You must have a linkage between the evidence structure and the policy that is developed. You have to have a strategy about the development of teaching quality. Those three elements are important to bring people together on and to get some agreement about. We have been in this space — it is a service gap space — and it has, as Susan has identified, a variety of emotional responses to it. We now have to strategise, and we would argue that this inquiry really needs to seek to have a state plan and, out of that, to have clear, identified strategies that the parent community, the education community and the training community can tie together with an evidence base. That is the most crucial component.

**The CHAIR** — That is a fantastic place to finish. Thank you very much. I believe you also have some documents you would like to table.

**Mr HUGGINS** — We have Gagne's table. We have put forward AITSL's profile, but we have taken the liberty — given that this is a poster — of adding 'gifted' to the context to emphasise on this one domain how this fits so well. We have done it in the spirit of adapting AITSL. We will leave that. It is just a point of reference. We put forward our position — just dot points, which we will table — that simply defines what we see as the issue generally and talks about the benefits of investment in this area and some of the solutions we thought would be useful to consider. They are just dot points, and please take them on that basis, to guide us today and to ensure that we deliver the benefits. We table that for your information. It is less formal but a means of putting our case. Is that okay?

**The CHAIR** — That is great. Thank you very much for coming in and appearing before the hearing today.

**Witnesses withdrew.**