

CORRECTED VERSION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the education of gifted and talented students

Melbourne — 12 September 2011

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Ms G. Leigh, President, Victorian Principals Association;
Mr J. Forsythe, Principal, Red Hill Consolidated School;
Ms M. Laurent, Principal, Glenferrie Primary School;
Mr G. Lacey, Principal, Lyndhurst Primary School;
Mrs D. Patterson, Principal, and
Ms P. Pace, Leading Teacher, Mill Park Heights Primary School; and
Ms C. McInerney, Principal, Plenty Parklands Primary School.

The CHAIR — I want to thank, firstly, Gabrielle, the President of the Victorian Principals Association, for putting this panel together, and thank you all for coming along and appearing before the hearing today. As you have probably heard, in the primary school sector there is a gap that we are looking at filling, in terms of getting some more information through this inquiry. A number of submissions have indicated to us that there is a need for more work, certainly in the earlier years. We welcome you today and look forward to hearing from you.

We are obviously looking at the area of gifted and talented students and how we can support and develop programs and initiatives around this area. We are using this forum as part of the hearing's evidence. As you can see, everything will be recorded by Hansard. We will give you an opportunity to look at a draft transcript, and if there are any typographical errors you will have an opportunity to correct those.

I need to point out also that all the evidence that we gather in today's hearing is covered by parliamentary privilege, so you all have the same parliamentary privilege as we have when we are in the Parliament. That means that everything you say is covered by that, so feel free to tell it as it is. That privilege does not apply when you leave the room, so you cannot go and have a press conference after today and tell it how it is. It is very important to get a real snapshot of what is happening in the schools and the areas that you work in.

We might start by giving Gabrielle the opportunity to make some opening remarks. Then we will go into questions and answers. Obviously we want to give everybody the opportunity to speak. It is a big group, but we have a number of questions as well. Do not feel obliged to have everyone answer every question. We might have one or two answer each question. We can always come back at the end. If there is something we have missed out, we will certainly give you the opportunity to cover that.

Ms LEIGH — Thank you very much for the opportunity to respond personally and on behalf of the Victorian Principals Association today. We do appreciate that.

I wanted to give just a short perspective, coming from primary schools and primary school leaders and educators. The no. 1 thing that we believe is that all students have the right to develop their full potential. Students with exceptional abilities and talents have specific requirements that need to be addressed within school programs. Such students may be classed as gifted and talented. We keep working around those terms. Gifted and talented students, once identified, may be extended through a variety of avenues.

Once students have been identified, schools really try hard to source appropriate programs within the existing structures. This is a huge limitation in our government primary schools in Victoria because already funding per capita in government primary schools is the lowest in Australia. It is about the level of just over \$9000 per student. Today I was in discussion with my counterpart from the independent division. He was saying that the equivalent with his school is \$20 000 per student, and he can afford to run a gifted and talented program, under whatever name it may be, as a permanent fixture within his school, with a permanent staff member.

We are very much tied in our sector because of a lack of resourcing. From the perspective of primary principals, gifted and talented programs could have enduring success if they operate within each school on a consistent and ongoing basis, rather than being an ad hoc response if you have the resources available. If the school can afford it or has interested and skilled personnel to run it, the school can run a program within limited boundaries, but this approach really needs resourcing, both physical and human resourcing. That is just an overview.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much. We might kick off by asking some of the panellists about programs for gifted students in their schools. Do you have such programs available? If so, could you tell us a little about the program and the learning opportunities it provides for gifted students?

Mrs PATTERSON — I will kick off. We have over 1000 students, but I have been in a school of 460 at Templestowe Valley Primary School. Nothing was done at that school, and I have come over to Mill Park Heights Primary School, where we do have a program. I will pass over to Trish Pace, who is the leading teacher in charge of what we do at our school.

Ms PACE — I have been the gifted and talented coordinator for the last 10 years, and during that time we have built up quite a substantial program. We do a lot of work on identifying students. Originally we had some backup to have WISCs done by psychologists, but unfortunately the resources for that have dwindled away to nothing. We are relying now on a much more inferior product — the Raven's test — teacher judgement, VELS results and things like that, none of which is perfect, to help us to identify students. At the moment we probably

have around 90 students in our gifted extension programs. Up until this point we have been fortunate to be able to employ someone 0.2 once a week, a former staff member who is very highly gifted himself. He runs programs in integrating mathematics with ICT and basically anything the children are interested in. They may look at aerodynamics, micro-organisms or all manner of things — the sewers in Rome as a mathematical concept. He really pushes them outside their boundaries.

Mrs PATTERSON — I will interrupt there. Up until last year, for four years we have employed a web designer who works on our school web page. We also paid him to work 6 hours off site and 6 hours on site with our students doing web designing and helping with various web page applications.

Ms PACE — Right up until this year we had very rich resources because of our growing numbers, but now our numbers are falling and those resources are falling with them. To cater for the junior school we have a teacher who I usually replace in the class for one session or a session and a half a week, and she runs a science program with the grade 1 and 2 students. The preps and 1s also do discovery learning, and a lot of the teachers I have worked with have experience in gifted education, one in particular. Like me, she has done a masters degree with that as part of her course. She is able to work on a number of things that will extend and expand the children's knowledge and be able to let us see what their skills really are as part of that discovery learning.

We also run other things. We have the G.A.T.E.WAYS program come in, we do Tournament of Minds and we have a very big chess program. One of the problems is that at our school the parents are not particularly well off, so to run something like G.A.T.E.WAYS, which is \$207 for four mornings over a month, is well and truly outside the reach of a lot of those parents. Whilst G.A.T.E.WAYS tries its best to give some extra places here and there, it really does not reach the breadth of people we would like it to. With G.A.T.E.WAYS, too, it is an opportunity for students at our school to work with similarly talented students from other schools, and the whole idea is to bring these groups of children together so that like-minded children meet and work together.

Mrs PATTERSON — To fund that, the money we earn from G.A.T.E.WAYS we actually put back to fund the children to attend. We get to send two extra children. Also to fund that, 0.2 of a leading teacher's salary is around \$20 000. To pay for Riccardo it was \$25 000, and for Alan it is \$11 000. My SRP is \$5.8 million, and 90 per cent is roughly 9 per cent of our students. If you put that money into there, you borrow from Peter to pay Paul. You have to rejig it. At my previous school of 460 I could not afford to do that. I can afford to do it here and rejig, but it is still really difficult. We can only do that because we are a large school. Medium-size schools and small schools could not possibly do that. Even now, as I drop 50 students, Riccardo went last year and Alan looks like going this year. You just cannot keep it; there are other resources. Yet for those students the benefits are just phenomenal.

Ms PACE — We do run it as part of our special needs program, because originally teachers did not have much of an idea about what gifted and talented education was. Originally they would nominate students who were the bright children in the grade rather than the truly gifted children, because they do not always show their true colours until they are given the opportunities to be extended to their real abilities.

Mrs PATTERSON — The majority of our students, after having maybe seven years as part of the gifted and talented program, are the cream of the crop. They enter the select entry accelerated learning program in the government schools, but the independent schools come along and snatch them up. They win academic scholarships to the independent and Catholic schools, which is great, but we put in all that money to try to keep those kids in the government system, but unfortunately they get picked up.

Ms McINERNEY — I would say that you are doing an excellent job. We have 776 kids, so we are in a similar sort of situation. We are not far from Deb in terms of the environment. I would say that we are severely underresourced, quite honestly. I know that money is always an excuse not to do it, but, as Deb said, there is the bucket, and it goes only so far. We run WiseOnes and G.A.T.E.WAYS — similar sorts of programs where children have an opportunity to come into a mixed group — but they cost the parents a lot of money. They are expensive programs. We try to support it. We have the theory and we have read all the materials from the department that say that they should be within the programs and should be catered for within their class — absolutely, and that is what we attempt to do. The planning has to look at children who are well above that VELS level, or well into other thinking strategies, and the ones who are down here. To be perfectly honest, and within these walls, there just is not enough to provide for those children.

Identification of them is important. We used to have money so that we could get our ed psychs to actually test the children, who are often identified by parents. I know that there are some jokes made about how every child is gifted, but a parent often has a sense that their child is doing something well above and out of the ordinary. However, we no longer have access to that. We do the same thing. We use Raven's; we have them similarly tested or we try to organise for the parent to have them tested, but there are truly limited resources. From our point of view teachers are asking us and crying out. They really do want to help. They do not have the training and do not really understand about educating a really gifted child, and I do not have the resources to put a staff member into that. Like Deb, we have a number of highly gifted children.

The CHAIR — Just on that, and to the other principals as well, if you do not have a specific gifted program in the school, how do you cope in terms of supporting the students? Do you use accelerated programs, grouping programs or WiseOnes? What are some of the other things you do if you do not run a program?

Ms LAURENT — I am from Glenferrie Primary School. I have 350 students, so I am considered to be medium to small. I think we need a big-picture approach to this. What we are hearing here is just a few snippets of how people are responding because it is not done properly. We need a whole approach, right from the top down. We need a representative at the region level, a representative at the network level and a representative at our school who are fully trained and understand what gifted and talented means so that we can have an approach. Every child in Victoria who is gifted should be entitled to an approach like this. It should not be: maybe the school will do it; maybe the school won't do it. It has to be a whole approach right from the top down that values gifted children.

It is not only about their academic progress but it is also about their social and emotional progress. My school tends to have children who are in the top 2 to 5 per cent of the state. We do have like-minded students — most of them. We do not have a lot of children in the middle range; we have above and below. Both aspects of education should be provided for children — below the indicative and above the indicative. I think it should be funded on the basis, as the others were saying, of having a psychologist who assesses and identifies the students and not just by an approach by the school. That person should be then able to apply for funding for that child, just as they do at the other end of the scale. At the top end of scale, where you have a child who has been identified — and there is a definite identification according to their IQ; they have to be two standard deviations above — those parents should be able to put in an application to provide that child with some funding as well as having the whole-school approach whereby you have at least one person in your school in charge of catering for your very bright and gifted students as well as being supported by the region.

Quite a few years ago I did a course which went for 10 weeks, and I have trained my staff in what it taught me. I believe we need to keep doing that. That was quite a long time ago. Nothing has come along since then. We need a full approach whereby you are trained properly and you understand what the child's needs are and how to cater for those children. I think we forget about the social and emotional aspects of a gifted child. We tend to think that gifted children are bright and that they will be okay. It is not actually the case. They are just as challenging as those children at the bottom end of the spectrum, and they really need to be looked after.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Marlene. We will give both of you the opportunity to give a run-down of your schools.

Mr LACEY — I am Greg Lacey. I am from Lyndhurst Primary School. Lyndhurst is a brand-new school we have just opened this year in the growth corridor out near Cranbourne. I have come from having taught for 10 years at Tyabb Primary School. Tyabb was a high-performing school in a relatively well-off neighbourhood. We had resources both from the community and through the school to be able to support our gifted and talented students in all sorts of ways. What I am finding now in a much smaller school in a growth corridor with low SES and high levels of English as a second language is that I just do not have the flexibility in my budget, and I am really struggling.

We run individual learning plans. We ask all of our teachers to have at least six to eight individual learning plans for those students at the very bottom of the range and also for those kids at the top of the range. I agree that in a lot of ways they can be as difficult to educate as those at the very bottom of the range. We spend a lot of money and a lot of time and we get funding applications for our students at the bottom end of the range, but there is really nothing, unless we can find it within the school budget, to support those kids at the top of the range. Yet for many teachers they are the most challenging students in the classroom. A lot have behaviour

issues, and a lot of issues in the classroom are created around gifted and talented kids, who are just not well supported in the classroom and not adequately resourced. I am really finding a significant difference between where I was and where I am in terms of trying to support these kids.

The other thing I am finding in an area like that is that I have a much greater number of students of low ability or with disabilities of some kind, and that places even more stress on the school budget to support them. It is a very difficult thing to justify spending money on kids who people would consider bright at the expense of the kids who are really struggling. A program where that level of giftedness was recognised in some way, particularly in resourcing, would allow us to support those kids adequately.

Mr FORSYTHE — I am from Red Hill Consolidated School — I will just check where I am from; I am not gifted and talented, obviously! My school is 470, so we are in that middle range, I suppose. I will confine my comments to before this year and this year. I consider that all children have talents, so before this year we devised an extensive program with specialist teachers to work with all of our children. The responsibility of these teachers was to extend children as required.

This year we have employed a girl to work two days a week with a group of children who have been identified as talented. I do not like the word 'gifted'; I think the word 'talented' is probably better; that is only my opinion. She works in grades 4, 5 and 6. The reality is that she is funded by the number of preps I have. We can talk about this forever, but if there ain't no money, we are just wasting our time. We need money to make these programs work. We have just seen our coaches disappear. Most of us would argue — not that we have ever had a coach, but I know schools around us that have had coaches, and I know that is the other end of the spectrum, but it has made a significant difference to them — that if there are coaches available for this sort of thing, it will make a significant differences to schools. The reality is that it is money.

While I will have a person working two days a week or more next year — it depends how many preps I get because they get funded the most, and I can shuffle around that — but at the end of the day, I am sorry, the program runs on money, and if you do not fund us, we cannot do it. The teachers do a fantastic job, but they do not have the training. They work as well as they can, but it is just that one step up. They are not trained, but they do the best they can. If I had 1400 — I do not know how many you have: 1400?

Ms PATTERSON — No, I have 1000.

Mr FORSYTHE — Over 1000. You have a better chance than we have, and you have a better chance than Greg, but if you are struggling, just imagine how the rest of us are going to be.

Ms LEIGH — John was referring to teaching and learning coaches and ultranet coaches. That program ceases at the end of the year. They were not gifted and talented coaches in particular, but it was something that we would certainly like in our schools. More generally, many of our schools have 200 or less students. You would have an idea around the table, probably from larger schools, about what sorts of programs those schools run. They said they did ad hoc sorts of things, like a chess club at lunchtime, or they might be part of the Tournament of Minds, which goes across the state, or trivia challenges. They are working on the goodwill of staff to take on that sort of club, so they just cannot afford to put it within their existing programs. I just wanted to talk on behalf of those smaller schools.

Ms PACE — I want to build on something Marlene said too. Talking about having students in the classroom, a couple of years ago I had a child in my grade who had an IQ of 154. When he was identified at age 8, he could potentially work as a 17-year-old. Imagine having that in your grade 2 class, along with your children who are working at the average and well below average! The sheer enormity of having to cope and try to cater for a child like that, with the social and emotional needs as well — you do not think of that. That is where a gifted child is: there is potentially a 17-year-old sitting in your grade 2 class. That really brings home how difficult it is for teachers to deal with it, especially if they have not had adequate training and support.

Mr LACEY — I guess I am here on a slightly personal agenda, because my son was identified at year 3 as having a 155 IQ. His reading age at that stage was 18. Across the academic skills profile his average performance level was 15½. There was an 18-year-old child in a year 3 classroom, and whilst we had lots of support from that school, we understood that a government school just did not have the resources to adequately cope with him. He was accelerated; he skipped a grade, and it had all sorts of social impacts on him for the next seven or eight years. In hindsight we would not have agreed to it, but we could not see any other way in which

the school was going to be able cater for a kid like him in a normal classroom environment without adequate resources or without extra resources. He had behaviour problems, and he was a difficult kid. He was obviously bored at school for a very long time. The social impact on him through secondary school up until about year 10, before he finally caught up socially, was really quite significant as a result of simply not being able to cater for him.

Ms TIERNEY — Many parents have also expressed frustration at not having proper primary school programs for gifted students. Obviously you are in huge agreement with that. We have also heard from Marlene about what she would like to see specifically. I picked up on the funding frustration from John. What would you be recommending to us about programs or services that you believe should be available for gifted primary school children?

Ms LEIGH — I would like to start off by talking about some pre-service education with teachers during their training in relation to how to identify, so we are starting right at the very beginning of a teaching career. It is not a response; it is a proactive stance so that there is some more knowledge built into our system and some courses that actually really cater. Marlene's idea of region — getting support locally and then through the whole system as to how to deal with these students. We need more staff to be able to actually identify and test, because it is very specialised. What one staff member might think is this result, another may think differently, so we need some consistency across the state and a consistent approach. With the commensurate resourcing, schools would respond very positively to that right from the beginning of primary school.

Ms McINERNEY — I think the aspect of pre-servicing is very important. We have a number of issues. I think all schools have faced that with their grades coming out. One of the things that is difficult for kids who are talented — and I assume your parents would agree with me — is that there is also a difference in society in relation to whether there is a gifted section, what it takes to be gifted and what is gifted and talented. I think our teachers coming through have the best intentions in the world, but they need to have some understanding that is common across the system as a systemic thing — that there is a giftedness in the community, it is within this range and this is what it may look like. If you have a child in year 2 who is working as a 17-year-old or an 18-year-old, at least there would be an awareness level.

For our young teachers that is part of it — understanding that there are gifted students and that we will face them. You will probably have one or two; you may have two every year that you teach. That pre-service foot in the door would be an excellent approach, and then the follow-up. We do all those things. We have an ed psych, and we test them. We actually hire our own ed psych, and I know a number of schools are doing it. It is ridiculous that a government school is paying for a private service. NIRODAH worked with us, and sometimes we have to use them to do that assessment. If we could have that at a regional level, at a systemic level, that would allow us to actually use that money for implementation for working with the kids initially. The support there, whether or not it is based at a regional level from which we can draw on those people for assessment, and something with the pre-service, would be excellent.

Mr FORSYTHE — We need people on the ground. We need people to work with children who show talent, and if we do not have them, they disappear. I can go back to when I was teaching. A very young lad I taught was probably of your son's ability, but he basically hid his talents behind himself all the time. He was so smart that he actually recognised he was so clever that it would not fit in with the group he was growing up with. I remember years later I saw his mother down the street. I asked her how her son was going. He was unemployed and doing nothing. That is the crime of the whole thing — that is, we have these children who have these abilities. Unless you can play football, you are in real trouble here. We do not recognise them; we do not do anything with them. I know some schools are doing a fantastic job, but I have a feeling most of those are private schools. They are taking the kids out of the government schools and offering them scholarships.

Ms PATTERSON — Two things. I agree with John. If it were not for the fact that I have Trish in my school, who is gifted and talented trained, I would not be doing this either. We are advertising for positions at the moment. We look for teachers, and it depends upon the cohort of students that you have. You look for trained teachers. It is very hard to get gifted and talented. The social and emotional aspect is that last year we had 174 preppies, and we were identifying more and more children who are academically quite bright. We are talking about four and five-year-olds who are already being told by their kinders that they are really great kids. However, socially and emotionally they are lacking.

We know that when you put children through the system they might be academically all right but they may not be able to get on with their peers. We are actually trialling a program in which we have identified children who might be bright academically, but we have 30 children who are socially and emotionally not ready at this particular stage. We are running two types of models, but because of government legislation you are not allowed to fund a primary school child for more than seven years. These children may need eight years. We want to be able to have a good balance.

I just came back from overseas — the ICP conference, PISA schools, performance for international student achievement. They are indicating that academically if you do not have the balance between social and emotional, that is the problem. We are trying to cater to two things. Your cohort of students determines what type of teachers you are looking for, but if I did not have a qualified gifted and talented person in my school, it would not even get a guernsey.

Mr ELASMAR — It has been suggested to the committee that Victorian primary schools currently use limited strategies to provide for gifted students — predominantly year level and subject acceleration. What are the most effective ways of catering for gifted students in primary school — for example, curriculum differentiation, withdrawal programs, vertical timetabling and ability grouping?

Mr LACEY — I will respond in reference to Tyabb Primary School, where I was previously. We employed a leading teacher at that school, similar in role to Trish, for accelerated learning and advancement. She had two roles. One was to try to identify who our gifted kids were in the school — who the highly talented kids were — and the other was to help teachers develop programs within their own classrooms. For two years we ran a withdrawal program, and to be honest it failed for a number of reasons. The most significant reason was that we were really only picking up a very small group of students, and we were not necessarily working in the areas in which they were gifted. What we found was that these kids may well be gifted in one particular area but not necessarily across the board. Whilst she was running a gifted program — it may have been around writing — some kids may well have been in there because they were identified as gifted, but their gifts were in numeracy, not in writing.

The approach we took over the seven or eight years was to continually skill up our teachers to make them more effective at identifying the kids — identifying what their particular talents and gifts were — and then working within that. That is when we started introducing individual learning plans at the top end of the scale and not just at the bottom end of the scale. The teacher training aspect in terms of identification and provision of programs, plus the support of a leading teacher to assist those teachers in negotiating curriculum and targeted initiatives, is much more effective than the withdrawal programs we started with.

Ms LEIGH — In primary schools we believe it should be every teacher who should have the knowledge rather than just having one teacher who has all the knowledge. Trish has been able to within her context spread it around and talk about it and work with a number of teachers so that they have a much greater understanding.

The other thing is that once you have that level of expertise so that you can bring out the skills of students in each of the grades, then the use of IT in terms of some of the programs would be really relevant. It would be then that you could extend, but we have to understand what we are doing before we can get to that stage — we have to learn how to walk before we can run. That is the analogy in terms of this.

Ms McINERNEY — I would comment that differentiating the curriculum is really the answer for kids who are looking for new ways. The opportunities that Wise Ones and GATEWAYS provide — the certificate programs — are about just that ability to work with like-mindedness. When you differentiate the curriculum, you have still got one child who is 17 in that area, and it is a very difficult thing for the group. Many schools, I assume, do as we do: we try to group our children. We might have four or five in a year level, and they are actually grouped together and placed in one class. At least we may go into a differentiated curriculum; they are working with like minds within their class.

They also participate in those other opportunities, but it really means that if you have got a small school, you might only have one or two. But the differentiated curriculum relies on teacher knowledge too and then the opportunities to allow their working groups and the extension of that understanding. For us, I would like someone with that knowledge who could then skill the teachers rather than actually perhaps taking the kids, except for something like Tournament of Minds, which is an excellent opportunity.

Ms PACE — Can I add to what Claire said? We also do some clustering, and one of the advantages of clustering is that not only does it help in terms of teachers having a group of children to work with and that group of children having like-minded children but it also lessens the effect of those children who hide, because they can see that it is valued within that group. This means that they are more likely to show their talents too and not hide them away.

Ms MILLER — It has been suggested to the committee that a SEAL program could be introduced in primary schools. Do you agree with this? What are the potential advantages and disadvantages of having a SEAL program for primary schools?

Ms LEIGH — Could you unpack that a little bit more?

Ms MILLER — Basically the question has come to us as a committee about introducing SEAL programs into primary schools. The first part is: do you agree with that — either in principle or in concept? What advantages or disadvantages do you see in having such a program in a primary school?

Mrs PATTERSON — You might answer that, because that relates to your son.

Mr LACEY — On the face of it, I would not initially agree with it. We have a gifted and talented child in prep at the moment. She was one of the ones identified with a 145 IQ. We have had her tested, but socially she is a five-year-old. We do put her up into grades 1 and 2 to do some maths sessions and so on to help her out academically, but in fact she struggles socially as a five-year-old. From my own personal experience, I saw the impact on my son of accelerating him into grade levels beyond his age range, and he did not catch up until year 10. He really struggled socially through the whole of secondary school, including in the later parts of secondary school.

On the face of it, it sounds like a great idea to identify kids, group them and give them an opportunity. I am not sure that acceleration is necessarily what they need, but we could certainly group them and that makes it much easier to cater for. The flexible learning spaces in our new school certainly allow teachers to change groupings and allow for that clustering sort of thing to happen, but I think they need breadth and depth. I am not sure that acceleration is really what these kids are on about and what we should be doing with them — certainly not accelerating them into working with kids at a higher age level, because I think there are real social impacts from that that are undesirable.

Ms MILLER — I just have a side question on something that Claire and Deborah were talking about earlier in relation to a gap in knowledge in teacher education. As part of a teacher's education — your degree or whatever — when you are doing teaching rounds and things is that part of your curriculum or is that just overlooked?

Ms LEIGH — No. You are fortunate if you go into a classroom with a good practitioner and they have a gifted child and they talk to you about it. It is not part of a student's experience.

Ms MILLER — So there is no formal teaching?

Ms LEIGH — No.

Mr LACEY — There is enormous variability from university to university, to make a broad statement. I think that a lot of the graduates we get are very good at the normal range of classroom differentiation, but when you get these kids who are significantly outside the normal range, that is when teachers really struggle. It is a real challenge for them.

The CHAIR — Does anybody have a contrary view to what Greg just said in terms of SEAL programs?

Ms LEIGH — I would probably come out even stronger and say that we certainly would not be recommending that because it would isolate one group of students from another, and the whole idea is students learning together in teams and getting to understand different nationalities, different limitations and just the differentiation of Australian society. You would be taking that away.

Mrs PATTERSON — You really need to look at Maribyrnong College as the very perfect model. They have the sports stream, and then they have the accelerated year 7 program. The children are old enough then,

and they are mature enough to know what they are doing. We just introduced a program for our five-year-olds for social and emotional wellbeing. For children in primary school that is the most important thing — to be accepted by your peers as well. It is a balance: catering for their academic side but at the same time getting on with their peers. That is what is happening with kids in the secondary school.

We looked at five youths who were killed in Mill Park a couple of years ago. They were young kids — 16-year-olds and 17-year-olds — getting into a car with 18-year-olds and simply not being able to say, 'Hey, this is not the right thing'. But peer pressure takes over, and the kids who are not socially and emotionally ready are subject to that.

The CHAIR — This is a follow-on question. Many parents who have made submissions say that it is difficult to have gifted children gain an early entry into primary school, particularly in the public system. Do you support early entry into primary school for gifted children? If so, what criteria should be used to determine if early entry into primary school is suitable for a gifted child?

Ms PACE — I think you need to look at the whole child; that would be the most crucial factor. It is not just their academic ability, it is their whole maturity and social maturity as well.

Ms LAURENT — I know the region has a part in this, and generally if parents wish their children to come to school before the required age, it is usually referred to the region and then they do have criteria based on their IQ. It is not a whole big-picture thing. Then it goes back to the principal and the parents to make that final decision — that is what happens at the moment.

Mr LACEY — I am not convinced we have an adequate tool to measure giftedness at four years old, to be honest. I have heard a lot of parents who have a feeling about their child. Some come in ready to read, some come in able to read — children come in at a variety of different levels — but I am not sure that we have the tools.

The CHAIR — Following on from the whole social and emotional element, and obviously the giftedness of the child, if those traits are picked up, do you support an earlier entry?

Mrs PATTERSON — No.

The CHAIR — No, you do not. What about others?

Mr FORSYTHE — One of the hardest jobs as a principal is actually moving a child from one grade to another, advancing them, because the reality is you look at their intellectual ability and you look at their social and emotional ability, and at the end of the day I always err on the side of their social and emotional ability first. Academically, in my opinion, somewhere along the line it will catch up.

I referred to a boy earlier; the reality is that we have got to be very careful that we actually get it right. Most schools, I assume, if they are going to move a child into another grade, advance them, will probably put them in there for a small period of time to actually see what is going to happen, and then you discuss with the parent whether this is right for their child at this particular time.

It is an individual thing, but I think we have got to err, in my opinion anyway, on the side of the child and their ability to be able to cope in a new situation, not how clever they have to be.

Ms McINERNEY — Just as we have parents who come to us and say, 'Our kinder has said they should have another year in kinder. We don't know what to do', I would say exactly the same thing, case by case. I would not like to see a blanket decision either way. I think it is very much on case by case, and meeting the child is one of the indicators. We have some very experienced staff members, and they can spend 5 minutes, they can walk in and look at a child and say to me, 'They're not ready for school yet' — either way. We would deal with it very much like the one who has to have another year at kinder and the parents are not sure if they want to come early; case by case.

The CHAIR — Just a 'Yes' or 'No' answer for this, if you could. If it was on a case-by-case basis, would you want that power to be at the principal level, or would you still want it referred at the department level?

Mrs PATTERSON — Principal level.

Ms PACE — Principal level.

Ms McINERNEY — Principal level, in conjunction with the parents as well.

Mr LACEY — Principal level, if we had some objective criteria.

Mr FORSYTHE — Principal level.

Ms LAURENT — Principal level. They are not always identified at that early age. Sometimes there will be something and the teacher will come and say, 'I'm not really sure, but there is just something', and we do that further testing with the school psychologist. The parents may be thinking it is something completely different, and it turns out they were not identified as gifted. At that very early age it is difficult to be black and white about the needs of every child, or even those children.

Socially and emotionally you need to be really careful, because these children can become school refusers; they can get deep-seated psychological problems in their identification. Moving them around from one grade to another or doing things like that can actually be detrimental for them. It is better if it can happen with their peer group.

Ms LEIGH — I was going to say that we have got a very new generation of students now, especially the very gifted ones, who might have sat in front of computer games, who might also be able to complete all sorts of puzzles or attain levels, but it does not mean anything. We are saying very much around the group that it is that social interaction, and what could potentially be really frightening is that we must get that right or help the child get that right.

Ms TIERNEY — Just a quick question going back to identification. As I understand it, there is an identification toolkit that is used in New South Wales. I assume that you are fairly familiar with that. Is something like that useful for us here in Victoria?

Ms McINERNEY — Yes. We do actually have means of identification, and there are different kits, but also if you look across to different groups that cater for talented children or gifted children, they all use different criteria. So really at schools they might come through on a Raven's test. We may implement that. Or they will come through and then we have them tested. So I would not label a child gifted until I had that sort of evidence identified — not a teacher and not somebody who could see that potential. They need certain behavioural characteristics, yes, so there is a checklist that we can use as a skill base, which parents can use as well.

Ms TIERNEY — And so the teacher could use the checklist and then the next level of assessment?

Ms McINERNEY — Yes, and then can refer them.

Mr FORSYTHE — We are having an issue now with the fact that so many of our children — I do not know whether it is just where I live or maybe other areas as well — are not starting school at four and a half, they are starting at five and a half or six. They are being held back in kindergartens all the time, so of the 70-odd preps I have starting next year, at least half of them will be well over five when they start school. They could be six. So you have the problem of the six-year-old starting in preps, and they generally have a lot more ability than four-and-a-half-year-olds, so we have to be careful how we diagnose them as well, because they have had access to computers and God knows what else.

Ms TIERNEY — Why is that happening?

Ms LEIGH — It is interesting. We have a little theory, and it seems to be happening across Australia, that in fact older students tend to score better on NAPLAN, so that we are starting to narrow our science because of the high-stakes testing.

Mr LACEY — I think there is also an SES factor in that. At Tyabb Primary School certainly the tendency was for parents, particularly with kids born between January and April, to hold them back for another year and not start them. Where I am now, as soon as they are of age, they are coming to school. There is no question about whether they are ready; it is ready or not.

Ms McINERNEY — Low SES.

Mr LACEY — In a low SES area, that is the pattern — send them to school as soon as possible.

Ms LAURENT — I think it is very much based on the kindergarten, the preschool, and their philosophy, and what influences they have had from outside people. I will not mention any names, but I know in my area that is the tendency from my feeder kindergarten, particularly with boys, to keep them back. One of the students that we have identified as gifted this year, who is in prep, was kept back at the kinder, and as I was saying to you before, there was something, but they could not quite work out what it was, and then we did further testing when she came. We did not know anything about that, but my teachers are pretty good at picking things up, and they assessed her and then we told the parents that she was gifted. They had been told by the kindergarten teacher not to send her to school.

Mrs PATTERSON — What is happening, David, is with the introduction of the zero to eight framework, where we are marrying the early years zero to five framework and the five to eight, all that knowledge about what is happening before the age of five has really been brought to our attention. But if you look in our particular area, the Whittlesea area, which is going to be the second-fastest corridor, and apparently next year it is going to be the fastest corridor, the AEDI data is indicating that children are coming in with lower oral skills than ever before. They are socially and emotionally not ready. In 2010 I had 142 enrolments, and we said, ‘Right, we can’t keep having these large enrolments because it’s generating more problems’ — your reading recovery, your interventions and stuff like that, and I know I am going off the track a little bit — so we said no to 22 preppies. The kindergarten says no, we say no. But 16 of those families went elsewhere. The following year when we had 174 preppies we said to the parents, ‘All right, if the kinder says no, we’ll take them, but your child may need two years to be socially and emotionally and academically ready. Hands up those who are in favour?’. We had 30 hands go straight up, because they are the families that know their child is not ready but they have to send them.

Ms PACE — Can I build on something that we were talking about in terms of accelerating at prep level and right through the school? One of the things I think we have to bear in mind is not just what is there for the child immediately or in the next year or at the end of primary school but what is going to make them successful in the long term. When I look at some of the children who have come through our school, almost all of them have gone on to select entry programs. The one child who I was involved in an acceleration with — and she really was a very good candidate — then went into a SEAL program, which then accelerated her again, so she is now with children who are two years older than her. In that case, and it would be a rare one, she really could cope with it because she came from a family of other gifted children and had a lot of support within the family. But that would not be the case with all of them, and I think we really have to be very careful about pushing children on and then finding that they fall in a big heap either at year 10 or at university.

The CHAIR — Elizabeth, can you pick up on the in-service of teachers?

Ms MILLER — Yes. What kind of training and ongoing professional development do in-service teachers need to be able to cater effectively for gifted students? Some submissions have suggested that all teachers should have some training in gifted education. Do you agree with this, or is it only teachers who provide gifted programs that need the training in this area?

Ms PACE — You never know when you are going to come up against one, so I think it needs to be that everybody has at least some base understanding of what it is to teach a gifted child and a base understanding of their needs.

Ms LEIGH — Yes, I think we have all been saying it should be across the board in primary schools, so there is that understanding.

Mr FORSYTHE — I think our point of view this year, as I said, is that one of our teachers works two days a week with various children. Next year our thoughts would be that she would not work with any children at all. She would actually work with grades and work with the teacher, and her job would be to skill the teacher in their ability to work with the children who are actually within their classroom. The children are not to be withdrawn, but the teacher would increase her knowledge, which I think is what we were talking about before — starting with the universities, but we wish you luck on that one! From our point of view this is a better way to get to not just 20 or 30 children but all 400 and something children, rather than just a few.

Ms McINERNEY — The challenge of it is that in dealing with gifted children within a room it is not just about providing that program; it is every time you are speaking. They do not need to sit there and hear that repetition of an instruction; they have got it. So if we can have teachers understanding that when they face a classroom, they will not have kids disengaging from the minute go, because many staff are saying, ‘Remember yesterday when we did so and so?’. The gifted child says, ‘Yes. Got that, gone’. They do not need to sit through the next 10 minutes, so if we only provide gifted education at certain times of the day, we have missed the whole point. It is the gifted child, and the education is supposed to match the child.

I think many of us believe that it should be targeted at teachers having an understanding. You are not going to get specific knowledge, but they should understand even that simple thing that you do not keep your gifted kids sitting on the floor. They do not need it. They need the social interaction and all those things. It is about the way you ask them a question: do not ask them the questions that you might ask a child who really needs to slow that learning down. Give them the delivery, and give them the question. Let them investigate. So if they had some understanding of that from the beginning, that would help them when they came into a classroom. And then if they have a specialist, maybe like Trish, to support them, she would not be battling because the person would already have an idea that this whole approach with this child needs to be different.

Mr CRISP — That leads me to my thoughts about finding quality professional development to do that. If you are recommending that it needs to be all in the school, then you have got to get those teachers trained up. Can professional development be accessed, and what should it look like?

Mr LACEY — It is certainly out there. We used to have a branch in the department of education specifically for gifted and talented, and the teacher who I employed as a leading teacher worked in that branch — that is where she got her expertise. In my school she was able to be in classrooms modelling quality teaching of these gifted kids to assist teachers in differentiation, to assist them in identification and to open up their curriculum to allow for the gifted and talented.

We need to clarify our terminology. When we talk about acceleration most people think it means moving them up to the next year level, but you can accelerate learning without accelerating the child. That is what it needs to be. If socially they work best with their 10-year-old friends, then let us keep them with their 10-year-old friends but allow them to go on. Have the teacher let go of the curriculum a little bit and allow these kids —

Mr CRISP — Is that development — —

Mr LACEY — It is certainly out there and available.

Mr CRISP — It is out there, and it is available?

Mr LACEY — Absolutely.

Ms LEIGH — It is not available to every teacher, though. It is for a specialised person like Trish; she has accessed it. But what we want is something that is more generally available within the auspices of the department and that support, or else the associations, or whoever, might assist across the board.

Mr CRISP — So it is there, but it is not necessarily available?

Ms LEIGH — No, accessible.

Ms McINERNEY — I think there is a financial commitment, and that is like everything else — there is time and finance. So if teachers are expected to put that in, or we are expected to put that in our professional learning program every year, that is going to limit the amount of time that you can spend on something like that.

Mrs PATTERSON — But it depends on the flavour of the month. We have just had teaching and learning numeracy and literacy coaches, and ultranet coaches. There were ESL coaches employed, and now literacy and numeracy coaches are going back into the system, and it is gifted and talented. There are cycles that go around and around. While the government at the time gets its act into gear, we are holding the fort all the time.

We like to rely on the government, but at the same time we go laterally. Claire has just come back from Belfast and the thinking curriculum conference; and I have just come back from Canada. We are constantly trying to think. While the government may be in their particular time — and this is where I hope I have parliamentary

privilege — there are things going on overseas that are just unbelievable. It is like, ‘Come on, get your act into gear; get in tune with it’. We are going laterally and trying to deal with it, but until it is properly resourced, looked at and the funds and teachers, the human resources, are adequately addressed — because at the moment we are thinking laterally to try to — —

The CHAIR — Do you want to specifically cite those examples? That is of interest to the committee, the ones that are happening overseas.

Mrs PATTERSON — Claire has just come back from the thinking curriculum conference in Belfast, and I have just come back from the ICP, which was about how to raise student achievement and learning outcomes.

Ms LEIGH — That was in Ontario, particularly.

Mrs PATTERSON — Yes. It was looking at matching social — and there I heard speakers from Helsinki and Shanghai. I am part of the High Performing Principals program, and I have just come back from London and Dublin. Marlene has just been overseas. We are accessing some absolutely fabulous programs. Yet we come back here, and because of government regulations and whatever, our hands are tied. It is great you asked the VPA. We could really tell you some great things that are happening, but unfortunately we come back here and we are told to sit on our hands and do the right thing. There is some brilliant stuff going on overseas.

Ms LEIGH — Again, with the high stakes testing, we are narrowing the curriculum on the literacy and numeracy and getting the results up rather than looking at bringing up every student and really dealing with all the different complexities. To have somebody like Trish in your school is a huge boost, because she refocuses the staff all the time and looks for those opportunities. It does not have to be a special course that you would go to; you need to have somebody skilled who is going to make sure that they spread that word and that it is there and is part of your school culture.

The CHAIR — Can I add as a follow-up that if there are specific programs that you think would be of interest to us, we would welcome you supplying some information to the committee at any time after today. That is what we are looking for. If there is some best practice happening overseas, we would like to hear about it.

Ms LAURENT — This builds on what they have been saying, but it is about the teaching approach that teachers use. I think all teachers have to use an approach like Claire said, no matter which child they are dealing with. It is about having that flexibility and that open-ended approach to cater for your students. That is where the individual learning plans are really crucial for students, because you are focusing on what that child needs. It is about class management, and it is about those core things that you want your teachers to do. I think the most powerful professional development that you can do is at your school, but you also need that support to do that. You can meet weekly — for example, with your levels — and work with them on focusing on a certain thing.

We are doing a differentiated curriculum in maths at the moment. That is in my strategic plan. I meet every week with every staff member. We do it in teams. We have a whole school planner. We have looked at the department of education websites. We plan their program with them. There could be something like that where you have contact with your teachers, you are supporting them and skilling them up. But we feel a little bit that we are not quite skilled enough to understand how to cater for these gifted students. We still need somebody else who has that expertise and who can come and support us. Then we can support our staff to do it at the grassroots so it is embedded.

The CHAIR — That is a good point. Thanks, Marlene.

Ms MILLER — We have been told that negative attitudes amongst educators and students at schools can impede the development of a school environment that values success and achievement. What is the best way to develop a culture that celebrates academic achievement in schools?

Mrs PATTERSON — We are all prime examples of that.

Ms PACE — I don’t know. I also teach grade 5 four days a week; maybe I should share what my students said. They said that the one thing they love about our school is that we celebrate everybody and that no matter whether you go to Mr Bartram’s extension program or you are in the soccer team or you are good at arts, there

is something for you at our school. I think that maybe that is the whole thing. It is not about pulling kids out and holding them up as, 'You're the really academic ones'; it is about celebrating everybody and building that culture that everybody has some degree of specialness about them.

Ms MILLER — How do you do that? How do you celebrate — —

Ms PACE — It takes a long time.

Ms MILLER — Is there an activity, like a particular day or an hour or an event?

Ms PACE — No, I think that is just part of the culture that you build within your classrooms and within your school. I think it starts with teachers understanding that children are all unique and special, that they all have particular special needs and that we need to cater for those special needs. It then flows down to the students. When I have five children who go off to an extension program, the rest of the grade does not bat an eyelid, because I have two who go to ESL and I have some who go to literacy support. No one bats an eyelid about it.

The CHAIR — Can I pick up on that. Somebody mentioned before that there was a very gifted student who knew how to project the persona that they were not gifted.

Ms LEIGH — Yes, it was John.

The CHAIR — Because he did not want others to know. How do we fix that problem, where that person can effectively hold their head up, proud that they are actually a smart kid in the school and are celebrated for their academic achievement?

Ms McINERNEY — I think it is easier at primary level; I really do. We would say that at school it is based on the values program, which is very strong. It is something that is noted, I think, in the area. People understand that we use values with everyone. In fact I had a parent the other day say to me, 'You're not showing me respect; why should I show you respect?', as she yelled in my face. You are accountable. I would say that for us it is very important to have those values, and one of those values is learning. It is exactly the same thing. It is in every single day. We value the fact that you have learnt something; you have made an achievement'.

Our teachers work really hard, and I think every teacher who wants to be a good teacher works really hard on just giving a child a bit of attention. It is not about, 'Fantastic, that was a great effort!', when the kid has made this much progress but, 'You've made a great start; how can you go further?'. It is just the child who has done something good that day, and they tell me, and they tell Deb. But with 760 kids I can still find that kid to say, 'Well done on that; that was great. I hear you have moved to level 3'. The little ones want to tell me, 'I've moved to level 5!' — 'Oh, high 5!'. It is tiny things that happen every single day that make a difference. Having the values for us is very strong: respect, care, learning, tolerance; those things. We talk about them. We do not have a discipline policy; we talk about the values. If something happens, you are not showing respect. We had parents coming late. We now have parents who have to bring their children to the office because they are disturbing learning. It is not because they are tardy or whatever else but, 'I'm sorry, you're disturbing the learning of that classroom'. That is how we approach everything.

Ms PACE — When you have a good, strong values system within the school it makes it safe for those children to put themselves out there and feel comfortable and be able to show what they can really do.

Mrs PATTERSON — This year, Elizabeth, I have over 1000 students. Last year I used to be able to count two children who I would say were misbehaving. This year ■■■■ is now in grade 2 and ■■■■ is in grade 4 — we do not. We really have values education. It is at assembly day and your pupil of the week; it is in your weekly newsletters. The sports results are in our newsletters and on our website. It is the chess champion. It is on the PA every day. Our teachers come back, 'Rah, rah, rah!'. It does not matter whether you are a sports player or a dancer or you play an instrument; we like to encourage all of that, and we do that.

John had his feedback: a 0.75-size effect to a student is that constant feedback for them. We do that, and a teacher would do that in every lesson.

Ms McINERNEY — It is not about the one who got the most. It is not feedback when you win; it is feedback every time, for an effort, for a change of attitude. It is about saying to Greg, for example, ‘Well done. You made a really good choice then, Greg, I noticed that’. No-one else may have seen that.

Ms LEIGH — It is again going back to that differentiating curriculum, so that you can actually find a niche for everybody and celebrate it. But it does go a bit against our Australian psyche; we do not like to stand out. So we have to work really hard, and that is where the values education in primary schools has come in very strongly. We have had to work a little bit against that because we all want to be a bit the same, and we do not want to stand out. So we are working very hard across primary schools to tackle that.

Mr LACEY — The sociocultural influences are really powerful, and we are constantly battling against them. I had a child at Tyabb say to me, ‘I like it at this school, Mr Lacey, because it’s okay to be clever’. That was a really lovely thing to say, but it was a really sad thing too for someone to be in that state. Where I am at the moment I have a high level of Indian, Sri Lankan and Middle Eastern families who highly value education and have a high level of respect for teachers, education and schools. We do not have a problem with those kids feeling comfortable about being clever, because that comes from their family background; it is very highly valued. It is not in there in every community, and it is a constant battle.

Mr FORSYTHE — I think the question you asked relates to a perception within, I would think, most school communities that believe for some unknown reason that we actually do not recognise all of the great things that go on in our schools, or that we do not advertise it well enough so that they actually know it. But the reality is that we do it all the time. People will say, ‘You only celebrate sporting achievements’. The number of times that I would celebrate a sporting achievement at an assembly would be maybe once a month, if I am lucky. We talk about children who have performed, not chess, but those sorts of things. Maybe the problem is that it is us — that we do not get that message out well enough. The reality is that in my opinion we actually do it very well, but it is better to think it does not happen than the reality of the situation. I must admit we get those sorts of questions back on parent opinion surveys all the time, and we think, ‘What more could we do?’. They are some of the things that annoy principals when we get that coming back.

Mr CRISP — That follows on a little bit from what I was talking about. Can technology help with those students in the school? We talked a little earlier about children coming in with high computer skills but that this does not necessarily aid social and perhaps even academic development. Can we build in that area? Is that a way we should go?

Ms LEIGH — Yes, very much. There are some good programs out there now, and to build on those programs would be terrific. It is really important for students to feel an element of success with that. Then they can be individualised, which makes them really relevant for the particular student. We talked before about how giftedness can be in all different areas of the curriculum and that you can home in on a particular area and really work with that student. It is much easier to manage in a primary school as we now have access to computers at least from year 3 upwards fairly generally across the board.

The CHAIR — You mentioned some good programs there. Could you be a bit more specific?

Ms LEIGH — They are individual programs.

Mrs PATTERSON — We have the new netbook program, and we have introduced that at grade 4, so with your whizzbang computer children it is a case of train the trainer: one might be very good on the computer, but they train others, so they are building the social skills and the relationships. The amount of ICT now and the apps are phenomenal. Kids can either keep continuing that way — remember, that is their particular learning style that they are comfortable with — but at the same time we like to have a well-rounded child, and there are the visual, the kinaesthetic and all those other types of learning styles. That is train the trainer. We do that as well. So the netbook can enable you to do that as well. As I said, the netbook can enable a gifted ICT student to use that tool to help and to talk with other children.

Ms LEIGH — I might open it up. Athletics is one. There are other programs.

Mrs PATTERSON — SuperKids plus.

Ms LAURENT — The problem with Mathletics is that it is not funded and you have to pay per child, so it is quite an expensive program.

Ms LEIGH — It gets back to resourcing.

Mr FORSYTHE — It is a lot of money.

Mr LACEY — And then you add digital excellence to that. You can put these things on booklists — I have friends who live in quite good neighbourhoods, so they just toss all this stuff on the booklist and parents are just willingly pay it.

Ms LAURENT — But it should be everybody.

Mr LACEY — But in the end you have to wonder about how much you can keep charging parents for these things. If it is \$10 a head for athletics and then \$4 a head or \$7 a head for digital excellence and so on to access these programs, it becomes quite expensive. We just have to temper that with how much we are going to ask parents to fund for themselves.

Ms McINERNEY — The other thing to add, I suppose, is that technology is not the answer or the panacea either. All children should have access. A gifted child may have an ability to really take to that, but you also have to guide them in terms of cyber safety, which is an enormous aspect of it. Some of those kids are able to get around the intricate software.

The CHAIR — The net nannies and what have you.

Ms McINERNEY — Yes, the nanny has been superseded. Talk about super nanny — she has been superseded! The use of technology is enormous, but it is more about the sorts of apps that are available and giving them choice, giving them a variety of things that they can use. Videoconferencing can enable a gifted child to then videoconference with another child, and they can be talking about different aspects, so it is using it in different ways.

Mr LACEY — Last Friday I heard Dan Buckley speaking, who is over here from the UK. Dan has set up a peer assessment tool for schools. It is available for all students, but it would be particularly useful for gifted students. It is not about academic success; it is about the general capabilities which are in the national curriculum and how we assess those. He has assessment tools, where they submit work to prove that they have completed the capabilities, and it is peer assessed by other students around the world — from Canada, from the United States, from the UK. Once again you need to be able to link into it, and you need to be able to train teachers to use it, but it would be a fantastic tool if it was available.

Mr ELASMAR — The Victorian Principals Association says schools need a set of guidelines to enable them to develop programs to support gifted students. If you agree, what kinds of guidelines or other policies are needed for gifted education in primary schools; how much discretion should schools have to create and administer their own programs for gifted students; and do you think all primary schools should have a policy on educating gifted students?

Ms PACE — I think the most important thing is to make sure that it is acknowledged that there are such people as gifted children and that they have special needs. We focus very much on other children whom we need to assist because they have lower than normal IQs and we need to assist them in particular ways with ESL, but I know there are schools out there that have tried to introduce some form of gifted program where the parents have arced up and said, 'Why are you spending money on this when we've got all these other kids you need to be helping? Gifted children can look after themselves if they exist'. We need to make sure that it is acknowledged that there are gifted children, that they do have special needs and that they really deserve the same degree of treatment as everybody else.

Ms LEIGH — I guess, starting off, what we thought of in terms of that submission was to have an overall government perspective, and then I think I included one of the gifted and talented policies with it, which individual schools would then interpret and bring them back down to what is relevant and put them within their own context. But it is important that we have an overall picture of what the parameters are, what the framework

is, around gifted and talented, what the definition of it is and how we actually assess what is a gifted and talented child. Then it is up to the schools' resourcing as to how they actually implement and assist with that.

The CHAIR — As a follow-up to that, do any of the schools currently have a policy?

Ms PACE — Yes. We do.

The CHAIR — All of them?

Ms McINERNEY — Perhaps not every school, though.

Ms LEIGH — Not every school.

The CHAIR — Could you elaborate on what the features of the policy may be?

Ms PACE — I actually have a copy of mine. I am not saying it is perfect.

The CHAIR — Great. We will take that as tabled. That is terrific.

Ms LEIGH — And I have this one, which we can table too.

Mrs PATTERSON — That is what I mean: you do not want to be reinventing the wheel. You are going for consistency and equity across the system. So give us the departmental one; we will contextualise it.

Ms McINERNEY — Basically it just covers the approach, that there are ways to help the development of these children, that they should be recognised and they should be catered for. Also the context for us is that there is not a policy, and you are never going to put in a policy for implementation where you say you are going to have a funded staff member, because you cannot do it. So implementation of things like differentiated curriculum focusing on your support for teachers who have children who are highly superior children, who are operating at that level — —

Mrs PATTERSON — Having the toolkit to identify them.

Ms McINERNEY — Yes, we use the toolkit. We use those sorts of things. If we had the opportunity or the support which we certainly had, then we liaise closely with the regional supports person who then provides direction or support or encouragement or whatever, but a lot of ours will not have it in there because there are no resources. There is no point in putting it in.

Ms LAURENT — A policy should be very general and not specific, and I think having an overall policy from the department of education is very powerful and very important to support us and to support parents. Then it is up to the individual school as to how they are going to implement it.

Ms LEIGH — Except with the proviso that the individual school needs the resourcing to implement it.

Ms LAURENT — That is it.

Mrs PATTERSON — Because that is what happens in the February census. They say do you provide 3.5 hours for phys ed? Yes. Do you run an ESL program? Yes. Do you run a gifted and talented program? If I was not at Mill Park but at my old school, I would have said yes, but I would have had to do it in a different way, because I did not have the funds. Even now I still do not have the funds.

The CHAIR — I advise that we will enter into evidence the Mill Park Heights gifted and extended program plan.

Ms McINERNEY — The other one here is a generic policy. I sent that to Gabrielle, because we use those as a basis for our school, but it is actually a CD of generic policies. They are fabulous; they suit everything. There is nothing wrong with the department using something like that. They are very broad and would enable it, but it would also enable a discussion between principals and parents too.

Ms LEIGH — We have found that a lot of schools do not have a gifted and talented policy. When I have actually asked, it is because everybody is asked to invent their own. Whereas if there were a few policies

there — we have put them up on our website to help people actually access policies and change to their own context — it really does assist.

The CHAIR — Gabrielle just quickly, I will not hold you to the exact numbers, but out of the schools that you are talking to, how many would have — versus would not have — policies, do you think?

Ms LEIGH — From my concept only about a quarter would have policies.

Ms McINERNEY — I agree; probably only about a quarter would have policies. More would be doing things for gifted children, but they do not have the time to write the policy. I guarantee that you would actually find programs without the policy.

Ms TIERNEY — We have received suggestions that it is important to enhance the communication about gifted education within the education community, and so I would like to know if you support the notion of a gifted education network for primary schools, and if there was to be one, what would it look like? Obviously there would be funding implications as well.

Mrs PATTERSON — There has already been one.

Ms PACE — There was one. I was actually running one for the Whittlesea network for a number of years.

Ms TIERNEY — For Whittlesea?

Ms PACE — Yes, but it became too difficult in the end. People were just too busy to come down to meetings. It was just really difficult. You could not really afford to have guest speakers come in; you would be relying on the goodwill of other people to come in and talk to people. It became really difficult, firstly, just to get people together because of their work load, and secondly, because there was only a very small amount of funding to get quality speakers in to talk to us.

Ms TIERNEY — Again, it was not systemic, it was not through the system, it was more ad hoc?

Mr LACEY — We had one on the Mornington Peninsula that was in conjunction with the Connexions program. Connexions is an after-school program for identified children. There were two programs per year, and there were about 1000 children per program across the peninsula. Tyabb might have had children who go to St Kevin's up in Somerville or go down to Penbank; it was independent, Catholic and government schools combining. All the schools together would advertise the programs they were running. Parents would then take the kids to those programs — it might have been Egyptology; it might have been art. It covered a broad range of strategies.

Along with that, the teachers who taught those programs after school also met as a network. The impetus was the Connexions program, but out of that we got a network of teachers interested in gifted and talented education.

Ms McINERNEY — CoP Ed relies solely on goodwill, and when teachers already face two meetings a week which they are timetabled to and then they are asked to go to a network meeting, or they offer to go — Sue used to go all the time — it just becomes an issue. Even to get an afternoon tea locally, principals have to say, 'Okay, we will all put some money in so at least these people can have a cup of tea when they go to a network meeting'. It is pretty sad.

Ms LEIGH — It is resourcing again.

The CHAIR — Again, is technology an option here, to use blogging and social forums?

Mrs PATTERSON — We actually do that in the Whittlesea schools network. We have our own blog and our own site from which we upload and download various things. That is great. That is an avenue, but you have got to have the others and meet face to face as well.

Ms McINERNEY — It is also something that is instigated at the school level. That is okay for some in a bigger network, where you might have someone to lead that initiative. How do small schools cope? What do

country schools do? How do they manage; how do they cater? Do not tell me there are not gifted kids in most schools.

Ms LEIGH — Somebody might nominally have the name of a gifted and talented coordinator, but they also might be the maths coordinator, the SOSE coordinator, the bus duty coordinator and about five other things.

Ms PACE — And teach.

Ms LEIGH — And teach as well, of course.

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 role can schools play in providing support, information and resources to parents?

Mr LACEY — Schools can play a huge brokering role in access to resources, and we finish up doing that in a lot of cases, both with kids with problems and gifted and talented children. It would be good if there was a centrally coordinated resource pool that we could access, as we are offering advice to parents in a bit of a vacuum, to be honest. We are here in the neighbourhood and there is nothing else around for these parents to access in terms of support. The school certainly has the opportunity to and is in the role of coordinating parents and offering them support, but first, we do not necessarily have the knowledge of what is out and about, and second, in a lot of cases we do not really have the time to do it. Yet that is the role we fall into. The VPA has been a long-time advocate of full-service schools, where a lot of these community resources are actually included as a community hub in a school. We know what it is about, we know where they are and we can give parents immediate access to all sorts of resources that at the moment are scattered everywhere. To be honest, they are not well coordinated.

Ms McINERNEY — Can I comment there, because we have a cone of silence; it really relies on the knowledge of the staff members. If you have got people who are skilled and have been in the school for some time, I know who on staff I can ask, and they will know something about it and I will know something else. But if you are new to the school, or if something is happening or there is a change of staff, you do not have that, and when that knowledge retires, resigns or promotes out, it is very ad hoc.

We are the first port of call for parents for everything. We should be the first port of call for gifted and talented children too, but we are the first port of call for most parents for everything. How many times have I heard teachers say, 'If your child won't come to school, bring them in their pyjamas'? It gets down to that. There are only so many resources in schools, and they only stretch so far.

Mrs PATTERSON — We had what is called HATS, highly able talented students, that a parent Michelle [REDACTED] was willing to run, working in conjunction with Trish in after-school activities. We would go to a barbecue twice a year, but out of 96 staff, only Trish and I would be down at the barbecue because we were already flat chat. But the parents organised that and the social thing, and we just facilitated it. We would get somebody in to run an afternoon activity at \$5 per head, but that money went to whoever was running that particular activity. When parents want the school to be supportive, we have to have partnerships because we are so thinly spread. Like a working bee, we have to have some parents up here to help us as well. We rely on and try to build that partnership.

Ms PACE — Of course, once Michelle left the school when her children went on to secondary school, it then fell back to me to run that. We still have it, but only once a year now.

Ms LEIGH — Nazih, in terms of that, I think the school is in an absolutely critical position to be the first port of call. I mean, that is what everyone is sitting here saying. If we had the expertise to go with that, to be able to help parents with their gifted and talented students, then we would be very willing to be part of the parent-teacher interviews and to be part of any of that. But we just do not feel as though we have that level of expertise across the board and consistently.

Mr LACEY — We know that 2 per cent of our students are going to be in the program for students with disabilities, and I think it is generally accepted that 2 to 5 per cent are going to be in the gifted and talented program. It is somewhere around that, so if you have got an assistant principal who is using all their time looking after that 2 per cent in the PSD program, it is a huge ask to virtually double their workload to support

these other parents who are often just as frustrated and just as much in need of support. We try to do what we can.

The CHAIR — Just leading on from that, in terms of students moving on to secondary school if they are identified as gifted, what sort of support do you provide for parents and what sort of guidance do you provide for some of the kids in relation to potential options for them? Do your schools look at some guidance and direction for those children going on to secondary school? Maybe if we just go around and get a snapshot.

Ms McINERNEY — Yes, very much so. It is very much on a case-by-case basis. Our teachers know we have a very experienced welfare officer — we call her that, but she is a teacher. That comes out of our budget; she is not government funded, but she actually works with the parents of those children to try to place them in a spot where they will have access to programs or they will have access to an education that will suit them. Many of ours — like Deb's — apply for private school scholarships. There is any number every year from four, five and six, to Ivanhoe Grammar or somewhere like that.

The CHAIR — They have got an awareness of what is out there?

Ms McINERNEY — I think parents find that they have to. Parents of gifted children feel the need to know what is out there and to see that, and also I think in many cases they do not necessarily see the government really supplying and supporting that sort of role. Even though in our local area, we have several schools that offer some of the programs.

Mrs PATTERSON — Yes, it would be case by case. The parents value what we have got to say, but we wear the hat of the principal and we might wear the hat of a parent as well, because we ourselves have had children. My son was identified as gifted — actually in your school — which he really was not, but I had to be conscious of it.

Ms McINERNEY — Sometimes we get it right.

Mrs PATTERSON — Our parents value our conversation.

Ms PACE — In particular it is about getting them to go out early and visit the schools and short-list a group that will be a best fit for their children. We may be able to point them in the direction of several schools, but there is no point in saying, 'Send your child to that school', because it may not ultimately be the best fit for them.

Mr LACEY — We would like to think we provide support for every child who we think is going to have transition problems into secondary school and provide support for that family as well. I struggle in wearing two hats, as a government school principal and yet with a commitment to my local community about the best schooling for their children. Whilst I like to support the government system, it is not always necessarily the best choice; so you temper your advice with a commitment to state education with the advice about the child. But we think that we would try to support every child who we thought was going to have difficulties in transitioning to secondary school, whether at the top level or the bottom.

Ms LEIGH — It is important that we also work with the secondary school for the transition, not only the parents. We are trying to build up really strategic links between primary and secondary for that transition, for every child, in particular your children that exhibit giftedness, talent or learning needs. Sometimes it is an arrangement between the primary teacher going into the secondary school for a couple of days and vice versa, just to have that conversation. They are often ad hoc and locally arranged, but they are very valuable, because in that transition we lose so many students in terms of slipping backwards from that year 6 to year 7 transition. We have got to do that better.

Mr FORSYTHE — We work fairly closely with our two government high schools in the area, and they actually have set up a number of extension programs for various children. I have to admit that once I have sent some children off to Peninsula, to Toorak or wherever it happens to be, I do sit back sometimes and think that an exceptional amount of money has been spent on these children to get scholarships, where it could have been spent in other areas — that is a balance that we make. We do not make that choice; we educate everybody. It is only after the fact that I think about it — not that it has ever changed my mind one way or the other. I do think that was interesting, but we work well with our local schools and they do well.

Ms LAURENT — My students go to many secondary schools, so it is very difficult to have a full relationship with every school that they go off to. My children actually do not go very much to my designated local secondary college, but we still have a very good relationship with them.

What I do — and it is me, Marlene; there are no other people in my school; I am welfare, I am PSD and my APs transition — is work closely with the school's psychologist for both of those, as I said, the top end and bottom end of the spectrum. We have a meeting in year 5 with our students, because we believe that year 6 is way too late to be deciding where your child is going. We actually meet with our parents, and we talk about transition and how important it is, how to work out what is the best school for your child, which schools are their local schools and what they have to do to apply for going to the school they are not zoned for if they need to and all of that. They are well informed, particularly with any parent who approaches us. We support them.

But mostly I am very keen to support children who have a disability, because you have to apply for funding to take them onto secondary. And also for our children at the other end of the spectrum, the gifted students, it is very important to find the school that is going to cater for them. It is not necessarily the school that caters for that child in one family. Within families you might even find that some schools suit some children and other schools suit other children. It is all about educating and working with your parents and doing it early so they can make an informed decision and know what their options are.

Mr CRISP — I am going to take the conversation to outside the academic area. We spent a bit of time talking about academic giftedness, but there are other areas or talents that people have in sport, music, leadership and other areas. What should we put in place to help those children and are we addressing any of that?

Ms McINERNEY — Do you mean as gifted students in sport or gifted students in art?

Mr CRISP — Yes.

Ms McINERNEY — I would say exactly the same answers we have given you. Differentiate the curriculum as much as we can; opportunities for those children beyond something or supporting them as they go further through, but again having that level of expertise within the school is what makes that difference. That is what it relies on. Simply we would have gifted children within all those areas, or they might be gifted in the arts or gifted as a different type of thinker. We talk to kids about how they think. It is fantastic for them to be able to look at that. But my answer would be that was exactly the same. That it is differentiation within the curriculum.

Ms PACE — Once again it comes down to funding, too, because we currently have a grade 4 student who is going off at state level, and yet the school is actually trying to do some fundraising to help support one of the teacher's children who is actually in the Australian secondary basketball team and going off to America. Once again, it falls back on the school to help support and find that \$6500 to send that child to America. The school community is doing an awful lot to try to support people, but eventually it comes down to the funding drain and the goodwill of people. There is just a limit to how much we can help finance other people as well.

Mrs PATTERSON — Every child has the right. You can tell by the end of grade 1 about a child's particular learning style. That is the area. If I did not excel in physical education, I would not be where I am at the moment now. It is about having that wide range. Every child has the right to have access to a wide range of programs. What a pity in some of the lower to smaller-size schools that funding actually restricts access to some of those programs. While your child finishes in grade 1, then in grades 3 and 4 you should immerse them as much as possible — the finger further into the pie — so that by 5 and 6 their particular field is identified, but you still have to have that transference of other skills. Every child has the right to succeed at whatever particular area, whether it be a gifted and talented student or an art student. You should have access to a music program and phys. ed. program and whatever, because then you develop those transferable skills that can come over. If I did not have a good phys. ed. program, I would not be here today.

Mr LACEY — I hark back to what I said earlier when we had a withdrawal program at Tyabb. It was terrific for some students, but it was only a very small number. We had far more impact by using our leading teacher to train all of our teachers. Equally, my performing arts teacher, my visual arts teacher and my physical education teacher, all in terms of identifying kids with talent and doing what we can within the school and the community to support these kids in extending their talents.

Ms LEIGH — Peter, I think your question actually highlighted that we tend to be bit narrow in our definition, or the community per se, of gifted and talented. That is where we very much need a government definition and a framework that describes it from every perspective just as a really good reminder of what it covers and encompasses.

Mr CRISP — The sport can be picked up on weekends. You also find that the history of music is often done out of school, but it is still at school.

Ms LEIGH — Absolutely, and you find that some of the lower socioeconomic groups might not be picked up if their parents are working full-time and do not have the resources — time and money.

Ms PACE — There is the financial resources, because music is incredibly expensive. Believe me, I know this one!

Mr FORSYTHE — I think a lot of this depends on the size of schools. The reality is that if you have a school of around 460 or 470, in theory you can run the programs we are talking about — phys. ed., music, library and whatever it happens to be. Schools smaller than that cannot do that, because they do not have the funds to be able to do it. You think it should be easy, but why — for example, we were talking about a phys. ed. teacher — can your school with 300 not join with a school down the road with another 300, and they have a phys. ed. teacher for both schools? We do not seem to do that. The funding does not work that way.

Ms McINERNEY — I think sometimes it does, but it is principals who do it. It is not systemic.

Ms LAURENT — I actually do not think we do. I agree with everything everybody has said, but I actually do not think it is equitable or accessible for all children to all of those subjects that you mentioned.

Ms McINERNEY — Sorry, Marlene. I did not mean it was equitable access. What I was saying is that sometimes schools end up sharing specialists because they have to. But principals do it, and not in a systemic way.

Ms LAURENT — To offer specialists in those areas with the school global budget we are given, I would say there are many schools that cannot do it — probably the majority rather than the minority. I can say I do not believe that I do it, and I am in Hawthorn and we are not poor, shall we say. But it should not be like that.

Ms LEIGH — It should not be an either or.

Ms LAURENT — That is not what it is about. I cannot really offer a proper music program and a LOTE program and a sports program and whatever else.

Ms McINERNEY — Drama.

Ms LAURENT — Yes, all those performing arts and ICT et cetera. It is not feasible that I can do that. I have to pick and choose. It is also about being able to access qualified staff. To do what I am doing, which is to offer four specialist subjects, I actually have to have part-time staff. I could not possibly employ full-time staff to do that. It is about staffing it, and it is about finding good staff to do it. I think in the music area we have a big lack of really good music teachers. It is very difficult to get a really good music teacher in your school to do a program that will systemically, over a child's primary school life of seven years, provide them with an opportunity to excel in that area. I would say probably most parents, if they want their children to do it, pay for it outside of school.

Mr LACEY — Education by postcode is alive and well. There are things I could do at Tyabb in that community that I could not even dream of doing in Cranbourne.

The CHAIR — Thank you, we have got time just for two quick questions, and then we are going to have some afternoon tea and an informal chat with you.

Ms TIERNEY — I just want to ask a question about gifted and talented children in the outer metropolitan and regional areas too, and the particular challenges they face and you face in catering for their special needs — particularly Greg and John.

Mr FORSYTHE — Red Hill, for those of you who do not know, is on the Mornington Peninsula, so we are classed as rural, but we are only 55-something kilometres from the city. I am probably not the person to ask, given the fact we are so close to things. We do not have trouble finding appropriate staff for what we want to do. You would have to ask somebody further out.

Ms LEIGH — I was at a meeting in Mildura in your neck of the woods recently, Peter, and basically principals were saying they just cannot get a generalist staff member to cover them to go out of the school for the day, let alone specifically in music or languages. It is really tough.

Mrs PATTERSON — I was at the VITTA conference, and a lot of those regional outer suburban schools use Skype and conferencing more and more. Bronwyn Stubbs from distance education said she is now able to get out to a lot more of those kids in those regional to very remote rural areas via that conferencing, and they are doing that very well. That is improving things — getting out there and access.

Ms McINERNEY — As long as they can get access. The ultranet was supposed to service that. That was a big issue for many principals. They said, ‘Great! What is it?. As soon as we can get access, we’ll tell you whether we like it’. It is working for some and not for others.

Mr LACEY — Certainly in the growth corridor, infrastructure of all kinds is lagging way behind development. Earlier in the year I was told by Casey council that 80 homes a day were being completed in the city of Casey. There are 250 000 people there. We are running maternal and child health at our school because there are no facilities in the area. There is no kindergarten in our area. We have a neighbourhood of thousands of people. There is no shop, there is no letterbox — there is nothing. The infrastructure falls so far behind, so the school more than ever is the focus of what provides for the community. Do we have problems accessing services? Absolutely. In that growth corridor area the services are way behind. We cannot get speech pathologists; they do not want to work out that far. We cannot get psychologists; they do not want to work out there, and we cannot pay them nearly enough compared to what they can get in private practice.

Mrs PATTERSON — It is the same with the rates in the Whittlesea area. Apparently ratepayers pay \$1400, but it costs \$2000 to service each block. We have already been told by David Turnbull that in Whittlesea — next year it will be the fastest growing area — they are not going to build a kindergarten for child care. The emphasis is coming back to using schools as hubs, so we are investigating using early years kinder to sort of transition people to be based in our school to help us with that. Where are we going to put them?

Ms MILLER — Many of the submissions received by the committee suggest there are negative perceptions associated with the terms ‘gifted’ and ‘talented’. Suggestions for an alternative term include ‘children of high intellectual potential’ and ‘high-ability students’. What terminology do you think we should use for gifted and talented students in Victoria?

Mr LACEY — I do not think it matters as long as it is clear — as long as we all understand what it means. I think ‘high intellectual ability’ is a bit narrowing because it takes out all those kids Peter was talking about. I do not mind the word ‘gifted’ as long as someone delineates exactly who we are talking about, because there are lots of kids with gifts but they are not necessarily gifted. Every parent would say their child has gifts. Most of them would say their child was a gift — many might not. The terminology is not as important as the definition. Who are we actually talking about? Who are those kids? What should we be looking for, and how do we identify them so we can actually not label them necessarily but at least identify them in school in some objective way?

Ms PACE — And with the criteria you use to identify them, make sure that they are common criteria across them all.

Ms LEIGH — I think John’s point before about ‘talented’ probably covers more. ‘Gifted’ is sort of like saying somebody has been bestowed with something; it has another connotation. As long as we set on a term I think there would be a preference for ‘talented’ rather than ‘gifted’.

The CHAIR — Would that be common around the table that there is more of an issue with the term ‘gifted’ than ‘talented’? Or do you see that it does not really matter?

Ms McINERNEY — I think it is blurred. There is a blur because of the clear definition. ‘Gifted’ to me, and when we talk with staff, is across the board, so you can be gifted in lots of things — sport, music, art. If we start to use ‘higher intellectual ability’ or ‘potential’ or whatever, it starts to narrow it a little bit.

Ms LEIGH — ‘Talented’ probably still covers that.

Ms McINERNEY — ‘Talented’, yes. If you read the definition the department is using, it does talk about ‘gifted and talented’ as being able to develop a talent, whereas ‘gifted’ is something different, but there is no common understanding.

Mrs PATTERSON — I agree with Claire.

Mr FORSYTHE — ‘Gifted’ I am not so sure of, it is hard to define, whereas for ‘talented’ I can look at the child and say, ‘You are talented in this’. We have all had children who may be talented in music, for example; they cannot kick a football for nuts, but that does not mean anything. It is important that we gauge it on what that child can do and work with them.

Ms LAURENT — It is probably about definition too. I think that whatever you call it, it will always be a black-and-white area with people, and it will be about being able to come up with a similar understanding.

The CHAIR — That concludes our questions. I want to thank you for your contributions. We have certainly spent a fair bit of time really thrashing some of these ideas out, but it has been very important to us. As I mentioned earlier on, we have not had the opportunity of hearing from primary schools, and today has given us a really good opportunity to explore some of those ideas.

We thank you very much for your contribution and invite you to stay for some afternoon tea. I also take the opportunity to recognise the gallery as well. We have had great interest from parents, educators and interested parties in this particular hearing, and I would like it reflected in the Hansard transcript that we have some dozen people here today listening to the inquiry. Thank you for coming along and for your input as well.

Witnesses withdrew.