

CORRECTED VERSION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the education of gifted and talented students

Melbourne — 19 September 2011

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Witnesses

Jocelyn, Alec, Karen, Sonia, Melissa, Wayne, Henriette, Kim, Heike, Emma, Felicity, Julie S., Julie M., Maria, Susan, Phil, Forum Participant 1 and Forum Participant 2.

The CHAIR — Welcome. Look at this! I feel like it is a jury or something. Welcome to this particular part of the forum, which is getting the parent group to make a contribution. I want to say a couple of things before we begin. Certainly this was something that was not planned initially, but I think after the first days of hearing, when we saw so many parents turn up in the gallery wanting to make a very active contribution to this — certainly we have had a number of submissions from parents already — the committee felt it would be important to provide an opportunity for more parents to contribute. That is why we decided to hold an additional forum, which we have done today. We did it by registration because we felt that if just anyone turned up, we would not be able to cope. As you can see by the number of parents here today, it is certainly something that many parents are very passionate about, and we have certainly experienced that right through these lots of hearings — and rightly so. That is the reason for doing what we are doing today.

This is a little bit different. Many of the parents who have been with us on the journey thus far have seen that it is normally a round-table discussion with microphones in front, whereas now we literally have a witness box. I ask that when you have something in terms of a contribution to make, give a quick show of hands and I will get you to come up. Do not adjust the microphone. We have had to use high-level technology to get the microphone positioned right, so if you just leave it as it is, it will pick you up. If you could also state your name before you make your contribution, that would be good for Hansard as well — first name only. We will only be identifying people by their first names as part of the hearing.

I also say that with the numbers we have, obviously we cannot have everybody making a contribution to every single question. We have a number of questions we want to try to get through. If you think it is something that maybe you will pass up, just wait for the next one, and be mindful to give other people an opportunity as well. If you have already made a contribution and it looks like others really want to make a contribution, maybe allow that to happen, and I will certainly identify the ones who want to make a further contribution as well. If we could share it around and give everybody an opportunity, that would be terrific.

In terms of formalities, I now have to go back to the formal part and welcome you to the public hearings around gifted and talented students. As you would be aware, we are looking at programs that are currently available and training that is currently available in the areas of gifted and talented students and also looking at options and opportunities for further enhancing program development around this very important cohort of students. Today's hearing will be recorded by Hansard. At a later point there will be the opportunity for you to correct typographical errors and things that have been picked up later. I also need to mention that the hearings are covered by what we call parliamentary privilege, which is the same privilege that members of Parliament are afforded. That means you can say whatever you like, just as we do in the Parliament — within reason — but when you leave these rooms, the same parliamentary privilege is not afforded. That means that if someone mentions something to the media or someone else outside of this room, the same parliamentary privilege is not afforded to them.

We will get straight into it and start with some questions around identification. Firstly, could you tell the committee about your experience with having your child identified as gifted? Did your child's school or teacher play any role in the identification process? This is probably something that everybody could contribute something to, but if we could be short and sharp, that would be great.

JOCELYN — I am Jocelyn, and I have three gifted children, who are currently aged 14, 12 and 8. The first one was not identified formally until he was in third grade, and I had to push for that. That was mainly because his younger brother was stunning them at preschool. They kept saying, 'There's something really special about him', and I kept thinking, 'But [REDACTED] does that'. However, my eldest is very introverted. I was told by his prep teacher that he is a child who only needs to be told once and then he not only uses it but starts expanding it into other areas. I had no idea this was unusual; the teacher did not make it particularly plain to me that it was unusual.

I had expected that Australia's education system would be able to cope with my children. It hasn't. So I pushed for identification. [REDACTED] teacher was initially reluctant. It was not until I was looking at pictures on a wall and I said, 'Gosh, that's wonderful', and she sort of looked at me and I said, 'Okay, it's not a wonderful picture; it's a really bad picture. But he's never done representational drawing before; he's always done diagrams'. I think that acknowledgement by me that he was bad at something possibly tipped the balance, because suddenly she

was on board and she said, 'Okay, we'll have him tested'. He tested quite high. He tested at the moderately highly gifted border, which is in the 140s. From that point, life changed.

For the second child, they tested him when he started playing up in prep, which was not really surprising because he could already read. For the third child, they just went, 'Here comes another one. Okay, fine'. It became progressively easier because the school adjusted with us. I think that is all I wanted to tell you about identification.

ALEC — My name is Alec. Our oldest son is eight years old and is in grade 2. When he was in kinder his kinder teacher said, 'There's something special about this kid'. We thought, 'Yes, we know he is really bright'. In prep his teacher said the same thing to us: 'Perhaps you should take him to a psychologist'. They put us on to someone to see and we saw her the following year, but we never had any advice to have him tested or any such thing. In grade 1 we found he was getting very disengaged. We did not know what was going on. We wondered if he was getting bullied — there was some trouble at home due to changing family circumstances — or whether it was his teacher. We did not really know, but we knew there was a problem, which concerned us a lot. At the start of grade 2 we got him tested, and as a result of that the psychologists, the teachers and everyone said, 'That's the reason. He is completely disengaged because he is highly gifted. Now we have all these pull-out programs and different things we can offer'.

It never occurred to us that having him formally assessed would open up these opportunities and give us all of these insights about different research, and we started looking into it. That was only earlier this year. It would have been really helpful if he had been identified, say, at the start of school. We would have been able to jump on this a lot earlier. He would have had a better experience through school so far.

The CHAIR — Stay there, Alec. Some of the submissions we have had suggest that all students should be tested. Do you agree with that, and if so, at what age should all kids be tested? If you do not agree with it, what other mechanisms would you suggest there should be for screening of gifted students? If other parents could think about that as well, I might call for one or two more.

ALEC — I think the start of school — perhaps before school or during prep — is a good time to test kids. For the talented and gifted kids, I think it is really important that they get tested. I do not know if there are any side issues about the general population. There may be issues from parents about them not wanting to have their kids tested. For me it is about having a screening test — a simple test that might take 20 minutes — just to provide some guidance. Then there could be a pathway whereby the small percentage, 5 per cent of kids or maybe 10, can go on to have further recommendations or maybe be given an information pack or something or other about what the options are, what this might mean and whether formal cognitive assessment is appropriate from there. I think that would be very helpful for kids in the gifted category.

KAREN — My name is Karen. I have two sons, one aged six and one aged three, nearly four. We have had quite a few problems with my older son in relation to the school recognising his giftedness, even though he was formally assessed as moderately gifted prior to starting prep. I recently took my nearly four-year-old son to the maternal and child health nurse and outlined some of the experiences we had had with my older son. As she was going through the PEDS, which is the Parents Evaluation of Developmental Status, program, she said, 'Okay. We'll do a Brigance on your younger son'. I did not know anything about the Brigance test, and neither did anyone else I had spoken to. It had come up in one of the earlier sessions about whether all children should be screened and at what age. This piqued my interest, so I put a little bit of information there because I thought we do not really need to be reinventing the wheel; if there is something already out there that can possibly identify these children early, before they get to school, then maybe this is something we should already be looking into, because it is already part of — —

The CHAIR — You are suggesting at the early years?

KAREN — They did it for my son's three-and-a-half/four-year-old check. Apparently there are different protocols for different ages, but this one was used as the pre-kinder check. It is advertised as part of the maternal and child health practice guidelines. Different municipalities also mention this test, which is primarily to determine developmental problems but can also be used to identify academic talent and intellectual giftedness. I will just pop that there; it gives that website.

The CHAIR — We will use that as evidence.

KAREN — That is really all I wanted to say, because that had come up a number of times in the past. There is already something out there, and is that worthwhile pursuing rather than starting down the track of something completely new?

The CHAIR — Fantastic. Thank you, Karen. The Hansard transcript will reflect that additional evidence being documented. We will go to Forum Participant 1, and then we will continue with some other questions. There will be an opportunity for you to come back to it through the additional questions.

FORUM PARTICIPANT 1 — On the question about whether all kids should be tested, I think they should be, mostly because of our experience with identification. We thought our child might have been gifted back in kinder. We talked to her kinder teacher, but she felt that she was not — she was not too sure. We came to grade prep, and she really started learning rapidly, just in leaps and bounds, far beyond what we expected. We spoke to her grade prep teacher about psychological testing and that kind of thing. She made us feel like it was a waste of time and a waste of money and that we should not worry about it.

We took it upon ourselves to test because we realised that our daughter needed more and the school was not really willing to meet us unless we probably had some more evidence. So without consulting the school we went and had her tested. We brought the results back to the school, which they were very supportive of. The principal was really fantastic. The teacher was also very supportive and actually even commented that she felt it reflected what her school report was about to say at the end of the year, which she had already written — but she had never recommended anything beyond that. This teacher was a fantastic teacher. She had been teaching for 20 years. She said she had never accelerated or had a gifted child in her class that she knew of.

So to me, to rely on teachers, even with some education and some background training, is still not enough. I worry about the kids who might miss out and who are dependent on only the teachers to be nominated for further testing. Even our child, who was quite clearly different and had more needs, was not picked up by this teacher or others. That is why I think it is really important that all kids are tested. I do not know how it would work, but even if it is some small kind of test and then filtering to get to more in-depth tests for kids who maybe might need that. Parents may not pick it up, for whatever reasons, and teachers may not as well. I think that the needs of the children are different, and they need to be addressed. If you do not identify it, you will not address it.

I had made a comment in our submission about the government possibly creating a target of some kind, because if you measure something, it will happen. If we accept that a certain proportion of our population are gifted and talented, then we should be able to say that we have identified at least some of them. If you set a target of 10 per cent or 5 per cent, then so many of them should be identified in the system. If they are not, something is wrong with the identification process. As a government you could set a target and actually track yourself to say, 'We want to achieve that'. Obviously what comes behind that are things like resources to make it happen, otherwise you do not need the goal. I think I have covered a bit of that — the identification — as well as my thoughts on testing.

The CHAIR — Does anyone disagree with that in terms of testing and generally screening in the earlier years followed by some follow-up? Are we pretty much in agreement?

Ms MILLER — It has been suggested to the committee that early childhood professionals and educators should be given some training to identify gifted students. Do you agree with this, and what is your experience of the ability of early childhood professionals to identify giftedness in very young children?

SONIA — My name is Sonia. I have three gifted children — they are now 11, 8 and 3 — and I have a vast spectrum of negative early childhood experiences to share with you. My first child read at two. We thought he was just reciting, to be honest, and then we realised he could read. So when he went to three-year-old kinder I said to them, 'He can read'. They said, 'Terrific; fantastic'. Eighteen months later they came to me, completely freaked out, saying, 'Oh my God, your kid can read. We've never seen anything like this before'. I said, 'Yes, he's been reading for two years. I told you that before'. 'Oh, we thought you were joking'. Even with the kid

sitting there with a book, reading it out to them, they still did not believe it — even though I had told them the child could read. It was completely bizarre.

With my second child, she was reading at four-year-old kinder as well. Suddenly she stopped. She denied that she could read. So I went to them and said, ‘You know, my daughter, she can read, but she’s pretending she can’t read. Isn’t that silly?’. ‘We don’t do reading at kinder’. There was never any mention of gifted or anything like that — never an acknowledgement that this was unusual or something that should be supported in the early childhood setting.

My oldest child, especially, went on to have an extremely negative experience in his early years. Now things have been much better because he is at Clifton Hill Primary School, which I think is one of the fabulous, standout schools for gifted children in Melbourne. I would be really happy to talk about that further, if you would like me to.

Something terrific happened last week which is not in my submission, which is that my three-year-old is in three-year-old kinder this year, although she is not actually old enough for three-year-old kinder. She should be in the year below three-year-old kinder. The kinder teacher came to me and said, ‘Do you realise your kid can read?’, and I said, ‘Yes. I’m happy that you noticed that she can read, because in the other situations even though they were told by me and they could see the child reading, they still did not actually believe the evidence of their own eyes’. She said, ‘Look, I’m really worried. She’s got two and a half years to go until she starts school. I can see she’s already a bit bored. Do you think she’s gifted?’. I said, ‘Yes, I think she is’. It was such an exciting moment. She said, ‘Look, I think we’ll put her in four-year-old kinder next year, is that okay with you? So a grade skip already, and you should look at early entry’. I was just so excited, because if either of my older children had had the sort of support from the early childhood setting that my third child has got, without me doing a single thing, then that would have been really terrific.

I spoke to the teacher and said I was coming to this committee today. She said to me something I have heard before, which is that a lot of parents come and say, ‘My kid’s really clever’, and so they get a bit jaded about it. But there is not an understanding in the community and the early childhood setting about the degrees of giftedness and the ability to recognise when a child is gifted and to do something with that. The early childhood setting is really important, and I also completely support the idea of screening at an early age.

Ms MILLER — Did you access any gifted education programs at the early childhood or preschool stage, and if so, can you tell us about these programs? If not, what do you think needs to be introduced for gifted children prior to primary school?

SONIA — There are not any, to my knowledge. Especially in relation to my second and third children, I am completely aware of the issue. I know they are gifted, and I am completely confident that there is nothing there.

Ms MILLER — So what do you think needs to be there?

SONIA — If the child has a disability or learning disorder, there is a formal framework into which that child can be hooked via liaison with the school. If you have got a kindergarten, you have got 20 kids, and if by some miracle the kinder teacher identifies that the child might be gifted, or if a child is thought to be gifted, there is nothing. Even though my oldest child, especially, had some behavioural problems in preschool because he was so bored, never was it ever suggested to me that he might be gifted. I was told he was not ready for school, although in fact he ended up being double accelerated. There was never any suggestion.

I went to my maternal and child health nurse with my second child because I was thinking of having her early entered because she was already reading two years before school was to start, and I was basically given the complete brush-off. I am very used to getting the brush-off from people thinking I am actually crazy. In England, when my son was at school he was not on the gifted and talented register, which is the top 10 per cent, even though his achievement testing put him at 1 in 10 000 — so 1 in .0001. Often professionals think that especially mothers advocating for their highly gifted children are actually a little bit crazy. It is a bit of a problem that we have too.

The CHAIR — Just before you go on, how many other parents were shrugged off by the teachers when they first went to them? Okay, let me just count that for the transcript: we have 17 out of 18 in the forum here.

Ms MILLER — Many parents have told the committee that it is difficult to have a gifted child gain early entry to primary school. What is your experience of this, and do you think early entry to primary school should be made more accessible for gifted children?

MELISSA — This is exactly the issue I have focused my written submission on, because I think it is such an easy and low-cost way of meeting the needs of gifted children. We have two children; one is now 8 and one is 5. The 8-year-old is in grade 4, so she had early entry. Our experience was mixed in the preschool time, as other people's have been. For one kindergarten it was, 'Your child could not possibly read. I don't believe you' — and of course she never saw her read. She never offered her a book; she never made them available. She had the mindset that children in preschool do not read.

In the other preschool we actually had a very positive experience. They identified that the child had particular needs and they had been trying to meet them, and, at the stage we got to when she was just turning four, they said very clearly, 'She should not come back next year; we cannot provide her with the sort of environment she needs for the next year. You need to look at early entry'. Of course this was the first I had heard about early entry. I went to see our local school and talked with them, and I got a great response. The school had a fantastic principal who said, 'I can see straight off this kid does need to come to school, and you should really look at this'. She then liaised with the department, and the answer was no because there is a cut-off date and, 'We will not look at anything past 30 June'.

I then started to educate myself a bit more and said, 'Well, is this right? Is this how it works?'. It is very clear in the administration of the act that it is supposed to be that the decision on early entry is made in the best educational interests of the child. If the child will suffer long-term educational disadvantage by not being allowed early entry, they should be allowed early entry. But we had to go through a very long and protracted argument with the department over it. I wrote my first letter saying, 'Please tell us the process; we would like to know how to do it', and I got the answer, 'No, she is not eligible'. Then I wrote again saying, 'Look, I think the act says you have got to at least look at the evidence, don't you, to find out her individual circumstances?', and again I got a no.

Eventually we just said, 'What are we going to do? The kinder has told us that she can't come back, and we've looked at other kinders in the area and can't find anything. What are we going to do next year?'. We went and got an independent psychological report. It said, 'Yes, this child will suffer long-term disadvantage if she doesn't come to school'. We sent that back to the department, and they eventually agreed. It has been a fabulous intervention for her. It has been the easiest, lowest cost way for the education system to meet her needs. She has gone in and developed very well.

In terms of what should be done on early entry, there needs to be clear guidelines that are put on the department's website that say that this is available, these are the circumstances in which it is available, this is the test that will be used and this is what you have to do to request it. That strikes me as being a very simple and achievable way to make what, as I said, is a very low-cost and useful provision for gifted children who are identified in the early years.

WAYNE — My name is Wayne. We have had a similar experience. It ended up, because we were getting pushed back from the school, that we travelled to Melbourne and paid \$450 for an independent psychologist to assess our son, and they put him in the top 1 per cent. We took that to the school and the barriers disappeared, but that was all on our initiative — otherwise, unless you have got that credibility behind you, you are coming up against some cultural barriers there, I believe.

Our son is presently in 2-3 - class, but he should be in 1st class. He is doing grade 3 work, and now part of the recommendation we are getting is, 'We will skip grade 3 and put him into grade 4'. So you end up with a 7-year-old who could be doing 12-year-old work, but he is still a 7-year-old. We need to be mindful of the fact that whilst he can operate at, say, 12 or 13-year-old levels academically in some areas, there are things in which he is still a 7-year-old. The school needs to be able to accommodate that if it is going to successfully address

these programs. What you end up with is a 15-year-old who finishes high school and they are not ready for university.

The CHAIR — On the particular evidence you have given just then, we had a student this morning who spoke about being advanced and being able to cope at that level and did not equate herself in chronological age but in the mental age. Do you see that as being the experience with your child in terms of being able to cope at that level in the classroom, or do you think that they are going to need some accommodation to work at one level but have friends in the other? And how are you going to cope with that?

WAYNE — His friends at school are in the bracket that he sits in, but at some point there is a limit to how far you can push that, I think, otherwise you have a 12-year-old mingling with 16-year-olds. I do not think that would add up.

Ms MILLER — Can you tell us about the sorts of opportunities available for your children at primary schools? For example, was your child accelerated? Or did your child have their curriculum modified to cater for their level of knowledge or understanding?

HENRIETTE — I also have a written submission.

The CHAIR — Yes, we can table that.

HENRIETTE — Basically the answer is that nothing is available. I have a daughter, Ruby, in grade 3 this year. She started school at five and a half, and I wish I had known then what I know now because she possibly could have started school a lot earlier. I had the notion when she was four that I was trying to hold her back from what she could do because I did not want her to be above the other children. It seems ridiculous now.

What I have experienced in the education system to date is that anything I want done I have to push, and I have to volunteer. I have to work part-time from home, and as much as I can I put my hand up at the school and say, 'I hear there's an opportunity to do this; I'll come in and help facilitate that for you'.

Nothing has been mentioned about curriculum compacting or any of the strategies that are actually on the department of education's website, and the school is currently experimenting with combined classes, or composite classes, which unfortunately seems to be a mix of lower grade students at the high level — or lower achieving students at the higher level — with high-achieving students at the younger level, so you have two different styles of learning. You have got children who are exceptionally motivated and want to learn with children who are possibly not interested at all. It is a very difficult thing.

I actually have an appointment with our daughter's teacher next week. I am going to be armed with what is on the department's website, and I will say, 'These are some of the strategies. Which is going to suit my daughter?'. But what I take issue with is that I have to do that and that I have to push. It is not in my nature to do that — to keep pushing — and I do not want to be doing that. I have given the school the evidence. We have paid to have her tested ourselves, and I want them to be able to tell me, 'This is what we can do'.

The CHAIR — You have got a meeting to talk about some of the strategies or to recommend some of the strategies for next year. What are some of those strategies?

HENRIETTE — In the middle of this year her school report came out, and it said that she is at the end of year 4. It shows a chart and everything was at the end of year 4, but that is where it stopped. We do not know — was it year 5 or year 6? We do not know where she is actually at. There is no testing to say that in writing or in spelling she is actually at 6 or 7. Who knows until she is pre-tested in some form. I had not heard of any of the strategies like curriculum compacting, ability grouping or any of those things until I looked at the department's website. The school has not offered that at all.

The CHAIR — We will note with Hansard that Henriette has tabled that additional document.

Ms MILLER — I have one more part to the question.

KIM — My name is Kim. My son is 11. He is in grade 5 this year. We have just changed schools this year. He had been at the local primary school. When he was in prep the teacher said, ‘I do not think I have anything for him to read’ because he had been reading all through kinder. I sent him to a Montessori kinder where reading was encouraged, and he thrived.

I was really hopeful that through primary school he would get some extra help, but that was where it ended — in prep. In grade 1 he was sent home with the same work, and I kept having the same discussions with the teachers over and over again, saying, ‘I think he can do more than this. Is there something else that we can do?’. ‘Oh yes, we will extend him’, but nothing happened. There were no extra programs in the school. They had some chess boards tucked away somewhere and he loved to play chess, but they never saw the light of day.

In grade 4 when he was sent home with his two-times table, he said, ‘Mum, do I have to do this?’, and I thought, ‘No, no more’. I could not tell him why he had to do that. I spoke to the teacher, and she said, ‘Yes, we will give him some more work’. The best suggestion the school could come up with was for him to skip grade 3 and go straight from grade 2 into grade 4. I said, ‘Okay, we will try that’. We did that for six months. Academically he was still at the top of the class, but socially it did not work. He missed his friends. If his friends were on an excursion, he would sit outside and read a book. The other kids did not want him there as well and said, ‘You are the young one. You do not really fit in’. He went on a school camp with his new grade 4 cohort, and when he came back the teacher said, ‘Nothing has changed’. So I said, ‘Put him back in grade 3, he needs to be happy. I do not want him to be sad’, even though I knew he would get no extension.

We sat it out then changed schools. This school is quite different, although it is a private school and costs a fortune, but it is better. It is not perfect, but it is better.

Ms MILLER — On that issue, what do you think of the suggestion that a primary school program based on a SEAL model be established, and what other kinds of programs would be appropriate at primary school level?

KIM — I think a SEAL program would be great. I do not think simple grade skipping works, because that is assuming that the child is going to stay one year ahead, when they may not stay one year ahead; they may progress and get more and more years ahead. As the earlier speaker said, you do not want a 12-year-old hanging around with 16-year-olds in high school. They have different interests.

If the SEAL model were to work you would need something in place to cater for them at high school and not go into the SEAL model as it is there. In one that is near where I live you have years 7 and 8 put together. If you have got primary school kids that are charging ahead, they are going to be beyond that. I do not know what the answer would be, because I think with gifted children they are so individual, and they do all move at different paces. I would love to see select-entry schools for primary school. I do not know how practical that would be, because at the moment we have to wait for year 9 to get into select-entry schools. If the children are not extended, encouraged and celebrated for what they can do, many have lost interest by then; it is too late. I think the fact that a lot are not praised for their abilities, as was mentioned earlier, is important. If they are great at sport, that is fantastic, they get the awards and the good help awards; but if a kid is really bright at maths it is, ‘Oh! Great!’, and move on do something else.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Kim. Heike?

HEIKE — I have got masses to say, but I will not say it all. I will talk specifically about what primary schools can offer and what we think they could offer. I represent a bunch of parents who live in the Dandenongs, around Belgrave, Tecoma, Belgrave South. Most of them have kids who attend the local state schools, and most of those parents when their kids first got into the education system, if not at kindergarten, really did not know much about giftedness at all. We have all just been discovering it as we have gone on. Some of us might have thought our kids were probably going to be brighter than average because, as parents, we were — and that is probably a common thing — but we did not know.

My child is now in grade 4. He is at a particular school in the Dandenongs. They have done a number of different things throughout the years. I would like to point out some of the issues we have had and some of the things that we think the schools might have tried on occasion that have been dumped and what we would really like to see. Firstly, the idea of SEAL for primary school, I had not even thought of that, but I think that would

perfect. One way to do it might be to get clusters of schools together and make one school the school that might attract these kids. Of course then we have the issues that we hear over and over of, 'That is not fair, because we are losing out. This school loses out, and all the smart kids are there'. We have had that at our school actually just within individual classes. Last year after parental pressure, and it is only ever through parental pressure, at the grade 3 and 4 levels — all our schools are composite classes — they seemed to introduce clustering in terms of putting a number of gifted kids — —

We do not know they are gifted, because very few of them get tested because it is expensive and most of the parents cannot afford that. They put them together in one class, and they just did extremely well. The grade 3 kids were working at probably grade 6 level. The grade 4 kids were probably working grade 6 level too. It was superb. They were not all gifted kids — they were all different ranges — but because there was a large cohort of what I would consider gifted kids, it pulled up the rest of the class as well. None of the other classes were negatively affected by this, but we had issues of attitude, and I have to say it came mainly from the staff at the school. The teacher who had the particular class which may or may not have had this special group — because it was never official — made a comment to me at one of the parent-teacher meetings, 'I have heard comments like Mrs So-and-so has the good class and they did not like it, so they are not doing it again. That is what she told me in a very unofficial way — getting the message across, but not actually saying it officially.

We have had ILPs at the school — individual learning plans for the kids — which have only come about at the top end of the spectrum because parents have really pushed. We do find sometimes that they are so useless that they are really just there to appease the parents who are all seen as pushy parents. Anybody who goes in there and complains is a pushy parent. The clustering would be an ideal thing within a school, and I would like to suggest that you might promote that, even within one school. If the school is big enough, they can do it within their own school; but if not, get a couple of schools together and help it work.

We also think — and this is probably going on to one of your other questions — that there really needs to be more adequate training of the teachers to understand what giftedness is. They still have a really vague idea. 'Isn't every kid gifted?' 'What does it mean?' 'There's no such thing.' 'We don't believe in it.' We have had those comments from teachers.

Our school this year has a gifted and talented coordinator, who is somebody who volunteered to be the gifted and talented coordinator but has not supported gifted and talented kids at all. In fact she is very anti any specific gifted and talented programs.

Ms MILLER — Can I just ask a question?

HEIKE — Yes.

Ms MILLER — You mentioned you are representing schools in the Dandenongs. Do those schools have an existing relationship, for whatever reason?

HEIKE — They do not have much of a relationship as such, but one of the local schools had somebody come in and offer to do a local area gifted program, and that program grew to encompass a number of the schools. All the parents involved in it were incredibly happy with it. We thought it was fantastic, and the benefit of this program was that the kids could do it almost every term. It gave them an opportunity to meet with like-minded kids, not just from their own school but from other schools. The negative, of course, was you had to pay for it, and some people could not afford it. This is an issue that we discuss all the time. That is really the only thing they talk about in terms of things that interest us all. It is really the parent group that has formed because of this program that is now pushing for other things. We have only become aware of each other by our kids being offered this program, and none of our kids, as far as I know, were tested to go into this program. It was just done on teacher recommendation: 'This kid is bright'.

That is another issue I would like to raise. I am sure some of you will be familiar with this. Really good programs like G.A.T.E.WAYS or even this one called Thinking Outside the Box are often given by the teachers to kids who are not genuinely gifted but the kids who 'deserve' to get a program: they have been good in class, they are reasonable students, they behave well. It just drives me mental. We even had it sometimes where some teachers — in some of our schools we have had this issue, and again it comes back to teacher attitudes, and I am

a trained teacher myself so I can see where some of this comes from — are a bit over teaching and just a bit old and will get these G.A.T.E.WAYS programs and ask, ‘Who would like to do one?’. It is true. They ask, ‘Who would like to do one?’, and some of the kids will do it. Sometimes kids decide they want to do it and they join one of these programs. What happens with G.A.T.E.WAYS if you do not get in early enough to join the program is that you miss out. So if it has been offered to some kid who is never going to do it anyway, which the school thinks is being fair and equal, nothing happens. I think that is probably where I should stop and let somebody else have a go.

The CHAIR — Just before you do go, you mentioned something about the negative attitudes with individual learning plans. I wanted to get comments from others as well. Is the problem with the individual learning plans or how they are currently being used?

HEIKE — It is mainly about how they are being used. The first one that my son had was basically taken from an individual learning plan that was designed for students who are on the other end of the spectrum, so they had learning improvement goals and all sorts of things like that. Last year when a teacher actually tested my son on the various tests that they could use it was better, but it is still a plan that says they would like to do this and they want to do this and they are going to do this, but they do not necessarily follow through with it. We have the official steps and we have a meeting regularly, but nothing really seems to happen. If the school does not allow it to happen, there is an individual teacher on their own. That is really how it has happened. It has been through individual teachers not a school policy; nothing really happens.

The CHAIR — Do others agree with that? Yes, okay.

EMMA — I have gifted twins, who are seven. I just wanted to say that I have found that they present very differently because they have different personalities. Although they are gifted at a similar level, giftedness is very much an individual thing. I am finding as I am talking to their school that we need to look at this on an individual basis. We are now negotiating an individual learning plan for each of them. I am saying to them that what works for one will not necessarily work for the other. That is a process that I have had to drive and push, and that has been challenging. What I like about the individual learning plan is that it acknowledges the fact that gifted children are gifted 24/7. It is helpful to have additional programs for an hour a week or whatever, but they need acceleration in the classroom every day, and that is what I am struggling with. I had both children assessed by a psychologist. The psychologist took me through what they need. The psychologist even came to the school and said, ‘This is what they need’, and then we had to try to put that into place. We had all the ideals about what should be there, but having to marry that with the actual reality of what happens in the classroom has been a challenge.

The school has been very positive and very keen to address the issues, but it is about trying to get it to change its focus and look at each individual student and their needs rather than the class as a whole. It is difficult to take out a student and say this student needs to be doing more advanced learning. You cannot just give them a handout and say, ‘You’re gifted, so you can do this’. You actually need to instruct that student on more advanced concepts, and for the teacher to do that they need support and training. I was brought into this whole arena by my daughter’s teacher coming to me at the parent-teacher interview in grade 2 and saying, ‘I’m at a complete loss to know how to challenge your child’. And I just said, ‘But you’re the teacher; you’re supposed to know that’, and I have since found that that is not always the case.

SONIA — I just wanted to tell you something positive about what is happening at my school, which is Clifton Hill Primary School. I really support Heike’s comments about the need for what they call magnet schools in America, schools where there are lots of gifted children and also clustering. Clifton Hill primary is an unofficial magnet school, and you get into it by selling your house and moving into the zone or really schmoozing the principal. I did the second! It is fantastic. When my daughter, who is my second child, started prep there were five children reading at grade 4 level in her class. It was identified at her school from her Best Start assessment for prep — because they were warned because of my oldest child — that she was at grade 6 reading level, which was just bloody fantastic. All the way through she has been differentiated, and they do clustering at the school, which is absolutely terrific. All the highly gifted kids are all in the same class. Some of them are what I call ‘freaky gifted’, and they go up to grade 6 maths from grade 2 and are doing high school

level maths in school. My daughter is working two grades ahead, so she is working at grade 4 level, but that is catered for in class. Nothing is perfect. I am really happy though.

The CHAIR — That is great. Thank you, Sonia.

JOCELYN — I believe you probably would have been told many times by now that clustering the gifted children is good for them in many ways. I have been with my school for a long time, and I love most of the individual teachers there very much, but it has a policy of splitting up the gifted children. They do not believe the gifted children should be together because they think they should be leading by example in each separate class. This year we managed a bit of stealth clustering. Two of them happened to be in the one class, and my child was assigned to another class, and I said, ‘I really do not want him to be in that class because that boy has bullied him’, so he ended up with the other two, who are very good. But I should not have to do it by stealth. I do not think this is an unusual attitude. The idea that gifted children should be examples is prevalent — that they should be pulling everyone up with them. That is really an unfair burden to place on them.

The CHAIR — I do not want to take any further comments. Thanks, Jocelyn. By just a show of hands, who has experienced the same sorts of things as Jocelyn has experienced in terms of not having the kids clustered and the negative attitude at the teacher end? Okay, so we have 10 out of 17. That is great, thank you.

Mr ELASMAR — I am enjoying listening to you. It is a good forum. Thank you very much. Some parents have suggested to the committee that when they were considering secondary school for their gifted child their child’s primary school did not give them any information about SEAL schools, selective-entry schools or specialist schools that might have been appropriate for their child. What is your experience of this? How can parents be made more aware of these programs? Do you think primary schools have a role to play in identifying suitable secondary education programs for gifted children?

WAYNE — My name is Wayne. Just to pick up on the theme of SEAL schools, our children are still in primary school. As I understand it, the SEAL program caters for years 7, 8 and 9. I think that completely misses the point. There was a comment earlier that these kids are gifted for the duration of their lives. You cannot just take out years 7, 8 and 9 and think you are delivering a worthwhile program. I think that encourages it to be ad hoc, and that is pretty much what we have at the moment.

Just to pick up on your question before about SEAL schools as primary schools, I think it is a good idea, but it needs to be disciplined, it needs to be resourced and it needs to be measurable and well structured. Just having it for a few years is not going to do anything really.

The CHAIR — Thanks, Wayne. Can I limit this to people who have kids at the secondary level.

FELICITY — I am Felicity. I have a son who is 14 years and a daughter who is 10½ years. My son is at a SEAL school, at Box Hill. I did not find out about it from primary school, although I was very lucky to have joined a parents group right from when my son was quite young. Many had kids who gone through the SEAL program and they talked to me about it. I think I had known all along that that is where he would go. Certainly in my submission I think I talk at length about the horror years of primary school and the difference that SEAL has made for him. It is the best thing I have ever done. I have been through years of having a suicidal son and all the miseries and bullying and god-knows what. So to go to a school like Box Hill where he is just blossoming, it makes me almost go gooey whenever I look at him now and to see him turning into the sort of man he is meant to be.

Most of that is because he is in a school where he is not the only one. He is in a school with other kids like him. He is in a school with other kids who think like him. He has teachers who understand how to teach gifted kids and he has an accelerated curriculum so he is not bored and staring out of the window all of the time. The difference has been phenomenal. I just wish that it had been available at the primary school so we would not have had seven years of hell before we got to the SEAL school.

Someone was talking before about how they did not want 12-year-olds mixing with 16-year-olds. I do not agree with that because I think they are thinking more about normal 16-year olds. If you have a 12-year-old who is highly gifted who is mixing with 16-year-olds who are of a similar mindset there is no issue with it at all. As a

child of 13 years I had the experience of going on a camp which was external to school. I came home friends with all of the councillors but not with any of the kids, because the adults who were the councillors were the ones I had most in common with. I had a wonderful time. Other people said to me, 'Why weren't you friends with any of the kids?'. I said, 'Because I wasn't interested in anything they were talking about. I was interested in the adults'. I think it is more about like minds being together rather than looking at age groups. I think the big problem with highly gifted kids in the education system is that so much of it is based on age when really that is not what we are dealing with. We are dealing with kids who should be taught at the level they are ready to be taught at and it should not be based on how old they are.

One quick comment on the accelerated side of things, or grade skipping. With grade skipping I really think there needs to be some sort of process external to school. I had a situation with my daughter, who did 1-2 composite as grade 1. She finished both years of the curriculum. Her best friend was going into grade 3 and it was a perfect opportunity for my daughter to grade skip, but the school refused because she was too small and also because she would have been the youngest; somebody has to be the youngest. There was nowhere for me to go with that. I had a very heated discussion on the subject with the principal, but really I hit a blank wall. How do you counter the argument that she is too small? She is; she is the smallest in her class now. She will probably always be the youngest and the smallest in her class. I just wish there had been somewhere external to go or someone who had knowledge of something else that I could have done. As a parent it is a very frustrating situation. At the moment if you hit a wall with your school, there really is nowhere else much to go and you end up changing schools, like I did, which is not really the right solution.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Felicity.

HEIKE — I will be really quick. It is Heike again. I am just speaking on behalf of the whole group that I represent. There is no information from the schools about any particular SEAL school that you can go to or any special schools. It is generally expected that you will go to the local high school or to the local Catholic school.

The CHAIR — Good. Thank you.

JULIE S. — My name is Julie. I come from a regional area and I have three children. I have two sons at high school and one going to high school next year. My eldest son's teacher in grade 4 suggested I needed to start thinking about high schools early. That was probably the first mention of any talent. She suggested I look into the local SEAL program. I did and it sounded good, but not for my son. We now send him to a regional state high school and we are quite happy with that, but again there is no extension. I feel that years 7 to 9 are just lost for gifted and talented children. They are just shoved in the room and maybe participate in a competition every now and then, but really there is little else to stimulate them.

When they go onto year 10 they have the option of doing VCE courses, but of course they are only being taught up to the year 9 standard. So then they make that big leap for which they are probably not prepared, although I cannot really say because my son does not go into year 10 until next year. Some sort of acceleration program within their classroom with their peers, like whether they go a step further with whatever the topic is, or some such thing is required, because at the moment they are taught new concepts, they master them quickly and then mark time while everyone else is coming to terms with it. Really they should be pushed on to the next degree of difficulty to help with that. I do not see that that would really need to be a costly solution. We just take it all to the next step for them.

The CHAIR — Why did you feel that the SEAL program was not for your child?

JULIE S. — Because we live in a small town and my children went to a small primary school. I suppose it is more the social aspects. The SEAL program is at a school with 1500 kids. My kids now attend a school with 500 kids. The size of the school makes a real difference to my children; maybe not to others. In particular my eldest son would not have coped at a large school and would have just gone downhill.

The CHAIR — Thank you for that input. That is excellent.

FORUM PARTICIPANT 1 — Just a very quick point; maybe something positive. We have had a very good experience with our principal. Our daughter was accelerated from grade prep to grade 2. In some areas,

when we had her assessed, she was already operating at the grade 6 level in grade prep and our principal has already started talking to us about establishing a relationship with the local SEAL secondary school, even though our daughter is only in grade 2, which I think is really good. I think the difference for us is that our principal has a background in gifted and talented education. I do not know if this has come up before. I have read the submission of the Victorian Principals Association and I was quite horrified by some of the positions that were taken. I think that something has to be done as well about educating the principals. They are the leaders of the school, especially at the primary level. The teachers are there every day, but they do take the lead somewhat from their leaders in the school. If the principals have a change of understanding about giftedness and talent, they can actually make changes happen in their school and even bring teachers who may not agree along with them. I wanted to make the point that I think things can be improved at the primary level about the switchover to SEAL at the secondary level, but a lot of it comes back to the principal. I want to capture the point that we do not forget about principals as well and their education.

The CHAIR — I saw a lot of parents agreeing with you. While you are up there, what were some of the areas that you think you would not agree with in the submission of the principals association?

FORUM PARTICIPANT 1 — I cannot remember it verbatim. The word ‘egalitarian’ comes to mind, as in, ‘Everybody is equal and everything is the same. We do not want to create a separate group that is going to disadvantage everybody else’. All the research that I have seen does not support that. Maybe I am tainted by what I have looked at, but they seem to believe separating gifted and talented kids and giving them the chance to really shine is somehow to the detriment of the rest. I do not think that is the case and I think their position was a lot around that area. I think that is concerning for the kids. They are kind of thinking about the ones that are not gifted and how it is going to affect them, but the wellbeing of the kids who have a love and a passion for learning are being held back because of everybody else, and that is what is concerning for me, especially in regard to the principals.

The CHAIR — Thank you.

MARIA — Hi, I am Maria. While we are talking about the SEAL program, they usually start from year 7 or 8, but for some children they come way too late. I initially wanted to touch on the problem of underachieving in regard to gifted and talented children. By the time some of these children get to year 7 or 8 the level of underachieving, the disengagement and behavioural problems have got to the point where even though they may have the intelligence to get to these SEAL programs, they are just never going to qualify because they do not have the achievements there.

I am the parent of an eight-year-old. I have had a slightly different experience from most people. We are actually going to a fairly large independent school that has a lot of resources and should be able to do it considerably better than it is doing. My experience is very similar to Alec’s. My son started at the early learning centre. At that point he could already read. He could write his name. He turned up at the early learning centre with a passion for learning and at that point his teacher was excellent. She said that he used to sit in the front of the classroom and essentially soak things up like a sponge. The following year we had another good teacher, but the curriculum was not quite challenging enough. It was not interesting enough. There were some strategies that may have been put in place that were not necessarily beneficial for him. For example, even though he was reading at level 20 in the Fitzroy readers, he had not demonstrated that to the school. They said, ‘Well, no, hang on, he has to read levels 1 through to 20’. So essentially we made him read levels 1 through to 20. Consequently he now hates to read. He is becoming disillusioned.

The CHAIR — How old is he?

MARIA — He is now eight years old and he is at year 2 at this school. Our problems started in year 1. I do not know whether or not it was just that he did not have a great relationship with this particular teacher, whether it was a personality issue or whether the strategies and curriculum were not challenging enough for him, but he became quite a problem for this teacher and this school. It became fairly evident within the first term of that year that the work they were giving him was not challenging enough. Usually he would come home, especially when he was at the early learning centre, very hungry to tell me about all of the things that he had learnt in class. That sort of stopped. He complained that it was boring. He said, ‘Why do I have to keep doing this stuff? I already know how to do it’. There were a few areas he was not doing so well in. I spoke to the teacher about

trying to work on those areas in which he was not doing so well at the expense of the things that he had mastered already and I was told that the curriculum was extremely structured and it was very difficult to make changes. When we were paying as much as we were paying for our school fees, that was the last thing we wanted to hear.

This is a child who was working on a computer when he was 18 months of age. He wrote his first PowerPoint program when he was four. I knew there was a problem when his mid-term report turned up and they had put him at grade level for information technology. A child who is programming in Visual Basic at seven-year-old level is not at grade level. At that point I spoke to his teacher and after I told her all the things he was doing at school, she said, 'Have you thought about getting him tested?'. We got him tested and essentially he tested in the moderate range with one domain in the 99.5 percentile. There have been some very positive things that have happened for us since then, largely due to the fact that we have a teacher who has committed this year to motivating him and doing some things with him. His information technology teacher from middle school has now taken him on board in a mentorship role. That has made a real difference to him, because he is now working on year 7 curriculum.

Last year we did not have a special education coordinator. This year we have an extremely good special education coordinator at the school, but unfortunately she has been shackled in terms of the administration and the curriculum at the school. She wants to work and do some things with these children, but she is not really permitted to do it.

The CHAIR — We are going to have to get you to — —

MARIA — Essentially my point is that in terms of these things, once you have that level of disengagement and this level of underachievement, these children may not necessarily get to the SEAL schools anyway.

The CHAIR — Good point, thank you. I know that Susan had her hand up. Did you want to make a comment?

SUSAN — I am Susan. I just wanted to go back to the primary school principals. I was here last week, as were a number of others in the gallery. We had some issues with their stance on acceleration and their awareness of kids' emotional readiness for acceleration. I just wanted to table a few documents with regard to that. We believe that they look at kids and say that they have social difficulties, they are not ready for acceleration; but acceleration will fix those social difficulties. The kids cannot get on with their age peers because they have nothing in common with them.

The CHAIR — I note that some additional documents have been tabled. I want to continue on in that vein. It has been clear from submissions that gifted students have particular emotional needs that require support and attention. What kind of emotional and welfare support do gifted students need, and what role should schools play in providing support to gifted students?

KAREN — Hi. I am Karen. I have spoken before. I just wanted to say that before you do the really hard programs and start looking at support programs, there are very simple ways that schools can show their support of these kids. When there is a kid getting a certificate at assembly each week for being nice to other kids or for representing the school in football or basketball, give the kid who is the best in math a certificate for being the best in math. Everyone is being recognised for everything else other than what the kids are meant to be at school for. We send our kids to school for academic training, but the schools want to recognise kids for being good at everything else but that.

The CHAIR — I acknowledge that people might have to leave during this time, so if there is something you want to say before you leave that is not necessarily related to the question I have just asked, I will give you the opportunity to now make a contribution.

FELICITY — Hi. I am Felicity. In terms of emotional support, it is mostly about recognising that they are not the only one in that position. I have been through this myself. I have watched both of my kids go through this. There is this whole question of, 'I am different'. It does not matter how much you try to pretend that they are not, they are different and they know it. One of the biggest things about clustering these kids is that they

suddenly realise they are not alone, they are not the only one, they are not the only kid who, at the age of seven, is absolutely obsessed with B-52 bombers instead of football. I think that realisation of knowing that they are not alone is huge for these kids. I know it was for me when I went to a secondary school on a scholarship and discovered other gifted girls. It was like, 'My God! I am not the only one in the world like this'. That sense of isolation is the biggest thing for most of these kids to deal with and in some ways it is the easiest one to solve, because it is all about helping them network with other kids like them.

Also, just in relation to the SEAL program which we were talking about before, one thing we have to be careful about is not grouping all of the SEAL programs together like they are all the same. We have a SEAL school much closer to home than Box Hill that we chose not to go to, because at Box Hill, with their intake of year 7s, half of the classes are either SEAL students or high achievers, therefore you have a pretty good chance of finding other like minds. Also, you are half of the school cohort, so therefore you are not outnumbered and you are not picked on, whereas at our local SEAL school there is only one SEAL class out of what is usually about eight year 7 classes. We heard from other people with kids at that school that that class is targeted, bullied and generally made to feel incredibly miserable at that school. Despite the fact that it is a SEAL school, the program there is basically failing and less and less people want to send their kids there because of this fact that the kids are so dreadfully outnumbered and that they are targeted so badly and are basically made very unhappy. Just be aware that not all SEAL schools are the same.

Ms MILLER — What kind of support and resources should schools and the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development provide to parents of gifted students? Are any of you members of support groups or networks of parents of gifted children, and if so, what kind of benefits and services do these support groups and networks provide?

SUSAN — We had a gifted support network when my children were in primary school. It fell apart when three or four other families hit secondary school, because they just could not cope with running it. There were only about 10 families involved. It was a rural area. It saved my daughter's sanity. For the record, I am Caelli's mother. My other daughter is sitting there. There is now nothing in the Ballarat area in terms of support for parents of gifted children. The group started out when Caelli was in grade 3, and we had support from the department of education. There was a teacher from one of the high schools who was heavily involved for the first year. It ran for three or four years and then just sort of disintegrated, and the department had no involvement with it after that first year. Those sorts of parent groups need some support from the government in order to keep going, because the people who need it most are the ones who have the most problems and who cannot put their time into running the group. There needs to be some form of government support for the parents in that manner.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much. Anyone else?

HEIKE — It is Heike again. It is kind of obvious, because I am part of a support group. We did not have any support from the schools, we did not have any support from the government or any thing; we were just a bunch of parents who got together when the special local program had a special forum about gifted education. We all realised there were more people out there and we thought we would just make a group, and that is what we do. We meet at my house and we sometimes get quite motivated. We have tried to encourage people from all the different schools that are involved with us to get out there and give their schools a kick in the bum to get them going. Also, we find that people find out about us through other people. People from the schools or people from outside the area have friends who then find out about us, but there is no support from anywhere else.

The CHAIR — Susan mentioned that it would be useful to have some department support in addition; not necessarily financial support.

HEIKE — What I would love to see is department support in terms of making schools more aware that we exist and just changing the attitude. There should be somebody responsible for gifted and talented children in each — what do you call them? — educational area, like the eastern region, and in the local clusters as well. That would help. We would love to have them and talk to them, but, as I said, some of them are not exactly parent friendly.

HENRIETTE — I have just begun a support group in our area called BADGER, Bairnsdale and district gifted education reform, and we like the analogy also of badgering. Our school is informally supporting us by letting us use the hall for no cost. We have set up a charter and we have some action points we are working on. One of them is to meet with the regional director of the department of education. She has agreed to an appointment, so we have some specific things we would like to ask such as bringing groups to our area, like G.A.T.E.WAYS-type programs, pull-out programs, school holiday programs, that sort of thing. But it is totally parent led, and if there are any financial costs, I think we have to just have to wear them ourselves.

We advertised in the local paper. The people who turned up were just from our school. We would really like to be able to advertise ourselves, but there is no way of approaching other schools to say, 'We are doing this; come on board'. We do not know how to get the parents from the other schools on board as well.

Ms MILLER — What support can a school offer individual parents? Do you have any ideas on that?

HENRIETTE — Individual parents.

Ms MILLER — Rather than support groups, individual support.

HENRIETTE — I think really it is a time issue, to take the time to sit down and to, firstly, have their children tested without being asked to do that. But let us say that the children have been tested; to sit down and make a plan for their future path. That is what I am always concerned about; what is going to happen next year and the year after and the year after that. I can see that the gap is widening between ability and what she is actually being provided with. There is a need to sit down and have planning sessions. At the last parent-teacher interview I had with the teacher I said, 'I think we need a bit of extension', and she said, 'How would you like me to do that?'. I said, 'I don't know, I'm not an educator. I would love to know how to tell you how to do that?'. They feel at a loss. Do not get me wrong, I think her teacher is fantastic, but I just do not think she has the resources, the information or the materials to be able to provide for the child. I do not think they know what to do.

EMMA — Hi, I am Emma. As a parent of gifted children, I would feel supported if my school knew what it was dealing with when it said, 'You have a gifted child', and if it knew that, it took the lead and said, 'Don't worry; we have dealt with this before. We are educated in this. We are up to date, and we know what to do. You don't worry about it; you worry about parenting your gifted children. We will manage the educational side of things?'

MARIA — I am just going to briefly add to that. If our school had a gifted and talented coordinator, somebody we could go to as a designated person who said, 'I am the person with expertise. If you have any questions, I am the person to talk to', and who can then put other parents, with their consent, in contact with each other so we know who the kids are with like minds, then we could organise playgroups or whatever, and that would be something that would be really helpful. We do not have one; we would love one.

Ms MILLER — Many submissions from parents suggest that there should be a statewide gifted education policy or a policy on gifted education in each school. What kind of policy or other guidance is needed, and what kinds of things need to be included in this policy? Should this policy or guidance be at a school, state or federal level?

FORUM PARTICIPANT 2 — This is a point I have always thought about myself. I am always amazed it was never mentioned that there is no statewide policy. At our school we are really lucky; we have a principal who is really supportive, as my husband, Forum Participant 1, has mentioned. She is happy to work with us in what we want to do at the school, but we are just parents. She is just the principal, and she has no support at all. She says, 'I do not know what to do. I go to the department and I look on its website. There is nothing there, or whatever is there is out of date. I am coming to you, as parents, asking you to tell me what to do'. We have to go back ourselves and read all sorts of literature — all sorts of books — and we are trying to come back to her and offer suggestions when that is not really our job. Our job is to parent our children at home and hope that the school is going to do the job it is supposed to do, which is to educate our children. That is not happening.

I think if the department had a policy in place, at least that is something the schools can then look to and say, 'That is some sort of support for us'. Once the policy is in place the school can have its own guidelines and move whichever way it needs to for its own particular school and its cohort of children, but at least there would be a framework. At the moment there is no framework and there is no support, and it is very difficult for the school to even know which way to go or for parents to do the same. I think that point — that a policy needs to be in place — is really important.

Ms MILLER — What kinds of things do you think should be included in that policy?

FORUM PARTICIPANT 2 — Each individual person who has been up here and spoken to you about what they would like for their child's education, that is what that policy should cover. I think everyone has covered it really well, with curriculum compacting, clustering and making sure these children are with like abilities and like minds. Select schools do that really well, and there has been lots of opposition to select schools from the principal groups for whatever reason they have. They already have that policy in place, and it is working. That is my point.

MELISSA — In looking at what the policy should cover, I think it is a simple one — it is that education meets the educational needs of the child. What you have heard here is that many parents feel the education is not doing that.

I think there are probably three levels: there is the government policy level, there is the school policy level and there is the individual teacher level. My feeling is that the government policy level is probably not too bad. You are hearing a lot of things about some areas of improvement. Some school policies do exist, and that is great. I come from a school where it is actually working very well. They have a very differentiated curriculum and an ability group across large age groups. It works pretty well, so schools can do that.

What we have found in our experience is that so much comes down to individual attitudes of teachers and also of principals, as I think you have heard here. From my side I think the easiest way to try to fix those things is talking about awareness raising, and I do not know if the people around would agree with this. When you are talking with people you can see straight away whether they get it. Do they actually get the gifted education stuff? If they do not, it is actually very hard to have any sort of discussion. You can have all the individual learning plans in the world and you can have the best school policy, but because they do not actually get what you are talking about, it does not move.

I just wanted to follow on from Forum Participant 1's comments and look at some of what I found to be really depressing submissions that have come in from principal groups and the Victorian Independent Education Union et cetera. I will do this quickly. I saw three basic errors, I think, in them, and I just wanted to focus on those.

One is that they are quite suspicious about whether giftedness exists in some areas. There is thinking that says an opportunity for some children is somehow a detriment to others, and I think there are times when there is a sense you prioritise individual children's needs. I just wanted to go through those. The test I use myself so often when people say things about gifted education is to ask, 'Would you say the same thing about sport or people with disabilities?'. If your sentences do not work for those, it probably does not work. There is the idea that all children are gifted. If you said all children are good at sport, clearly that would not be true. I am one of those who was not, so clearly that is a nonsensical statement. If you are saying things like, 'A young Nathan Buckley can only kick 10 metres because the other kids can kick 10 metres; he is not allowed to kick 20 metres', you would just think that was an enormous waste of potential, but we let that thinking go on in gifted education.

There is the idea that any opportunity for one group is a detriment to others. With things like sports camps there are no particular issues; no-one worries about them. The Australian Institute of Sport does not get the same flak that selective academic schools do because we just accept that exceptional performance in sport is okay, and we want to encourage that. We do not have the same thinking. We had this at our school when we were looking at the Australian Mathematics Competition, which my daughter wanted to do. The principal's response to that was, 'Oh, we don't encourage competition in curriculum areas'. I had to stop a second and say, 'Well, actually kids do basketball and district athletics. They're curriculum areas too, and you don't mind kids who like basketball

playing with other kids who like basketball'. If kids want to do maths, let us not have this sense that a special program is, in some way, a detriment.

The last one I want to focus on is the idea that you get to prioritise children's needs. This is what I find quite offensive about some of the discussions of selective schools, and I want to say why. Looking at something like the work being done by Professor Stephen Lamb of the University of Melbourne that says that selective schools are a problem because they are a detriment to the kids who are left behind, again, I use my test. I use it with children with disabilities. First of all, I am not sure the evidence is there. I have looked at his publications, and I do not see any concrete evidence that there is a detriment to the children who are not selected. But let us say there was and that we could show it. Would we feel okay if we said, 'It is really good for kids in mainstream environments to get some contact with children with disabilities. It is really good for their development. It is terrible for the children with disabilities, but it's more important that we look after the mainstream kids'. I think that is, essentially, the argument we are letting run here. We are saying it is okay, somehow, to sacrifice the educational needs of gifted children because it might, perhaps — not that it has been proven — help the mainstream children. I think that is quite wrong and an immoral way of thinking about it.

Just to conclude, the other thing I take from looking at children with disabilities is that one-size solutions are not usually the right approach. If you look at children with profound disabilities, sometimes it is not appropriate to mainstream them, but for children with lesser disabilities, it might be. It depends; there is a spectrum. I think it is the same thing for gifted education. There is not one silver bullet that we are going to find that says, 'This is going to completely meet the needs of all gifted children'. To me what it is about is raising consciousness and awareness, and getting that education out there so that the principals, teachers and people in the department really get it and try to work out the best approach for each individual child and to meet their educational needs.

Mr ELASMAR — My question is to parents who live in rural and regional Victoria. It has been suggested to the committee that many gifted students who live in rural and regional areas face particular challenges. What are the particular challenges faced by gifted students in regional and rural Victoria? What is your experience of this and how can gifted children be better provided for if they live in rural and regional areas?

The CHAIR — We will focus on the rural and regional parents for a minute.

WAYNE — I live in Bairnsdale. I think what will happen, if you accept for the sake of this discussion that 5 per cent of the population are gifted — that is 1 in 20 children — is that it will become harder, particularly for smaller schools. If you have a school with 20 kids in it, then you may have 1 kid. That really goes against the grain of what we are talking about, which is to bring like-minded children together. In Bairnsdale there are essentially no gifted education programs or schools. You could travel to Sale for a SEAL school, but that is for years 7, 8 and 9 in high school only. There is essentially nothing there. In terms of how that impacts on gifted kids in regional areas, I think it is fairly obvious. They have only what their parents provide for them and the goodwill of an individual teacher or principal in what they are willing to do.

The CHAIR — On that basis, what would you see as some of the potential opportunities to provide for these particular kids when you have limited numbers in these regions?

WAYNE — I think this notion of clustering is correct. You would look at putting your resources into a specific school. To give you an example, they teach deaf kids at Bairnsdale West Primary School. What they do is have the deaf kids go to Bairnsdale West. There are teachers there who specialise in teaching deaf kids, and they have the resources to do it. There is nothing like that for gifted children, so they are just missing out.

JULIE S. — For us the choice of school has been a real problem. We have chosen to go to what I would call our local school. However, it is not our locally zoned school. We chose that because of the support it offered for my kids. The education department has disallowed a subsidy that allowed us to send our children there, because it has to pay for the bus and it is very expensive. If the education department could allow schools to actually pay this bus subsidy instead of saying, 'No, we don't allow exemptions for academic reasons', it would really help us. To send our children to our locally zoned school, which, I will be honest, is all we can really afford to do if we do not have that subsidy, would be so detrimental to our children. Our locally zoned school has a policy of educating children for employment, not educating children to their best ability. I think the education department

does not understand the individuality of these kids. You cannot send them to just any old school; you have to send them to the one where they will have a bit of nurture, which our kids really need.

The CHAIR — What area are you from?

JULIE S. — I am from Creswick. Perhaps if they were to double zone, like they do for our neighbour Clunes, that would make a real difference to us. There are also a few other little suggestions I have, like easy access to information. Because I am on a low income, we cannot afford to pay bus fares and have the internet, so we do not have the internet. I do not have a very high level of education. I am not from an era of computers either, so I am not computer literate. I find going through the computer to get information quite difficult. Easy access to hard-copy information would be good, as would the department supporting school choice based on culture and support needs of the kids. I also think the school representative and the cluster ideas are great.

PHIL — With the region issue, that is where it is very important that, as it was spoken about before, all teachers have training regardless of if there are gifted students. That is something they do not recognise, particularly in the rural areas. That is also where the problem is; principals do not believe in the acceleration issue.

The problem we have had is when our eldest daughter was in grade 4 we tried to get her accelerated to grade 6. The principal did not want to have anything to do with it. We had both of our daughters tested; they came out as being gifted. That information was taken back to the school, and it took a while before the principal then wanted the education department to actually test her. That test was done, but unfortunately that test is confidential; we do not get a report on that test. He came back and said, 'She is only in the lower 90 percentile'. Luckily for us at the end of that year the education department moved him on. We had an acting principal come in the following year. He was very open minded towards our situation. When she was in grade 5 he actually got a hold of that report and told us that she was actually recorded as being in the high part of the 90 percentile. Luckily for us she was doing grade 6 work.

At the end of that year she was put into the graduation class to graduate to high school. The problem we had there was, though, that the high school she was going to — luckily for us — was in the second year of SEAL. The teachers we had met prior to that were happy to have her in the class, but they knew she was young. The problem we got was that the psychologist put a stop to it, and said, 'No, there is a social aspect to it', although her mentality was at a higher level — five or six years greater than that. Luckily, we broke down the psychologist, and she got admitted into going from grade 5 to year 7.

When our second child was going through that situation we tried to avoid her going from a grade 5 situation to a year 7 situation. The following year the principal that was appointed to the school was there basically because she had that background. They said she had a background in gifted education, so we thought we were going to be lucky. Unfortunately when our daughter was in grade 4 we wanted to get her accelerated to grade 6 so she would be a grade 6 student going into high school and having no issue in terms of psychology.

This principal, although she had a gifted background, did not want acceleration. After two terms of trying to get her accelerated, we actually moved her to another school. At that school we said we wanted her to go into grade 5. They did their own internal assessment and said, 'Yes, we are happy with that'. So she went into grade 5; the following year she went into grade 6. That went straight through the system. At one school we had a negative response, but at another school they were very positive for us. That was of benefit to us. She went into grade 6. A grade 6 student going into high school is what is supposed to happen. There are no psychology issues.

It is very important that all teachers have a background or knowledge of gifted education. There should be no issue in accelerating a student where it is needed.

The CHAIR — I am going to move onto the financial burden on parents. Certainly Julie just mentioned that. The committee has been told that the cost for parents in catering for gifted children, including accessing professional services and the user-pay programs, can be a significant financial burden. What is your experience of these? Is there a significant financial burden on parents in catering for a gifted child?

FELICITY — Yes, there is definitely a financial burden. My experience has been virtually everything I have ever been offered for my kids I have had to pay for. If I want to do G.A.T.E.WAYS, Brainwaves or anything, I have to pay for it. I have had to pay for three assessments. I have also had to pay in time; currently I do a 1½-hour round trip to take my daughter to primary school, because they at least have some notion of how to handle her. I now also pay for my son to travel to secondary school and everything. But from my perspective, I still need to find that 1½ hours in the morning and afternoon to take my daughter to that school, which then obviously limits my work opportunities.

If I actually sat down and added it up, I would be horrified by what it has cost me over the years. But yes, there is definitely a huge financial burden.

KIM — From the time my son was at kinder — I said earlier he went to a Montessori kinder; he did three years of kinder. It was five days a week, and it was 45 minutes away. The cost was equivalent to a private school for three years. At primary school some of the G.A.T.E.WAYS programs were \$150, \$200 for a one-day session. They were offered only every once in a while. I have not had him tested, simply because of the cost — I only work part time — and now we are at a private school, which I found is the only option in my area to get him what he needs, which is working out very expensive.

HEIKE — People up in the Dandenongs have similar issues to everybody else. All these programs — everything that we could possibly do — are user pays, from all the special programs like G.A.T.E.WAYS to the chess club at school, where you have to pay at least \$50 a term, to the Maths Talent Quest, which was \$20. Even for the uni of New South Wales test, you have to pay. There is nothing offered within the school — within any of the schools in the cluster, really — that is not user pays.

Ms MILLER — The committee understands that gifted children often need to access social and cultural activities in addition to academic extension — for example, music lessons or cultural events. Do you agree with this, and what kind of extracurricular opportunities should be provided for gifted children? How often should they be delivered?

JOCELYN — Some gifted children are very intense, and they do need more stimulation than is offered by the school. My children are fairly laid back, and I do not think my children would be doing any more than the average parent would be offering to their child. Most parents of a certain socioeconomic level would try to offer their children music lessons and so on. But for a child who is extraordinarily intense, and there are quite a few of them, then I would say that the burden is probably more than usual.

FORUM PARTICIPANT 1 — The previous question and this question go together for me. Within the school we have some programs which are quite good. We have WiseOnes operating at our school. That costs probably about \$800 per year, plus if you add up the various G.A.T.E.WAYS, that is probably another \$800 a year. On top of that, this is probably similar to some other comments. I think as a family we choose to advocate as much as we can at the school, so we are regularly meeting with the principal and talking to teachers or volunteering in the classroom to have a better relationship with the teacher. That is partly to know what is going on but also to show our interest for our child in education.

In terms of the extracurricular stuff, our daughter does piano lessons, and she also does drama. They are intense interests of hers, which we fund. I do not know whether it is something that the education system really should fund. I do not know if they can or they should. We could go to a private school and maybe have those things happen within the school; we choose to do them ourselves outside of school. That is really, for her, something that she has relayed to us as something she really loves. She often says that she wishes school was the way her music lessons are, where in half an hour she learns so much. In half an hour her mind is blown away, and then she has to spend the rest of the week trying to bring it all into herself and practising and making it all happen. They are expenses that happen.

But getting back to the question, I do not know whether it is something that all parents can expect to put the burden on the state education system to fund. The hard thing might be for some families who may not be able to afford it but whose children really have an intense interest in areas. Even sport or music or languages can be very expensive if you want to have more training outside of the school. But I think there is only so far the state

can go to support that, and some sacrifices have to be made by the parents, as we have made, to try to enable those interests to be developed for our kids.

Ms MILLER — It has been suggested to the committee that business, industry and community partners, and higher education institutions can develop new learning experiences for gifted students. Do you agree with this, and what learning experiences could be provided for gifted students in the wider community?

MARIA — I just wanted to give you a positive thing. The BASF company did some chemistry labs for children, where they got together and did chemistry experiments. Something like that, I believe, could be expanded very nicely to gifted children. For most of the children who were doing it, it was just a little craft thing, but our son wanted to know the basis behind it and what was happening with the chemical reaction. I think that is one instance where companies that do have a few things in place could be expanded a little bit into a gifted area as well.

KAREN — I grew up in a regional area of New South Wales. When I was in high school there was a local program called the Young Achievers program, and I saw this from both sides of the fence. My father was involved in running one particular group with his business. I also had friends who were high-achieving kids and were involved in this program in their later high school years. As part of this program they had semi-regular meetings and went to the site of the business. They formed their own business, their own pseudo-company, and ran it. They ran it based on their limited life experience at that stage but also on experience that they gained from talking to people on the site and people in manufacturing. They ran their own business for — I do not know how long exactly — a period of months. That was an ongoing program that continued for a number of years in the community.

HENRIETTE — My children have a special interest in books, as probably most gifted kids do, and I think it would be great if there was a way of bringing a community group together where writers and artists would volunteer their time and the children would go and talk to them about what it is like to be a writer and those things so they can start looking ahead to the future with some of their interests.

FELICITY — At my primary school we have a program set up that deals with Monash University engineering. They have a number of engineering students come in and run programs with groups of gifted kids. They have done robotics earlier this year, and they have just started doing the solar car challenge. The kids in the school benefit because they get access to programs that they possibly would not have elsewhere — I know my daughter absolutely loves it because it is so stimulating — but it is really good for the engineering students as well, because they then have to take their knowledge and teach someone; they have to apply it in the real world. It is a really beneficial relationship in both directions.

One of the things I like about the concept of cluster schools is that it makes it so much easier for, say, an engineering department at a university to say, ‘Okay. We’ve got these students, and we want to get them out there doing some stuff’. They then have a school that they can look at and say, ‘With the kids here, this is probably going to be a beneficial relationship’, and they can establish those things and maintain them. Too often stuff like that happens because the current principal likes it, but then the principal changes and the new principal does not. Then the engineering people might have to go and start all over again with a totally different school to find a new way to set up those relationships.

If you had permanent things, like I know Box Hill High does — it is a permanent school that permanently has gifted kids going through the program — therefore it has built up more permanent networks of mentoring people that they can draw in; they have access to uni and they have access to Box Hill TAFE. They have built those relationships over the years, and both sides benefit continually from that.

The trouble is that if you have an industry that wants to develop stuff like that, really where do they start, particularly if they are interested in accessing the primary level? They have to find an appropriate school, and so much groundwork has to be done before they can even consider running mentoring or any of those sorts of programs, whereas perhaps if you had the more established primary schools with those sorts of kids there, it would facilitate those sorts of relationships much better.

The CHAIR — Thank you. We have concluded our questions, and without giving everybody the opportunity to make a comment, I just want to give the opportunity for a quick comment particularly to people who have not had the chance to do so or those who think there is something that has not been covered.

ALEC — There is a point that I wanted to raise earlier when you were asking about what the department might be able to do. I think it would be really beneficial to have some kind of information resource, fact sheets or something, because there is a body of evidence and research about giftedness, and at the moment each parent has to research independently through the internet and all the different sources. I feel a lot of the education profession carry with them the teachings that they learnt when they were becoming teachers, and this is not necessarily supported by the current evidence.

A move towards evidence-based practice would be a tremendous help to parents who are advocating for their children. If they were told, 'This is the body of evidence, and here are the department guidelines', like there are in health or other areas to support a particular view. An example is that there is a lot of evidence, particularly for the profoundly and exceptionally gifted, that acceleration — skipping two or more grades — is almost always a net positive outcome for the child, in spite of the age difference when they end up being a couple of years younger. But the overwhelming paradigm amongst teachers and principals is the reverse. That is a really important point.

If there was a resource where some of this international research was compiled and collated, and perhaps assisted by an expert in the department to whom parents or schools could go and say, 'Here is some information for you', that would be tremendous and would perhaps be easier than trying to train every single teacher across the state.

MARIA — One thing I do not think has been touched on is that there is really no incentive for schools and educational institutions to actually have any of these programs. Unless there is some sort of legislation to say, 'You need to be doing something for these children in the same way that you need to be doing something for the children at the other end of the spectrum', nothing is going to change.

I know, from my perspective, it has been extremely frustrating because the school believes they are doing a really good job, but in fact they are not able to identify the gifted underachiever, and if you are simply using achievement as your bar in terms of saying, 'This is a child that needs to have these programs', you are going to be missing about 50 per cent of the children, and these children will then not be eligible to go into the other programs. One thing I would really like to see is something to say that as a school you need to have a formal policy that the parents can go to, as it is in New South Wales and I believe in Queensland. There should be a designated person in your school who is in charge of looking after this policy, and unless that is legislated, I do not think that is going to happen.

SUSAN — I was waiting for the question on acceleration and SEAL, which is my big bugbear. Both my daughters have been double accelerated and have gone through SEAL. Acceleration works. I know there are some people who have concerns about children at different age levels. Kirily, sitting there, finished VCE when she had just turned 16 with a lot of 18¹/₂-year-olds — one of her best friends was 19 — and it was not an issue. It was fantastic having her with the older kids. That is where she was mentally. The decision not to accelerate a child can be really detrimental, just as much as a poorly planned acceleration. Had it not been for acceleration, there would have been two wonderful children in mental institutions from our family.

KAREN — I want to make a comment that follows on from that. I am not alone when I say that the reason why I am here is that the difficulties we have experienced with our son's education are not only detrimental to his education but also to his self-esteem. It is devastating to see your six-year-old depressed and telling me that he is no good and will never be any good at anything because the thing that he is good at is not recognised.

The CHAIR — That is a very good point and probably a good point on which to finish. Jocelyn, come on up.

JOCELYN — I have been waiting to say this. When I looked at your brief I saw that it seems to be gathering information. I have no idea how much of this you are actually going to be able to put into practice. I would like the committee to remember, when trying to do that, that you are building on shifting sand. In 5 years,

10 years, will what you do today matter? Try to build so that what you build is as hard to tear down as it is to build up. For me that means schools. The reason the SEAL program still exists through all the years of hostility is because it is hard to tear down a school system. Please, build solidly.

The CHAIR — That is also a very good place to finish.

On behalf of the committee I would like to thank you for your contributions today. I am looking at the committee members, and they are overwhelmed by the passion that is in the room.

There is one word that comes to my mind that we have heard time and again from each and every one of you, and that is 'perseverance'. You have had to persevere to get to where you are at this point with your children. I am going to do something very unusual. On behalf of your children I would like to thank you, because quite often you do not get thanked for the work you do. I know each of you is a parent and would say, 'That is expected; I am a parent', but at the end of the day, as we have heard, many of your children would not be where they are if it was not for your passion and perseverance. Congratulations on doing that.

This is a very important area; it is very important to us, and each and every day we are exposed to it we become more passionate about it. We hope what we are doing will be groundbreaking and will offer a long-term solution to assist these children. Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew