

# CORRECTED VERSION

## EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne — 19 September 2011

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#### Witness

Ms J. Freitag, Coordinator, Gifted Resources.

**The CHAIR** — Welcome, Jo. Thanks for appearing before the committee. I will just go through the protocol. As you know, this inquiry is looking at gifted and talented students programs that are currently available and also opportunities that we can look at to further assist this cohort. We are being recorded by Hansard today, and you will have the opportunity to look at the evidence once it has been prepared and make any changes that need to be made that are of a typographical nature. Your evidence is covered by parliamentary privilege, which is the same privilege that we are afforded, so anything you say today is afforded that parliamentary privilege. The same does not apply for any comments you make outside, so if you were to call a press conference and say whatever you like, that would not be covered by the same privilege as in here. We will get straight into it. We will give you a minute if you want to make an opening remark or go straight into Q and A; it is up to you.

**Ms FREITAG** — I would like to thank you very much for conducting this inquiry and for the opportunity to make a submission. The main points from my submission no. 113 that I wish to highlight are that gifted students are a real group with special educational and social-emotional needs, and they require modifications in parenting, teaching and counselling in order for them to develop optimally. Also, the gifted are not a homogenous group; within the gifted group are various levels of giftedness, as described by Professor Miraca Gross. These different levels of giftedness require different types of modification to education to meet their needs.

Another point is that it is possible for gifted students to underachieve if not given suitable provisions for both challenge and support, and this is even more likely if they are either twice exceptional students, with a learning difference or disability, or if they are from geographically isolated situations, economically disadvantaged backgrounds or non-English-speaking groups. I would like to highlight the key factors in improving support and educational provisions for the gifted, which I mentioned in my submission. Do you want me to read those again?

**The CHAIR** — We have them in the submission. We might get straight into the questions, if we could. I am going to begin. Your submission suggests that permanent policies for best practice in the education of gifted students should be put in place. What kinds of policies do you think are needed, and should these policies be at the school, state or federal level?

**Ms FREITAG** — Definitely at state level and possibly at federal. I do not know about that so much, but I would like to see teacher education, for instance, being in their pre-service training and having proper gifted education not just as a one-hour extra but as a core subject so that then they are well equipped to identify and cater for students. I would like to see these things in a policy so that it is related to best teaching practice rather than to the climate of the day, so that once it is there it cannot be just waved aside or diluted.

**The CHAIR** — So teacher ed is certainly something about which you are suggesting there should be some policies in place?

**Ms FREITAG** — Definitely, yes.

**The CHAIR** — Are there any other areas that you would like to say the committee should be focusing on as a recommendation for implementing a state-implemented policy that schools could then follow? If you are suggesting that the state is an area to start, would there be teacher ed? Any other areas?

**Ms FREITAG** — Certainly support for teachers — for instance, we used to have a gifted education section with three full-time staff.

**The CHAIR** — What about identification? What policies would you like to see around — —

**Ms FREITAG** — I have heard people talk about this, and we have asked whether they should be routinely tested for giftedness. No, I do not think everybody should be tested for giftedness, but I do think that if the teachers had that education, they would be able to locate the children who should then go to a psychologist who is qualified and passionate about gifted education and who has the specific knowledge in that area — because general psychologists do not always understand the whole giftedness aspect of it — and then they could refer them for further testing. If teachers had this in their pre-service training, they would know the characteristics they were looking for.

**The CHAIR** — Your submission suggests that positive attitudes towards giftedness should be promoted and a culture that values academic achievement should be developed. What is the best way to develop a culture that celebrates academic achievement both in schools and in the wider community?

**Ms FREITAG** — It is a matter of changing the general outlook. Australians on the whole are very happy to celebrate sporting successes and to celebrate their entertainers. If the same success were celebrated in an academic way, that would be wonderful. How exactly do you do it? I know we have had things like the Shine advertisements and that sort of thing. I just think it needs more positive publicity somehow.

**Ms MILLER** — Your submission suggests that the internet should be used to facilitate education for gifted students. How can technology be used to provide better learning opportunities for gifted children?

**Ms FREITAG** — There are a number of cooperative programs which can be participated in. The ultranet has been set up recently, and that is in its teething stages still. That has the potential to link students all around the world. When my son was about 10 he was participating in the Virtual School for the Gifted, which does not exist as it was any longer, but the materials that were used there are now available through EUMY, Enrichment Units for Middle Years, which is Lynne Kelly's website. That was excellent. It was open-ended, and it allowed for participation internationally — things like that.

At one stage they had a 'describe your ideal school'. Once he had gone through his creative response to it he then settled down and said that his ideal school would be going into the classroom and to a computer station and looking up what lectures from anywhere around the world were available by webinar or teleconference. You would be able to sit in a classroom of any university around the world. Because he was very much an autonomous learner, you would be able to select what you would like to hear at the level and pace that you could receive it. That was his ideal version. There are things like this available. You can do full university courses via the internet.

**Ms MILLER** — Your submission also recommends that teachers be able to access professional development opportunities as well as professional networks online. What sort of online training and networks could be created for teachers, and who should provide these online services?

**Ms FREITAG** — Gifted Resources is an information service, so I just point out the availability of things. I have done a number of international webinars, which will last for a week or more and have presentations from around the world. These were not specifically for the gifted; they were about education in general — Global Education, Collaboration and the Reform Symposium. This was very interesting. It was not specifically a gifted provision. There are online gifted education ones. There are a couple that come from New Zealand. All the schools have Miraca Gross's program from the University of New South Wales, and they can use that. The Certificate of Gifted Education has an online component, and they can also go in person to hear that.

**Mr ELASMAR** — Your submission identifies that gifted students have particular social and emotional needs and that there should be increased awareness of their needs. What kind of training, support and resources do teachers need to meet the emotional welfare needs of gifted students?

**Ms FREITAG** — They need to be made aware of this in the pre-service training. They need to be able to recognise when a psychologist is needed, or we need to have somebody on staff who has that training and understanding. They need to realise that usually there is increased intensity and sensitivity in gifted students.

**Mr ELASMAR** — What about the emotional support that gifted students need — for example, access to networks of like-minded peers or welfare coordinators for gifted students?

**Ms FREITAG** — Yes, being in a group of like-minded people will take away a lot of the problems to begin with. The problems will be increased if they do not have a like-minded group.

**Mr ELASMAR** — Your submission says that you are often contacted by parents when they are considering homeschooling their gifted children. What advice or services do you provide to these parents, and what support or resources do parents need to effectively homeschool their gifted children?

**Ms FREITAG** — It is a big decision to homeschool; it is not an easy one. Quite often parents will talk to me because I did homeschool two of our children for part of the time. I will show them the resources that are available to them and suggest that they make contact with the Home Education Network, which has localised groups. I think they can meet up for activities, excursions, sports events and things like that. I am very happy to talk to them about their children and where they can locate the resources they need.

**The CHAIR** — In terms of gifted students with disabilities, your submission suggests that there should be an increased understanding of the needs of gifted students who have disabilities. What are the specific needs of these children, and what kinds of support and resources do gifted children with disabilities need?

**Ms FREITAG** — They need to be challenged at an appropriate level in their areas of strength at the same time as they are being supported in the areas that are not as strong. Sometimes this may involve a particular program. For instance, if they are visual-spatial learners, there might be a different way of teaching them which will make it very clear for them. If they have dyslexia, it might be a program through SPELD or something like that. At the same time as the problem is being addressed they need to have encouragement and to be challenged at the level they are at in their strong area. The use of mentors can be really important in that context.

**Ms MILLER** — Your submission says that parents often contact you for advice and support. What kind of support do parents need to help them cater for their gifted child? What specific information and resources should be made available to assist parents of gifted children, and who should provide the support?

**Ms FREITAG** — I always try to put parents in touch with a parent support group, if there is one near to them. I spoke to a group of parents in Geelong who were in the process of setting up one of these groups. I spoke about the needs of gifted students and the particular needs of parents in supporting them. I have it with me, which I could give you if you require. The main thing is that they need a feeling of normalcy. Things that are quite unusual in the general population can be quite normal in the gifted population. They need to know what things are fine and they do not need to be worried about so that they know if there is a problem. They need to know that certain things like perfectionism, introversion and a creative and very different way of thinking are all par for the course for a gifted person. They need to have knowledge about extension and acceleration programs and the sorts of needs that their children will have educationally. They need extra information and myth busting. They also need help to be able to create a dialogue and teamwork with psychologists and teachers so that parents, teachers and psychologists are all pulling in the same direction, with the children's needs at the forefront.

**The CHAIR** — Do you want to include that as part of your evidence?

**Ms FREITAG** — Yes.

**The CHAIR** — I note that the additional documents will be included as part of Jo's evidence today.

**Ms FREITAG** — They need social opportunities and support to be with other parents and to be able to share experiences of things that may not be common.

**Mr ELASMAR** — In talking about programs, your submission says there is a lack of programs for gifted children in primary school. What programs do you think we need for gifted students in primary school?

**Ms FREITAG** — At the moment there are some excellent primary schools that understand gifted education very well, and parents are prepared to travel a greater distance, or sometimes even to move house, in order to be near those schools. We do not have anything that is the equivalent of the SEAL school or the New South Wales opportunity classes. Something like that could be of great benefit.

**Ms MILLER** — Your submission says that pre-service teachers should have compulsory training in gifted education. What kind of specific training do pre-service teachers need to teach gifted students effectively?

**Ms FREITAG** — They need to be able to recognise the students, and they need to understand that they can work at a much faster rate and with increased pace and depth and that they will want to go much deeper and much broader into each subject.

**Ms MILLER** — Your submission also says there should be further postgraduate professional development in gifted education for teachers. Do you think some training in gifted education should be mandatory for all teachers? What kind of training and professional development do teachers need to properly teach gifted students?

**Ms FREITAG** — I believe they should all get it in their pre-service to a degree and then, particularly for people who are going to be teachers in SEAL schools or gifted coordinators in schools, there should be further postgraduate study.

**Ms MILLER** — I just want to touch base on a comment you made earlier when we were talking about homeschooling. I know someone who does homeschooling; they have three children. How would you suggest you bring to their attention any milestones or indicators that they may have a gifted or talented child? Is it something they could access on the ultranet or something like that?

**Ms FREITAG** — Are they already homeschooling?

**Ms MILLER** — Yes. We have talked about teachers, and you indicated they should be educated, but for the person who is homeschooling anywhere around the country, how would you suggest we — —

**Ms FREITAG** — It is a slightly different way of looking at it, because the benefit of homeschooling is that you can move as fast or as slow as needed. You can go to the depths and you can follow the child's passions. The issue of whether or not they are gifted does not come up to the same extent. It is the same as with school: if schools could do exactly what is needed for each child and if they were prepared to do it to the degree that is needed — if the child was six years ahead — then that is what you would do.

The issue of identifying giftedness is not quite as important with homeschooling. It probably would be really helpful to know, but it is not quite as much of an issue. When people ask about identifying I ask them why they want it, will it give a definite benefit and will it lead to the school giving them appropriate provision. Very often that is exactly what is needed. They need to have that evidence.

There are very many different methods of homeschooling, from complete unschooling where the child learns at their own rate in their own way through to setting up a school in the home. It depends a little bit on which model is being followed. If you are doing the school in the home, then definitely you will need to have them identified. Achievement level testing is very useful. When we first began homeschooling we had a MENSA grant which, with some achievement testing with an education consultant, we used for finding the level to start at. That allowed us to start from there and go on at our own rate.

**Ms MILLER** — It is interesting because with homeschooling you can accelerate your child and you do not have the negative emotional things that are attached and the negativity that can be associated with it as well. It is interesting.

**Ms FREITAG** — I spoke to both of our children and asked them if they did not mind me mentioning them if necessary. I also spoke to a young friend of our youngest son, who was also homeschooled for secondary. Both he and our son went back to do their VCE at year 12. Homeschooling was excellent for all of them. The styles varied greatly. The friend used the Yea AYCE program, so he had a semi-formal education which led back into education very smoothly.

I began quite formally — almost like a school in the home — and relaxed it as I began to get the feeling of it. The value of it was that you could go on as long as you wanted for any particular subject. You did not have a bell ringing to say, 'That's the end of English now. Stop the thing you're in the middle of writing', and we could move through the material as fast as we wanted to. We used the Distance Education Centre Victoria for part of the time, and they were excellent. They were flexible. I showed them the work that we had done the year before, and they said, 'That slots right in here'.

Christian was quite radically accelerated, and we got to a point where, if we had continued, he would have done VCE when he was 12 turning 13, but we stepped back to being informal for a couple of years, not with the DECV anymore. We went back to me just homeschooling. By that time, because he had had a couple of years of DECV, which was quite formal and had deadlines and things, he said that what we were doing then seemed

haphazard to him. We were able to tee up mentors for him, and that was excellent. He said that was probably the best year of the homeschooling experience, with a university tutor.

**The CHAIR** — We are going to have to wrap it up there. Thank you very much for appearing before the committee and for the contribution you made today.

**Witness withdrew.**