

CORRECTED VERSION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the education of gifted and talented students

Bendigo — 20 September 2011

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Witnesses

Pieta, Alison, and Susan, parents.

The CHAIR — I start by welcoming you to the hearing today. As you would be aware, this committee, which is the Education and Training Committee, is investigating programs and what is happening in the area of gifted and talented students and also ways forward in ensuring that this area is enriched and improved in terms of policy, framework and support. In terms of process today, we have a number of questions that we want to ask you. Everything will be recorded by Hansard, but we will not be using your full names in terms of identification, so it will just be first names as part of the evidence. You will also have an opportunity to review the transcript. If there is something that was not said or if there are errors, there will be the opportunity to fix that.

The other thing I need to point out is that, just as members of Parliament have something termed ‘parliamentary privilege’, which is protecting our process when we are in Parliament, the same thing applies to you today. Anything you say today is protected by parliamentary privilege, but if you wandered outside and held a press conference and said whatever you liked, the same privilege would not apply. Feel free to vent in this room. We want to especially welcome you today and take out some time. It is important for us to hear from parents, so thanks for coming. We might start. Is there any opening thing that any of you wanted to say?

ALISON — I was told that we could have 2 minutes. I have not timed it or anything!

The CHAIR — Yes, sure — over to you, Alison.

ALISON — We were supposed to talk about what our interest in the inquiry was. I have a 12-year-old daughter, and her educational needs are not at all, in any way, catered for by the current education system — public or private. They are not otherwise taken into account in the education funding structure. I will try to say it only once, but there is not a day that goes by when I am not consciously outraged by this. I think of it every day, and I think of the inequity and social injustice of it. My daughter is not just gifted like a 1-in-50 person; she is probably more like 1 in several tens of thousands or something like that. I have listed a few of her outstanding achievements in my written submission that you would have read, and I have also said a little about my experiences with trying to approach the education department.

I will summarise that briefly by saying that when I first approached local primary schools as my daughter neared school age, it did not even matter about their ability or inability to identify gifted children, because I told them that she was. I had done it myself. I was quite clear, and I was approaching them on that basis, saying, ‘How well will you cater for her?’. They did not need to do anything special at that stage, but they basically refused to do anything. They said, ‘We have got nothing offer you’. This was my local school. I pay taxes, and I pay rates. I have worked and paid taxes all my life, and they said, ‘No, we do not cater for her’. They did not say so in so many words because they would not do that, but that is really what they did. I told them that not only was she a fluent reader then, she was a fluent reader prior to starting preschool, so she was not really going to fit in with learning letters, was she? But they still said, ‘Well, you know, it’s a nice school. It would be nice if you came here’, and ignored what I was saying specifically.

In addition, I did further research and I approached the education department at two further levels. I spoke to the regional gifted coordinator for the Loddon-Campaspe region, and he said, ‘No, there are no other schools’. I was prepared to go to, say, the closest 15 schools. He said, ‘No, none of them are any better than any others. There is no funding for anything. They are just the same as the ones you went to’. I then rang the gifted coordinator in Melbourne, and she said she did not have anything to offer either. She just said, ‘Basically, parents of gifted children are very resourceful, and you will work something out’. It is sort of true that they are, because they are also likely to be more intelligent than other people, but it is not fair that they have to draw upon their own resources entirely, without public assistance.

What I wanted to say is that somebody like my daughter is only going to turn up at a local primary school of 100 students like Maldon Primary School once in every 650 years or something, on average. At a larger school of 300 students, which I think is the number that attend the largest primary school in Mount Alexander shire, Campbells Creek, they are only going to meet someone like her every 200 years or so. So why are they going to be ready? There needs to be something done.

My answer is home education. It is not the answer for every parent, but I do not see why we should not get some public assistance with that, because it is actually a much more cost-effective way of catering for somebody like my daughter than having a special staff member in a school bussing her down to Castlemaine

Secondary College to do secondary school maths when she is prep grade. Just to remind you, my daughter was doing year 7 maths by the end of prep year. She is currently at year 7 age; she is 12. She is undertaking her sixth and seventh units at university along with doing other studies at home in languages and music. Anyway, that is my background.

The CHAIR — Susan, do you have anything to add?

SUSAN — Yes, I would like to, thank you. Firstly, thank you for the opportunity to speak to the inquiry today. My position is as the parent of three gifted children and also the coordinator of the Home Education Network. I withdrew my boys from school back in 2000 basically because the school was unable to cater for them. The eldest, especially, suffered horrendous bullying, which made school an insufferable option. Our home education experience has been largely positive, but there have been times when I have wondered whether somebody else could have catered for them better in the academic area. However, they have been happy and healthy in a learning environment for 11 years, something that became quite apparent was not going to happen in school.

The CHAIR — Is that all three?

SUSAN — The eldest two went to school; the first for almost four years and the second for nine months — three terms. The third has never been to school. We just thought, ‘Why put him through it?’. School is a very stressful situation for gifted families, and I believe that one of the major reasons you will not have received many submissions from parents is because they are far too stressed out coping with everyday life to even be aware that an inquiry was happening. We have home-educated all these years, and my eldest son is now at university. For us the whole gifted problem has receded to a large extent because, out of the system, we have just got on with catering for them. We are not worried about year levels or about what they should be doing; we have just catered for them. But I wanted to come today to speak up for the people who are still stuck in the system — the system that fails gifted children.

The CHAIR — Pieta, I will give you the opportunity to tell a little bit of your background in terms of your story, because I have heard from the other two.

PIETA — My eldest child is only eight, so I am a lot earlier on. I have four children. My son also has autism, so it is a mixed bag, but because he is too clever he can get no help. I did not bother sending him to kindergarten because he hated drawing, colouring and painting and he was already reading fluently and doing maths well beyond his years. He just would have created havoc. Fortunately he was born in February, so I was able to skip prep and put him straight into grade 1. He only suffered bad bullying for about a month. The teacher and the school were very good, and they overcame that from his point of view. But his knowledge, his understanding, his emotions and everything went totally backwards, and his comment at the end of the year when we did home-school — he was in school for a whole year — was, ‘I never got given anything I don’t know. I don’t have to do this, Mum, because at school you only have to do what you already know’. At some point, if he had stayed in the system, he would have hit things he did not know, but he would have had three, four or five years of thinking, ‘I don’t have to do it if I don’t know it’.

He and his younger sister, who is two years younger — she is bright; I do not know whether she is gifted, but she is definitely not to the extent that he is — are attending Lockwood South Primary School one day a week. They have about 40 kids in total. Because of his autism and the big groups et cetera, we went somewhere small. He is in a 3–6 class. He basically does not participate. He keeps to himself. The teacher has said that unless he has a one-on-one person with him he does no work. He needs a full-time assistant if he is going to be in the system, but he is too intelligent and can hold a conversation, so there is no way he would ever get any funding. I am sure there are lots of kids out there in the same situation. His IQ is 140. Both he and someone with an IQ of 60 have the same difficulty interacting with peers. Someone with 60 gets a whole separate school to look after them; he gets nothing.

The CHAIR — How old is he now?

PIETA — He is eight. That is our background. Gifted kids with special needs are ignored. It is not just the giftedness; when there is an extra need, the giftedness rules out anything. If they did not have that, they would get other help.

The CHAIR — In terms of the decisions you have made to homeschool, did you consider alternative options? Some people who have fed into the inquiry have decided to move closer to Melbourne because there were more options than there were in rural and regional Victoria. Was that something you considered? Were there other things you considered before you made the decision to homeschool?

ALISON — I looked at the local schools. I rang Girton Grammar School. They did not sound very promising at all. At that stage we had moved from Melbourne only a few months earlier, and I was thinking, ‘Perhaps we should have stayed in Melbourne, now that I recognise that my daughter is gifted’. Then after a while I realised that there would have been nothing in Melbourne either. She is so far up that it was not going to make a difference, so we were very happy to be in the country and enjoying our lovely bush property. One thing I did want to emphasise is that at a certain level children are not catered for anywhere. It is not just in the country.

The CHAIR — You have one child?

ALISON — One 12-year-old daughter.

The CHAIR — Pieta, how many children do you have?

PIETA — Four.

The CHAIR — And you, Susan?

SUSAN — Three. I looked at other options, but I was involved with a parent support group for gifted children. I was hearing through that that people were having the same problem no matter where they were. Whether they were in the state system, the private system, the Catholic system, Melbourne, Geelong or Ballarat, everyone was having the same problem. I was sure that moving schools or moving towns was not going to solve the problem.

The CHAIR — Pieta, are you homeschooling one of your children?

PIETA — Two. I also have a one-year-old and another who has just turned three who I am looking after.

The CHAIR — Tell me about your decisions — obviously you were evaluating other programs.

PIETA — We were overseas before we came here, which is another reason we did not do the kinder thing, so we were semi-homeschooling then. We did look at schooling. We looked around at the options. We looked at small schools out of town et cetera. Even if you look at Melbourne and look at moving to Melbourne, there are waiting lists for any schools that have a program.

The other thing with giftedness is that you are not gifted until you are in high school. We are not in high school yet, so we cannot have gifted children! That is basically the way the system works everywhere, but the first three years of primary are probably where it will show the most — when you are reading novels when everyone else is learning their alphabet. By the time you are 10 you can read novels that are a bit thicker than everyone else’s, but at least everyone is reading. What happens in the first two or three years of school if you already know it? The other thing is that my son is extremely varied. He is very gifted in some areas, and in some areas he is actually quite behind. People assume that everything is at the same level.

The CHAIR — Have any of you or all of you had any formal assessment of your children?

PIETA — We have, yes.

ALISON — I did not. I did not think they would tell me anything I did not already know, and it was going to cost \$500 to \$1000, which would be better spent on interesting resources for education.

SUSAN — We had our eldest son tested, and that is exactly what we found. It cost us several hundred dollars for a report that did not tell us anything that we did not already know. It told us the areas he was very strong in and the areas he was not so strong in. We knew that when he was two, so it gave us a piece of paper.

PIETA — Probably the reason we had him tested was not for his giftedness at all — we could work that out — but for what else was going on because of the other difficulties he was having, and the IQ is part of that testing. That was more our purpose for testing rather than needing to know the number of his brightness. The only other thing is that teachers do not listen to you at all until it is on a piece of paper from a professional. Yes, I am a parent; I am actually also a doctor, but that was irrelevant.

Ms TIERNEY — Obviously you have made the decision to homeschool and worked out that there are advantages to it. For the record, can you identify how homeschooling has benefited your child educationally as well as emotionally?

SUSAN — Primarily the advantage has been that we can individualise instruction. With my boys I have totally thrown out the curriculum and followed their passions. I have found that to be very effective, even in covering areas that they were not so interested in. For example, one son was passionate about astronomy, so we followed that to the nth degree. We bought books, we visited websites, we joined the local astronomy club and we kept getting further and further into it. As his passion led him in a self-directed learning method in that direction, he broadened out to cover English, maths and obviously science. At one stage he was even covering physical education because he had this huge project going where he was mapping out the distances between planets and running between them. We covered the curriculum just by following passions, and that has been the big advantage for us.

ALISON — It was obviously just that my daughter could work at her own pace and not waste her life waiting for other people to catch up. I had that experience at school where I would finish the maths in 5 minutes and be ignored for the rest of the hour or so. She did year 2 maths in five weeks without even working hard or particularly long hours — just doing it when she felt like it — and it went on from there. She has read hundreds and hundreds of novels and other books and been able to follow all sorts of interests. Schools would have been a total waste of time, and it would have been damaging. The teachers would have tried to make her fit in and actually held her back — not only not developed her intellect but reined it in.

PIETA — The ability to run each thing at its own pace is good, but emotionally it has made a huge difference. School is highly stressful. He can cope with one day a week, but he copes by spending most of it reading books in the corner. He does not really participate, but he loves it and looks forward to it. They cannot cater — not because they do not want to but because they do not have the staff to cater for his needs.

Mr ELASMAR — What are the biggest challenges faced by parents who home-educate their gifted children?

SUSAN — For me the biggest challenge has been there are three of them and one of me, and it is difficult to cater individually for three children who have very separate areas of interest, particularly living in the country, so we could easily go to a lecture in Melbourne every week that would satisfy the eldest's needs, but there is a limit to how many things I can drag the younger two along to that they are not interested in, so in that respect it is difficult, as one person, to do it all.

ALISON — I suppose time and money. I am a solo parent. I have to fit in trying to do some work, and I have been conscious of having my daughter be able to go out and do things with other people as well, so over the years she went to dancing class for six years, and she has gone to swimming classes for eight years. She is not socially backward at all. She is a naturally gregarious person, in a way, as well as being a quite studious one. It is just trying to fit in all these roles with no financial support from outside. I have a conservation property, and I have a part-time job. It is very difficult, and there are so many things she is interested in, so many things she would find benefit from. We go to Melbourne once a week and try to fit in a few things, all squashed in the one day. It is time and money, and squeezing it to stretch.

PIETA — The question was about challenges? I have got two young preschoolers as well as trying to homeschool, so that is just where I am at. But I am feeling like there is no other option. I think there is an element of it would be nice to be able to send my kids to school each day, but to do so would ruin them. There is not much for them, and I can see that as the kids get older there is even less. I mean, the discovery centre here in Bendigo is wonderful when your child is interested in science, but it runs out, so you have to travel further and further. When you are limited to one income, because I cannot go and work if I am schooling children, then — I don't know whether it is in here, but, for instance, I use a more curriculum-based thing, but to buy a

teachers' workbook, it is not tax deductible. It is really expensive, so there is that element. It is a lot more expensive than sending the kids off to a school. The challenge is that different gifted kids have very different patterns, like Susan was saying. Likewise, in a classroom they cater to everybody.

SUSAN — Could I just add that there are no days off when you are a homeschooling parent. Once you pull them out of school, it feels a bit like stepping off a cliff, and you know that this is it. They are your responsibility now, and that is a bit scary.

Ms TIERNEY — Firstly, once you made the decision, what did you do to go about preparing for homeschooling? Susan, you gave the example in respect of curriculum, the astronomy case that you had. How did you go about generally designing a curriculum for your children and sourcing learning materials?

ALISON — In the very beginning, while Amelia was still in preschool — we get on very well — I thought, 'Would we get on well in that relationship?'. So I went out and looked for a maths book, because we had never done maths. I looked at prep, and it was obviously too easy. I looked at grade 1, and it was obviously too easy. I got to the grade 2 one, and that was the first thing I did. She whipped through that in five weeks, and she was still in kindergarten. We went on from there, and she said, 'I want the next one', and, 'I want the next one', so we started off using those workbooks you can buy. I got some English sort of ones to start with, and then we branched away from that.

Also I should mention that the other resource homeschooling parents use is the internet. There are email groups sharing experiences with other homeschooling parents of other, say in my case, really highly gifted students, including international ones. There are a couple of American lists, and of course they have 10 times the population, so you are going to get 10 times the number of exceptionally and profoundly gifted students there. It is big enough to have a list of parents. Those sorts of resources are invaluable. They tell you about online courses, personal difficulties faced in doing things and directions they have taken. That is absolutely invaluable to having an international community of similar people.

The CHAIR — Are you able to recall some websites that you could share with us, particularly some of the international ones?

ALISON — 'Hoagie's gifted education page' is a good grab bag of everything. The woman who did that is an American with two profoundly gifted daughters. I think she started in 1998, and she successively covered every aspect of everything — lists of everything. No-one would want to use all of these things, but that would practically lead you to anywhere else you would ever want to go to as a directory.

The CHAIR — That is good.

SUSAN — Back to the curriculum bit, when my boys came out of school, they were so stressed that we just totally backed off and had a holiday to begin with. The fighting, screaming, kicking and punching went on every day after school and every day before school. I got them up in the morning, and the fighting started. I dragged them out of the car into school and had them clinging onto me while I was trying to get back into the car. After school it started again. So when they came out of school, we just consciously concentrated on de-stressing and having a holiday, and at the same time I was trying to research homeschooling methods.

I read a book by a man called Alan Thomas, who talked about home-educating according to children's interests and letting them follow their interests to learn. What he talked about reminded me of how the boys learnt before they went to school. I did not teach them to read, but they were both reading. My son Matthew started school with *The Magic Wishing Chair* packed in his bag for reading time. James started school and I thought 'Isn't it cute? He likes maths' and then discovered that it was actually grade 4 maths he was doing. The method of allowing children to learn and following their interests made sense to me, and that is what we did. Things calmed down and they regained their love of learning, which they lost in school, and we took it from there.

PIETA — Like Alison said, in America there are different figures, but a lot of Americans homeschool. There are lots of curriculums made by people ranging from basically very rigid to a lot less rigid, so I researched lots of different ones. In my first year I used one that is very literature and reading-based because my son loved reading. Likewise he was needing to just back off and let the emotion — because if a kid is highly stressed, they are not going to learn anything anyway, so there is no point just keeping on going when they are stressed and

angry. I had a three-month-old when I was starting out too, so we just did a more reading-based thing, and we have progressed on to what we use, always in a constant debate as to how much computing to use.

There are lots of good programs out there like Mathletics and Spellodrome that lots of schools use, so I tend to use a number of things that schools use, but I hand-pick ones that my children are interested in rather than saying, 'This school uses these ones', and, 'This school uses these'. I can say, 'That one, that one and that one' and try to do more. It is easier as the young ones get older and there are more out-and-about excursions and hands-on type things. A lot more learning happens there than trying to do actual bookwork. For my son, writing is still a war zone, so the learning has to happen in other ways than what would be expected of a grade 3 child, which is lots and lots of writing.

Mr CRISP — I think Alison is probably going to lead us off with this one and talk about what supports parents in Victoria who educate their gifted children at home need and how support for parents who homeschool their gifted children can be improved?

ALISON — There is really none at the moment. I started an email list about four or five years ago. It is not a high-volume one; I think we have about 25 or 30 parents on it, and they are all home-educating children in Victoria because they are gifted. They chose to home-educate for of that reason. Just sharing things is some consolation for the lack of support in other ways. I think there needs to be some funding. It would be cheap at the price. It is costing me about \$9000. My daughter insists on doing a full-time uni load. I keep saying, 'Just do one unit a study period'. She is doing OUA as well as all the other stuff she does, and when she has had a whole year it will have cost me about \$9000 just for that. But if you look at what the per capita allocation of funding is for kids in schools, it is more than that. Last time I looked it was about \$8000 per primary school and \$10 000 and upwards per secondary school student, and if my daughter were in a school, none of that would be devoted to her anyway — it would not be devoted in a way that would help her. It would be spent; the school would get it, but it would not be spent on her.

I think there would need to be some sort of unit in the education department in Melbourne, some first point of call. I don't know whether there is anymore; I think the previous government abolished or downsized it to the point of zero — —

The CHAIR — In terms of the support networks, Susan, you run the — —

SUSAN — The Home Education Network.

The CHAIR — Could you tell us briefly how many parents are involved in that network, and are you two involved in that network or in another network?

ALISON — I have been a tiny bit, but really it is just all home-educated children, and we do not have a lot in common with all home-educated children, so it has not been of much relevance to me, but it was handy to know that there were other people home-educating out there when I first started it.

PIETA — I am sort of involved in another one. I have only recently worked out that they are two separate things. I guess some of the things are relevant and some are not. Most of it is just email and a magazine; sharing ideas, sharing approaches — sharing all that sort of stuff.

SUSAN — The Home Education Network is basically information and support for anyone home-educating their children, and there is only a small subsection who are home-educating gifted children. I am primarily involved to help people with finding information, generally, about home-education.

The CHAIR — How many parents would be involved in the network in the broader sense, and how many would be specifically educating gifted and talented children?

SUSAN — The Home Education Network currently has 400 family members, but what we find is that a lot of people join when they come out of school and may keep their membership up for one or two years. Once they feel confident they let that membership lapse. Often they are still involved in social groups and activities that are either run by or connected to the network, so it is broader than the 400 who are strictly members.

The CHAIR — Are you able to identify through that membership the parents of gifted and talented — —

SUSAN — No.

PIETA — Could I go back to Peter's question about what other support could be provided? One of the things my son gets is a Helix Club thing. Those sorts of magazines often congregate gifted kids because they are interested in advanced science and stuff, and all of the meetings are in Melbourne. All of them require a family of four to go down for an entire day for a 40-minute session over the school holidays. How can we be supported better?

Mr CRISP — For the travel costs?

PIETA — No — getting something here. I cannot take four people down for a day, five days in a row over the school holidays just for one child. We need to ensure that things are not just — I forget what it is called — for one day a year. It is fun, but that is not support; that is just a particular event.

Ms RISELEY — Are you referring to the Able Learners' Enrichment Program?

PIETA — Yes, that's it. Everything is so congregated in Melbourne that you really are very much isolated. I know people who are more rural and more in trouble than people in regional centres. We need to have stuff in regional centres, and I am talking regularly, monthly. This is the first time I have met Alison. I will get to meet other parents, and my son will get to meet other kids who are around his age and have the same intellect so he can relate.

Mr CRISP — Thank you, Pieta. You have answered a little question in my mind. Teleconferencing is not going to do that.

PIETA — No, the kids need to be able to meet other kids. Yes, within that there will be ranges, but at least you are going to have a bit more of a connection. That will not necessarily help Alison. She will need a whole world conference.

ALISON — My daughter did get to go at grade 3 age to a Miraca Gross talent search at the University of New South Wales, and she got the top score for a grade 3-aged person in the country. One hundred and something kids in grade 3 to grade 6 got to go there. It was a week-long camp. You still had to pay \$750 to go there, but it was subsidised. That was the last year they had it because the funding was withdrawn. She had a ball. She was with grade 3 to grade 6 children, and it was an eye-opener for her. They had science topics all week and were sleeping in dormitories. They thought they would be going back the next year, and everybody said, 'See you next year. This was wonderful'. It was the last time they ever had it. It ran for 10 years and was a national thing. That was the top of the tops. It was something that was necessary, but it was still only tokenism, because it was only one week a year.

SUSAN — Could I add that I agree with both comments by Alison and Pieta that something here would be fabulous, because especially when you have a number of children, as Pieta and I have, travelling to Melbourne for something for one student means that the other two have just got to tag along. Going to Sydney, possibly for a week, with an eight-year-old when you have younger children is not terribly practical either.

ALISON — Some of them were just put on planes and shipped in, I think.

SUSAN — Some children are more confident than others in social situations. Putting one child on a plane and sending them to something that was going to be fabulous would work, for others it would be far too horrific to contemplate.

Another thing about support is that it would be really good to have a gifted unit within the department and as part of that to have phone support for parents, teachers and home-educators of gifted students so that there would be a central point we could ring, or people coming behind us could ring, for advice and to find out what resources are available. If that unit could be giving advice to teachers about departing from the set curriculum, especially, that would be really good.

ALISON — When students first enter a school, they should be broadly assessed to see if there are any major gifted people amongst them who need further support. I think it is probably not practical to have every teacher in every school totally trained in giftedness, but they should at least be able to say, 'This person is a little different; maybe I need to send him on to a specialist'. This is similar to a medical situation. Every GP does not

have to know about every rare disease and unusual operation or such things. But you need to be at least a little aware, be able to funnel them on and then be supported back at the school with specialist expertise.

The CHAIR — We have already heard today about the value of having the support cluster network group you could feed into for information, support and so on. Do you think that is the sort of thing that would be helpful in rural and regional areas if it were, say, supported by the department?

SUSAN — In some respects, yes, but there has always been an ongoing problem. If there is one teacher in a school who has the gifted portfolio, they continue to go off to conferences, and they come back all keyed up and knowing what to do, but no-one else will listen to them. I think that a cluster encourages that sort of thing. There needs to be general education for teachers. It might not be every teacher's specialty, but at least if they had some knowledge about it, that would help.

ALISON — Yes, a knowledge that everybody is not the same, that there is a huge range of possibilities. That is the guts of what they need to know — with a bit more detail — but every teacher needs to know that much.

The CHAIR — And a parent support network run in a similar way that had support from the department?

SUSAN — That would be very good. My experience of a parent support group in gifted is that the parents burn out. For a long time I was involved in the Parents Association for Children of Special Abilities, and what ended up happening was that the committee were basically resourcing parents who contacted us, rather than receiving any support ourselves. We had no funding and no resources. We were just trying to help other parents. It does become very tiring, and it is very emotional listening to people's problems and not having the power or the authority to help them.

Mr CRISP — Pieta, this is for you because I would like to talk about gifted children with learning disabilities, and you have got a son who falls into that category. I know he attends school one day a week. You said he is happily left in the corner to read. What support should be provided in schools for that student? The second part of the question is: what support and resources are needed by parents who homeschool their gifted children with that kind of disability?

PIETA — In school, basically the teacher has said that he needs an aide full time — or part time. Unless there is someone standing beside him, she turns around and he is gone. I have asked, 'If he was full time, would you get that support?', and she said, 'No, he is too intelligent'. Therefore that totally rules him out of anything.

There is another child in the school who has severe autism, who is behind in everything, but her speech pragmatics, meaning how well she can hold a conversation, is passable, so she gets nothing, because she can hold a conversation. They said that in every single other area she is behind. There is something wrong with the whole thing.

If people with difficulties are getting more and more integrated into schools, then having one criteria being the most important, ruling out other things and saying, 'If your IQ is above 70, you get nothing' — or whatever the cut-off is — then everything else does not matter. It does not matter that he does runners, it does not matter that he goes into the corner and it does not matter that he hits kids. That is all irrelevant because he is intelligent. In social intelligence, he is very immature, but that is irrelevant because he is intellectually intelligent, so there is something that is misunderstood. Just because you are bright at maths, science and reading does not mean that you can cope in a classroom and does not mean you do not have special needs. That whole concept that one thing says there is no other special need is the problem. What does he need? He needs an aide. Even if he had an aide for half a day — he does the hour's work in 10 minutes when he actually gets on with it, but it can take 3 hours to actually start those 10 minutes. So it would not actually have to be full-time, but he could have an aide for part of it, and he is in a 3-to-6 class, which means there is the flexibility.

Another thing about schools is that it seems there is a thought that composite classes seem to be terrible and you should get rid of them as soon as you have got enough kids in your school. That works really badly for these kids, because gifted kids often are not gifted in everything, so just class skipping does not help either, because then you are going to fail half of the year. Composite classes actually work really well, because you can do grade 4 reading, prep writing and grade 2 maths, because the kids are all there, so it is not harder for the teacher if they can forget what your date of birth is.

Mr CRISP — What about resources at home?

PIETA — At home I need breaks. That is why he is in school, and he goes and reads in the corner. It is really hard work, and you get nothing.

The CHAIR — We are going to have to wrap it up there. On behalf of the committee I want to thank you especially for coming in today and sharing your personal stories with us. It is obviously a very important area, and certainly we have not heard, up until this point, the homeschooling stories that you have been able to share with us and we really thank you for telling us. We wish you well in all areas and the work that you are doing with your children. Thank you again for coming in.

Witnesses withdrew.