

CORRECTED VERSION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the education of gifted and talented students

Bendigo — 20 September 2011

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Mr J. Geary, Director of Teaching and Learning, and
Ms S. Cody, teacher, Catholic College Bendigo.

The CHAIR — Thank you for coming before the committee. Firstly, by way of introduction, we are looking at the areas of gifted and talent students, the programs that are currently available and the opportunities to improve options in this area. In terms of the process today, we have a number of questions to ask you. We will also give you the opportunity, if you would like, to make an initial statement. Do not feel compelled to do that, but if you have something, that is fine.

We will be recording everything via Hansard. You will have an opportunity to look at that and, if there are any errors, to have those corrected. I also need to point out that your evidence at the hearing today is covered by what we call parliamentary privilege. It is the same privilege that is afforded to members of Parliament, but it does not apply to anything that is said outside of the room, only to what is said during the hearing itself.

Welcome, and we will get straight into it. Would you like to make an opening statement?

Mr GEARY — Yes, probably just to quickly give a context around our school. We are a school of 1900 students from years 7 to 12. We are based at two sites: one city-based site for years 10 to 12 and one site that is about 8 kilometres out of town for years 7 to 9. The school is the only Catholic secondary provider within Bendigo, although that will change in a few years time when a new Catholic secondary college will be established just outside of town. In terms of the school's social demographic, just as Bendigo has those significant levels of social disadvantage up to advantage, our school captures all those cohorts across the town. We are a low-fee-paying secondary Catholic school, and our collection rate of fees is probably around 75 per cent to 80 per cent. About 20 per cent of our school population do not actually pay the fees. That is our school.

The CHAIR — Getting straight into the area of gifted and talented students, what specific programs or educational opportunities do you provide to gifted students at Catholic College Bendigo?

Mr GEARY — In terms of maths, we have an advanced maths program for year 8s and 9s. Those students are identified during their time in year 7, and then they move into a number of advanced maths classes after that. From there most of our programs would tend to be more individually based and individually catered, and I would say that most of those programs are based on extracurricular-type activities with which we try to extend our students. Sarah is probably better to take over from here.

Ms CODY — We have events on the calendar all the time that students can get involved in — different competitions ranging from arts to more academic competitions and events and programs. We promote those to all students. Often the take-up is not so good, so then we have refined that process to those students we have identified with talent in that area and then we get those students involved. As John said, those things are changing all the time. It can be quite ad hoc at times, but there are certainly plenty of opportunities for students to get involved in things that extend them. As John said, they are mostly extracurricular programs.

Mr GEARY — Being a bit more specific on that, our students are involved in some of those things like Tournament of the Minds. We have a range of opportunities from year 7 to year 12 in terms of debating and public speaking that our students attend and perform at, generally fairly successfully, and through the Catholic Schools Association we also have a strong performance culture and success around music for our students all the way through. I guess we invest a fair bit of our staff time in that and also in terms of our financial commitment to that. Other things we look at around that as well are things like voice choir, so we certainly do cover that. We encourage all our students to become involved in the national maths competitions, while it probably varies in some of the other curriculum areas whether they participate in those types of national events on a year-to-year basis. It sort of ebbs and flows. It is always around maths and sometimes around the English, humanities and science areas as well.

Ms CODY — With the co-curricular, sometimes we struggle to get numbers. The school has been working towards having its own competitions and events as well, so we have art prizes and we have writing prestigious awards. We are trying to build up things internally within the college.

Ms TIERNEY — Teacher training has featured fairly heavily in this inquiry, so what are your views in terms of the pre-service and in-service training that is required, and do you think that training in gifted education should be mandatory?

Mr GEARY — I am not sure that training in gifted education should be mandatory. More sophisticated training in differentiation of curriculum, which would cover that, we would say needs to be undertaken. We

know, and I guess all educational research would point to the fact, that individualised learning is becoming more important for kids in the way that they learn presently, which is probably a little bit different to what it was 15 or 20 years ago. We would say that our new staff who come in and our existing staff are not necessarily well equipped to understand it; they know that is what we have to do, but understanding how you go about doing that is something else. At our school we are very much focusing over the next three years on a stronger push around teaching and learning because we are a school that has been very good at supporting our underachieving students and very good at supporting the middle ground, but we know in terms of those gifted students that we do not value-add as much as we should. I think that is because our staff struggle to understand how they do that. In a class of 27 or 28, how do you cater to those gifted students?

Ms CODY — It is often a reactive process, too. It is not planned for, so sort of halfway through the unit, it is ‘I need to do something about this’, and that really depends on the experience you have as a teacher and how comfortable you are with your curriculum. I am not sure in relation to La Trobe, having spoken to the people who work in gifted education there, of their take-up in their gifted education unit. I am not sure whether that is actually even happening any more. There used to be a really strong push for that, and I am not sure whether they run them at all any more.

Ms TIERNEY — I think we learnt this morning that they do not.

Ms CODY — I think it would still be valuable to have that.

Ms TIERNEY — Is there currently any professional development in this area for the teachers at your college?

Mr GEARY — At the moment it would not be a strong focus, as I said, for us. We are setting ourselves up over the next three years to have stronger conversations around teaching and learning, and parts of that will be around differentiating curriculum. It will be one of the things that we hang our hats on in terms of the changes that we are making based around that. One of the other things, I think, before that step of saying to staff, ‘We need to better equip you in terms of the strategies around that’ is to convince some staff of why we need to do things differently around that.

One of the difficulties that we have around that is the lack of data around NAPLAN results and VELs results that come through from our primary schools through to the secondary schools. Our NAPLAN results came out last week, and we can unpack that for our staff now, especially for our students who are in year 9. We can look at their results back in year 7 as compared to what they are in year 9, and we can say, ‘This is the cohort that you have got individually’ within each of our classes. We cannot do that for when the students come in in year 7 because we do not have access to their NAPLAN results and we do not have access to their VELs results. So we are waiting for two and a half years before we can provide some good data and start to explain to our staff, ‘You have got four or five kids in your class who are achieving right up the top. What are you doing for them? How are you engaging those students?’.

We do other testing, but the simplest way of going about it would be to use the testing that is already done before they come in. The Victorian individual student number that is coming through is obviously the way for that to take place, and the ultranet obviously does that too in terms of its rollout, whereby that information travels with the student. But we are only starting, in terms of Catholic education, to dip our toes in the water around that. I think there has been a heads of agreement signed around us getting on board with that in the next 12 months or so, but that is pretty important, I think, in terms of being able to convince classroom teachers that we need to do things differently. You have to have some evidence to say why.

Ms TIERNEY — And being a regional college, what are the challenges that you face in terms of PD?

Mr GEARY — I think there are some significant challenges around that, although we would probably say that our model around professional development, or what we call professional learning, is that, while a culture probably gets created, to get professional development you jump in the car and head to Melbourne. That is obviously expensive. We are trying to change that culture within our school, and we say to our teaching staff, ‘Let’s bring the experts to you rather than you going to the experts’, because we know that if we send an individual staff member to Melbourne, we probably do not get much out of that. We need to get more people into the schools. Obviously there are costs involved in that and there are challenges involved with that, and if you can find ways to support us in that — yes, we would welcome that.

Ms CODY — With the VAGTC, their lectures for teachers always seem to be twilight, which is not an option for us. We have used, and I have been pushing to use the government's PD package, the six modules package that anyone can access through the internet. That is fabulous for staff to self-pace their own professional development and it has fantastic content, but the reality is that there are not going to be a lot of people, even with a large staff like ours, who are going sit down and find that time to go through it. I did have one tiny ad for it this year, but, as John said, there does not seem to be a huge specific professional development in gifted education and it does not seem to be a huge priority within the staff. The broader context is what the school is going to look at.

Mr GEARY — From our point of view, in terms of professional development and professional learning, obviously the government schools have had the programs around teaching and learning coaches in the school over the last few years. We obviously do not have the resources or luxury to be able to put those things in place, and we would much rather have a model where there is someone with expertise around differentiating curriculum working with us over a period of time, because that will make more of a difference than a one-day session. They are working alongside staff and basically walking with them in terms of the changes that are taking place. That is a better model than one person coming in and then moving away — not to say that the other stuff is not valid.

Mr CRISP — I think you are drifting this way, so I will direct you a little. What kind of education do teachers need, and what other support or resources do teachers need to help them identify giftedness?

Mr GEARY — I think some of our staff need a better understanding of what giftedness is and the diversity within that. I would think that is it. As I said earlier, we need greater access to data in a more simple manner than how we can get it at the moment. That would help around that.

Ms CODY — People understand it comes from a range of sources — it is testing, but it is also observation. It is what parents have noticed as well, and it is what previous teachers have noticed. It is a whole collection of information. It sometimes seems to take a long time for a student to become identified, because it is not always just through your own testing. I agree with John; I think our staff probably need more education in that, but again it is what their definition of giftedness is too. Some people have very different ideas about what it is, and they are not always sure whether that student is gifted or not gifted.

Mr GEARY — In relation to trade training centres, we have been fortunate that within Bendigo we have a consortium approach whereby we share that site with Bendigo senior. It has more of the building and construction-type things. On our junior site we have 20 acres. We have moved into agriculture out there. We have a fantastic facility that has been built out there, and I do not think there would be any other facility better than that in the country. It provides an opportunity in terms of giftedness in trade-related areas as well. At the moment people would see that as an advantage because it helps us engage some disengaged kids. We would say that what comes through that — and we have been running a program in ag. for a fair time — are some incredible students who go through that program, and we see the outcomes of that. While academically they will not be our top VCE students, in terms of where they sit within the community, they are extremely strong contributors around that, and we need to broaden that notion out.

Mr CRISP — It has been suggested to the committee that technology could be particularly effective in providing learning opportunities for gifted students in rural and regional Victoria. How does Catholic College Bendigo use technology to provide learning experiences for students, and what kinds of programs and resources could be provided online for gifted students in rural and regional areas?

Mr GEARY — I think that is critically important, and I think it is an opportunity as well. We have just rolled out to all year 9 and 10 students a one-to-one program. They all have tablets. They have one of these, the same as what I have — that type of thing. We are moving through a change in the way we are engaging with our students around that. It provides us the opportunity to look at our structures differently in terms of the way we set up a timetable and the way we set up learning. I think that notion that we can connect to other parts of the world and to larger centres is particularly important, so we would certainly be interested in programs that support our students and that some of our students could be enrolled in that would maybe be delivered centrally. At the moment we struggle to provide them with access to that. We would like to be in a situation where we can extend that.

Ms CODY — That is right, and opportunities for independent study.

Mr GEARY — Part of the issue around that is bandwidth. We have moved to providing these to all our students, but our bandwidth is not particularly broad. When we add this to our wireless network at school, everything slows down and reliability is an issue. We have made a commitment at our senior site to increase our bandwidth by four times, but it has cost us \$80 000 to do that. That is a strong commitment, but then we will have all our year 10s to 12s with access to these. If we want to stream video into where students are sitting in a classroom at Bendigo and sharing a class that is being delivered somewhere else, we need a system that is reliable. Technology is important, but bandwidth is critical. We can provide them with great machines, which we have, but if the pipe is not big enough, we are in trouble. If you can get the national broadband network in Bendigo in a hurry, we would welcome that.

The CHAIR — There have been some negative attitudes towards giftedness amongst educators in the wider community — that is what we have certainly been hearing. Has this been your experience, and if so, what can be done to improve the attitudes towards giftedness in the education community and in the wider community, particularly in rural and regional areas?

Mr GEARY — I would not say that in our school there is a negative attitude towards it. We would have frustrations that we are not doing as well as we can or as well as we believe we should be around those kids with giftedness. There is a frustration around that. We are a good school, and the foundations of what we do are very much around caring for our young people, but we see some kids who have been fantastic when they walk into the school and are not continuing with that aspiration all the way through. Again, I would not say that there is a negative response from any of our staff or parents around that within our college. I would say that we are more frustrated, and we want to be able to do more. We want to extend those students more in terms of what we are doing.

Ms CODY — I would agree with John. People are very receptive to any information they get and any offers of help and support. Again it would be that they would probably love to do more, but it is the busyness, the time and the day-to-day things they need to get on top of.

Mr GEARY — I think that some of our challenges, as I said earlier, are about the aspirations of our students and ensuring that they maintain some aspirations in terms of what they are doing. We have a staff member who has been working with us for a couple of years, and he is a bit of an eccentric genius around electronics and robotics and that sort of stuff. The things he is presenting to our students are fantastic and the potential that is there is very much cutting edge, but he struggles to get students involved. I think he struggles to get students involved because in a regional centre students now very much need learning to be real and to have meaning for them. We cannot necessarily inspire those students with the state of the art about where you can go in three or four years time if you get involved in that industry, because some of that industry is not based here.

Ms TIERNEY — The committee has heard evidence that many gifted students have particular emotional and welfare needs and that in rural and regional Victoria that is compounded by that feeling of isolation. Is this your understanding or your experience, and if it is the case, what sort of emotional welfare support should be provided to gifted children in rural and regional Victoria and what role can schools play in handling this need?

Ms CODY — Within our school we have very good pastoral care within classes. Teachers are very mindful of communicating with the students and acknowledging when they can deal with the challenge, when they might need to step back a little bit or when the student might be feeling frustrated. There is a lot of communication that goes on. There is good communication with parents around that as well. We have good support with counselling staff for any students who have issues related to that, but I guess we are a large school so they usually find students who have similar interests and similar challenges. I do not think I have come across too many students in the past few years who have huge emotional and social issues. If there is anything that crops up, it is dealt with by the individual teacher.

Ms TIERNEY — That is fine, but it has been put to us that gifted children often have a heightened sense of emotion. An example that was given to us today was a heightened sense of justice and fairness: they can often really take offence to certain behaviours they do not consider to be fair, and that causes issues.

Ms CODY — That is part of the understanding of what giftedness is. When you have staff who are working with these students they may come across behaviours like that and need to understand where they are coming

from. With a lot of our Asperger's students who are also presenting as gifted in certain areas, it is sometimes about stripping back the curriculum and seeing what they need to make their day a good day. If that means something quite different to what others are doing, then so be it. We are very flexible in that. One of the good things about our school is that we can take on board what each student needs for their whole person.

Mr GEARY — I will add to that and go back to some work where I was fortunate enough to act as a project officer when the Vulnerable Youth Framework was released a number of years ago. I did part of a pilot project for the Office for Youth looking at vulnerable young people within Bendigo. I would agree that some gifted students fall into that category. We know in terms of connections to the community that for a young person school is the major connection going out into the community. One of the things I would say is that when students who are gifted have issues, which is no different to students who are not gifted who have issues, parents' first port of call around seeking support and advice will generally be the school. A school is well equipped to provide support around that sometimes.

As Sarah said, we are a school of 1900 students. We have four staff in our wellbeing team, and they are not all full time. If you are trying to get access to a psychologist in Bendigo, as a colleague of ours was doing and said the other day, there is a three-month wait. We have just undertaken a review of our student support services, which includes students with disabilities and also looks to some degree at what we should be doing around gifted students. We do not have a psychologist on staff, but the clear recommendation from that review was to get a psychologist tied to the school in some way. We need that support. It is like anything with our disadvantaged kids: we outsource some of that, but you do not outsource the psychologist because we just cannot get them out here. The wait is too long. If you were going to place them somewhere, we have enough work for a psychologist to work with us full time, but of course we do not have the funding to employ them.

Ms CODY — When we have a student present to us — and I worked with a student closely last year — it is almost a school refusal situation. They are not happy and not wanting to come. We met for a year, constantly meeting with staff, constantly meeting with parents, constantly meeting with the student and constantly meeting together to work out the best plan for that student. The school is extremely flexible. If this is what it is going to take to make this student happy and feel like they want to come and if they want to learn this way, that is fine. We just try to get to the bottom of things, put something in place and connect them to other people. It is a work in progress with them, and we have had some good successes with that.

Mr CRISP — The Goldfields LLEN's submission suggests that business and industry in the wider community could provide opportunities for learning to gifted students. What would be the best opportunities that business, industry and community partners could provide for gifted students?

Mr GEARY — I would say mentoring, and I think that falls into line with the aspiration that we spoke about earlier. That is fairly critical. As I said, I think learners today expect their learning to be relevant. In a school setting the best way that we can do that is to allow students to see that the learning we are putting in place has a connection to the real world, and certainly business and industry would allow that to happen.

Ms CODY — What is John's program? MindMatters, is it?

Mr GEARY — MindMatters is an example of that.

Ms CODY — I think business and industry are becoming more open to having students come in and are seeing the value of that. Even with the Inventor of the Year awards, this year they had a Young Inventor of the Year award, so they are seeing the value of that mentoring and partnership with these students.

The CHAIR — That concludes our questions. On behalf of the committee I would like to thank you for appearing before us today.

Mr GEARY — No worries. Thank you. All the best for your work.

Witnesses withdrew.