

CORRECTED VERSION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the education of gifted and talented students

Melbourne—10 October 2011

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Witnesses

Ms R. Collins, Coordinator, and

Ms M. Germech, Victorian Affiliated Network of Gifted Support Groups.

The CHAIR—Thank you for coming in today and appearing before the committee. The way we will work today is we have a number of questions which we want to ask. Hansard will be recording today's hearing. You will have the opportunity to sight Hansard after the recording and make any changes to typographical errors. Also you are covered with what we call parliamentary privilege. Any comments you make outside the hearing may not be afforded such privilege.

I might start, if I could. I wanted to look at negative attitudes to giftedness and your network's submission suggests that there can be negative attitudes towards giftedness, gifted students and their parents in the educational system and in the wider community. What do you suggest should be done to overcome these attitudes and increase the understanding of giftedness in the educational and wider communities?

Ms COLLINS—The negative attitudes have been there for a very long time. I remember that Galileo was excommunicated. I do not think you are going to change those negative attitudes. As the greater population increases their overall intelligence there will still be high intelligence children in the community that are several standards above the others in terms of IQ. You are not necessarily going to change those attitudes. However, a positive education process with the wider community would be helpful. That is something that could be looked at, but it is not going to help the kids that are here in the schools today and that is what we are interested in. We come today really adamant that you need to do something now. We have waited a long time and the kids I first started helping 30 years ago are now grown up and producing children of their own. We have the same problems happening over and over again. We have experienced those as children. Our children have experienced them. Our grandchildren are starting to experience them.

If you do not do something that will continue. There are two reasons why nothing has been done by successive governments and by successive department heads and administrators. There are two things that I can think of. Either the people concerned are too silly, too thick or too dumb to know what to do, or else they do not give a toss about gifted kids. My colleague and I think that those two reasons go hand in hand, that they do not know what to do. They do not have a clue of what to do with gifted children and they keep misunderstanding that high intelligence is exactly the same as high academic achieving. They completely ignore the fact that high intelligence is completely different to high academic achieving. Yes, it is associated but it is not the same. The curriculum, the schools, the system is not adequate for our children, and if you do not understand that, how many times do we have to explain it? How many different ways can we try and present it to you? How many different inquiries, surveys and research projects do we have to do? The data is all there, read it. If you do not want to do anything, that is cool, that is fine, just tell us and we will not give you our children.

Ms GERMECH—Can I add to that too, to directly answer that question. I am counting sleeps now. We have another 13 months in secondary education. I have been informed that university will be roughly similar but not as bad. The negative attitudes, as Rhonda said, have existed for a long time. I see the only solution as actually having 'not negotiable' policies imposed on schools about how these children are treated and how the parents are treated. When a parent says, 'You're punishing my child with what you're doing,' the school cannot say, 'That's just a parent. What would she know about education?' which is in my case an awful lot and usually more than the teacher that is saying that. They cannot say that, they cannot then go off and do their own thing which is what they currently do. Schools have a lot of power to ignore the parents, and the internet has made it easier for them to ignore parents because they do not have a person in front of them.

If a parent says, 'My child is coming home extremely distressed.' 'We don't see that in the classroom.' 'Well, just believe me.' To remove the option of their judgment and say, 'This is the protocol. This is how you will behave towards these parents,' not only, 'This is what you will provide for the child,' but when the parent says this you will not say, 'They must be wrong. We have the documentation that says this child is exceptionally gifted. We can assume therefore that the parent is fairly intelligent, and with all parents we can make the safe assumption that they know their child, therefore we have no choice but to act and this is the protocol we follow.'

Instead of making it up on the spot for each parent that comes along, their attitude is not one of, 'We might do it this way,' there is a list that says, 'This is how we respond to this person. We treat this person on their

merits as they come to us with the information they give us. If they're angry, we don't get angry back. They're angry because their child has been hurt,' and every parent is angry when their child is hurt. My child was recently punched at school by someone twice as big as him, literally, and I was angry and I was given some thing about the other child gets frustrated in stressful situations. I think any of you would be angry if that was the response you were given, but that is the response we get to every terrible thing that is done. On the whole, there are some really fantastic teachers but many teachers do terrible things.

If there is a protocol that when the parent rings up the principal and says, 'This terrible thing has been done to my child,' the principal is not allowed to go to ground, is not allowed to then discount what the parent says and hide it. One way of hiding it has been that my son was accused of truancy, when he was ill with a high fever in bed. The Education Department chased me for that. If there is a protocol that prohibits those actions that would be the best step because, as Rhonda has pointed out, this is embedded in our culture. If we lived in Germany, if we lived in Hong Kong, these attitudes would not be such a burden to all of us.

The CHAIR—We certainly have that point. I will move to Gayle who will touch on support for parents.

Ms TIERNEY—Yes, that dovetails quite neatly into it. In your submission you suggest that parents need support and guidance on how to cater for the gifted child. What kind of support, information and resources do parents of gifted children need and how is this support best provided?

Ms COLLINS—One of the things we have been doing as parent support groups is providing phone access or email access for people with queries. That would be a simple thing for the department to set up, that there is a central line that you can ring somebody. There used to be a gifted education section and you could ring up whoever was working there and say, 'How are things going. I need some information on so-and-so. Who is the local person in the regional office at such-and-such?' There would be somebody who would give you that information. Now you have to go in a queue, you have to get past a barrier to talk to someone. Unless you have private phone numbers of these people where you have put them aside at a conference, you cannot get in. You cannot ring up anyway. Then central office says, 'Well, each school is independent.'

Ms GERMECH—'Talk to the principal,' who does not answer calls.

Ms COLLINS—Who does not talk to you.

Ms GERMECH—He does not answer your emails and tells the staff not to answer your calls or emails.

Ms COLLINS—That is right. You go back to the school principal and get nowhere and you ring up the regional office. There might be somebody who has some kind of interest in gifted, they are tagged gifted, but they do not necessarily have any training. Direct phone access to something called 'gifted', email address, something called 'gifted' with somebody that is competent, trained and interested in gifted, working at the other end. At this particular point I would also like to say there is a gold star that needs to be awarded to Vanessa Reynolds at Box Hill High School.

Ms GERMECH—Who is retiring.

Ms COLLINS—Yes, but you need to give her a gold star anyway, because she is one of the people who has saved gifted children and has worked her butt off to do that. She is retiring, we do not know who is going to replace her with but she could be a consultant if you paid her enough money. Just a little thought. In terms of what to do, moving on, there are a whole lot of things that can be done, but what I would like to give to you are these copies. I will table these, because we have talked an awful lot about the state of affairs and I would rather get on to, 'Let's get on with something.'

The CHAIR—Sure. We will have those tabled as part of the evidence. Rather than having to go through them they will be part of the evidence.

Ms GERMECH—Can I add to that, as part of that line, because I have been lied to, to my face, by the principals and ended up with my son in a situation where he had to be pulled out of the school, had no school to go to, and his education has been fiddled with terribly by the Education Department, it would be very useful to have an advocate within the Education Department, that when there is a series of misinformation coming from principals so that they can cover their legal bottoms because of their own actions, that there is an advocate for the child and for the parent within the Education Department that the information is not turned inside out and into something completely unrecognisable which has been the case in my experience many times over. The advocate says, 'No, you can't keep saying that because these are the things we have on paper, these are the facts. You can't keep answering a question that wasn't asked. You can't keep taking action that hasn't been agreed to.' This is what we are doing to keep principals and teachers on track, to have that advocate, because they will not listen to parents.

The CHAIR—Thank you.

Mr ELASMAR—Your submission says that the current educational system is not suited to the needs of gifted students and the school can be damaging for gifted students.

Ms COLLINS—Yes.

Mr ELASMAR—What are the most important learning opportunities that should be provided for gifted students in schools?

Ms COLLINS—In terms of providing for gifted students in schools, some kids can go through the system without any problem, depending on personality, background, their particular areas of giftedness, family supports et cetera.

Ms GERMECH—And the degree of giftedness as well.

Ms COLLINS—The degree of giftedness. In those documents I have given you there is an alternative system that we have developed that shows you how you would set up provision for gifted students. Some children would still go through the regular system, lock step grade by year system, and other children would go to a special school for gifted students, like they have in Hong Kong; not the SEAL program, not a select entry school, a school for children with high intelligence, not high academic achievers. If we do not get a special school, the problems will still exist because any changes that are done within the system are still done by people who have no idea of what giftedness is.

Ms GERMECH—Anyone not excited by giftedness either.

Ms COLLINS—Could not give a toss.

Ms GERMECH—Some of my son's best teachers have been people who are excited by these kids, and they are not necessarily people with outstandingly remarkable IQs themselves, they are people who see these kids for who they are and can cope with the individual basis. The difference between these kids is enormous. You are not going to get one rubric that is going to suit all the kids. There is no simple answer. It would be nice if we could sit here and say there is a neat and tidy solution, but as the kids differ from the norm, clustered around the norm, they are more and more different to each other as well as the centre. The real key is people who are very broad-minded and are very excited about these kids. It is a very specialised area. I know it would be lovely to come away with this neat set of solutions about how you would provide for them within the school. With a son still in education I do not think there is a single school in Victoria that would be suitable. He is a good kid, he is well behaved, he works hard. There is no school in which he would be happy.

Ms MILLER—We have talked about negative impacts but would geographic location be a barrier? If you have kids in Albury-Wodonga, as opposed to Warrnambool, as opposed to Melbourne CBD, as opposed to Frankston—

Ms GERMECH—It is huge.

Ms COLLINS—You think of a special school for gifted children would be a group of six kids in a room. That is the special school for gifted education. We are not talking about a building, we are not talking about fancy signs, school uniforms or laptops that do not work. I do not care about any of that and neither do any of the other parents. We want a room at a church hall or somewhere and our kids can go there and we will work it out from there. We do not have to have a curriculum, we do not have to have—

Ms GERMECH—Those geographical boundaries, having experienced that directly—

Ms MILLER—I will move along if that is all right.

Ms GERMECH—Okay.

Ms MILLER—The Victorian Affiliated Network of Gifted Support Group submission says that infant welfare nurses, doctors, psychologists and welfare workers should identify gifted children. Why is it preferable to have these professionals identify gifted children instead of teachers?

Ms GERMECH—Excuse me. Sorry, I cannot believe you said that.

Ms MILLER—My second part to the question was what kind of education, support and resources do these professionals need to help them identify giftedness in a child.

The CHAIR—If we can keep it very short because we are—

Ms GERMECH—Very quickly, okay. Teachers are recognised as being the least likely in all studies to identify a gifted child, that is why. They are rubbish at it. They are absolutely rubbish at it. My mother is a teacher. My son had already more than finished years 1 and 2 maths before he started school. I was not told by the school that he was in remedial maths. That is one example out of hundreds.

Ms COLLINS—Infant welfare centres are the people that see the children early. You need an early intervention program. You need to identify gifted children as early as possible, the same as you do with intellectual disability.

Ms MILLER—Like at primary school.

Ms GERMECH—They are punished in child care. 'Put your hand down, don't answer that question.' They are punished right from the time they can speak which is about one.

Ms COLLINS—For instance, the PACSA group in Bendigo went around and in-service trained all of the infant welfare centres and all of the preschool association people in Bendigo. The reason for that is that those people are looking at children all the time and they are trained in child development. You will find these gifted children not through IQ tests but through child development with infant welfare centres. If they are trained to look for those signs, early walking, early talking, early development, precocious development in various, different ways, they will pick them up early and then will be able to start the intervention before they hit kindergarten and perhaps put them in the right kindergarten.

Ms GERMECH—Most of them can be identified close to birth.

The CHAIR—We are going to have to sum up there. If there is one very short thing that you do not think we have covered, either in your submission, or today, I am happy to hear that, but we do have to wrap up.

Ms COLLINS—If the committee is interested there is a prospectus for the special school for gifted children.

The CHAIR—We are happy to have that tabled as part of the evidence as well. Thank you, Rhonda and Maree, for coming in and giving evidence to us today. Thank you for the submission and the further

documents you presented as well.

Ms COLLINS—Happy reading.

Ms GERMECH—I would really love to see this has made a difference. After years in the education system I very much doubt that I will see much difference, but I would be delighted to be wrong. I would be really delighted to be wrong. We have suffered terribly through the education system and I have spoken to other parents who have been broken by the process.

The CHAIR—Thank you very much.

Witnesses withdrew.