

CORRECTED VERSION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the education of gifted and talented students

Box Hill — 29 August 2011

Members

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Mr N. Elasmarr
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Administration Officer: Ms N. Tyler

Witnesses

Rockson, Year 7 student,
Evangeline, Year 8 student,
Daniel, Year 9 student,
Tina, Year 9 student,
Marley, Year 11 student, and
Keely, Year 11 + student, Box Hill High School.

The CHAIR — Thank you for appearing before our committee today and I know it seems very formal but just relax. Just so you know the committee has called a series of hearings to find out your experiences at school. So we're going to use what you're going to contribute today as part of the hearing process to ensure that we've got more opportunities and options available to students that are termed as gifted and talented or high achievers. We are very interested to hear about some of your experiences while here at Box Hill High School. Now, all this — we call this evidence. So all the evidence that is being collected today is termed under what we call parliamentary privilege. You may or may not be familiar with it. As a member of parliament when they stand up in the Parliament they can pretty much say what they like, the same thing applies to you in this room. However, outside of the room it doesn't — you don't have that full parliamentary privilege. Feel free to share and contribute any experiences that you have in the area.

Also we will be recording all the information and we will give you a copy of that to look at to make sure that grammar and typographical errors or anything else will be picked up.

We will ask a series of questions and maybe one or two of you could contribute for each one and there will be an opportunity for everybody to contribute. If you could just state your name — we are only using first names when it comes to students. So that's another important thing to point out. So you will only be referred to in the report by your first name. If Daniel wants to speak if you can say, "Hi. Daniel." then off and give your contribution.

So we might make a start. I will ask the first question. The first one is, what do you find are the biggest differences at Box Hill High School compared to your previous primary or high schools that you've been to.

KEELY — I'm not quite sure if I have much to compare to because my primary school I went to was a bit like Box Hill, they gave us groups and they would give us harder work if we were in the higher groups so it was pretty similar in how they let us extend ourselves if we wanted to, if we could do harder work. So it's fairly similar in that way. Before I went to that school I went to a Steiner school, so a completely different system. I'm not quite sure if there is anything I can compare.

The CHAIR — I will ask a following question to you. So you've been able to, it sounds like, have the right schools for you all the way along; is that something that actively your parents sought out? How has that been supported for you?

KEELY — My parents, they believed in Steiner ideas and everything so they sent me to that school but it didn't really work out. They have their idea and the curriculum and everything but if you're different — if you want to challenge yourself or if you are not keeping up even, they don't have a way to really cater for that. That is what I found and other people as well who weren't keeping up with the work, they didn't really know how to help you. It was a very rigid kind of curriculum and so when I left that school they looked pretty hard for a school that — so I went to a government primary school that was really good in that way and let us challenge ourselves and people who were struggling, they got the kind of easier work to do and the teachers helped them accordingly, which was really good. Same with Box Hill, we sought out a school that was like that.

The CHAIR — Did your primary school refer you on to Box Hill? How did you find out about Box Hill?

KEELY — One of our friends was a teacher here and she was associated with the primary school as well. A few people from the primary school came here for the accelerated program as well.

TINA — My experience of primary school was different to Keely's. I found there was a lot of compromising in the classroom. I went to a Catholic primary school — and that was just for convenience, it was not because my parents actively sought out anything. I don't remember learning anything that was sort of given to me in terms of challenging myself. It was more or less individual learning and maths particularly. I was sort of left to my own devices and didn't actively pursue anything unless you have been told to. What happened was the class was compromised to either if you worked slower they pushed you up if you worked faster they slowed you down. It was quite frustrating for a long time to just not reach the potential and then not have to go about it at such an age.

The CHAIR — What do you think is the best thing about being a student in the SEAL program?

EVANGELINE — I think the best thing about being a student is that we are academically challenged, so we work according to the pace that we feel that is appropriate for us. For example, if many people are very advanced in science or maths they receive all the challenges that are necessary.

MARLEY — It's a lot better with the challenging work, it's more up to my standard. The primary school I went to there was a lot of the same. I found that, I don't know, that I wasn't challenged at all, especially the maths work. I guess bored and I'd end up talking in class and not doing the work because it wasn't — I didn't find it interesting and the fact that I already knew how to do a lot of the stuff. When I came to Box Hill in class I'd actually sit down and do work that interested me more because it was challenging and because it was new stuff and we watched in class and I find that a lot better I guess.

The CHAIR — Do any of you travel a fair way to come here?

MARLEY — I travel about an hour.

TINA — I moved houses.

ROCKSON — 10 minutes.

Ms MILLER — We're all moving to Rockson's house.

The CHAIR — Marley, you travel an hour?

MARLEY — I live at Belview, which is past the end of the Belgrave train line, so I have to get up at 6:30 in the morning to walk half an hour to the station and then catch a train and back to school.

The CHAIR — How did you find out about this school?

MARLEY — We found out through my friend's mum, [REDACTED]. I don't know how they found out about it but his older brother [REDACTED] already came — he came for the SEAL program but tried out and got into mainstream. [REDACTED] tried out and so did I and we both got into the SEAL program and we were from the same primary school. It was good knowing someone from out there to travel with.

KEELY — I travel about an hour as well. I just get the train to the city. I live in Alphington. I get to the city and outwards. It is about 25 minutes each way. Sometimes it is a bit tiring but it's okay.

The CHAIR — It's worth it.

KEELY — It is. It really is.

Ms MILLER — Do you have any individual learning plans at Box Hill? If so how do students contribute to the development of their learning plans and what are the benefits of having an individualised learning plan?

TINA — We don't really have individualised learning plans, you know, as in a piece of paper or anything, but I think that is because our school is so good at catering for everyone's specific pathways. Like, I'm currently doing biology year 11 in year 9. There are all these specific pathways specifically for your individual interests, if that is what you mean by learning plan.

Ms MILLER — I guess your own individual input is on how fast...

TINA — Yes.

Ms MILLER — ...you work at the individual component to that question.

TINA — Yes.

The CHAIR — Keely.

KEELY — I've never had an individual learning plan like that. I have kept up with the class. There are opportunities to extend ourselves. Sometimes the teachers will say these questions are extension if you want to do something a bit harder. I'm not sure if this is the exception or the rule, most of the time when we have the individual learning plans it is when someone is not keeping up. They talk to their teachers and I'm not quite sure what they do but they work out something.

EVANGELINE — I think we are encouraged to have our own individual learning plan even though most people may not have one. I think most of us do keep up to the standard and we are encouraged to explore our own pathways and careers and education.

Mr ELASMAR — Talking about challenging students and programs, do any of you find that the SEAL program is not challenging enough?

TINA — In specific areas maybe.

DANIEL — Yeah, with the electives — we don't get accelerated with them and with HBE and subjects like that we are marked as a year 9 but we can't get anything higher than Ds. We get Ds because we are marked as a year 10 but we are doing year 9 work for them.

TINA — In terms of being challenged I think it would be nice to be further challenged in areas like English and humanity-wise because this school is a bit — it is really maths and science orientated but there is a huge niche for kids looking to be further extended in English. Even though English really requires maturity and experience there is such a possibility to introduce maybe alternative programs for that, I think.

EVANGELINE — I agree with Tina in that we need more language learning pathways and opportunities as well as English for people who are more humanities-orientated rather than maths and science because our school has a fantastic learning program for maths and science people but for people like me, I'm really interested and enthusiastic about English and I feel I am not challenged enough in that area.

MARLEY — Same with me. I'm really, really into music and the one thing I find about the school is it doesn't have a very good music program. It is all right now because I'm accelerated, so I skipped year 10, so I'm in year 11 now. So it is all right now I am doing VCE music. Through year 7, 8, 9 music I found it was really a waste of my time because I knew the stuff that was in there. Because we were grouped in with the mainstreams for the electives, as Tina or someone was saying it's just, I don't know, maths and science orientated more.

Ms MILLER — Can I ask a question on that? Do you play a particular instrument?

MARLEY — I play guitar but I play numerous instruments and I write, all that sort of stuff.

KEELY — I really think that the problem with the electives — it is not really a problem — but the thing is we are grouped in with the mainstream so some classes will be half, half. That is fine. It is good to meet with different people in the classes and once you get to year 11 class, for us it doesn't really matter if you've been accelerated, you get grouped in with them anyway. The work is often challenging enough anyway in year 11 but the electives I really found that in normal classes and the accelerated class we did get pushed a bit more but in the electives it did feel a lot more light on. I think it would be really hard to completely segregate both groups. So it is a bit of a challenge.

TINA — A good experience to learn how to work with other people as well and work at our pace.

KEELY — Once you are in VCE there are different people in all of your classes.

The CHAIR — As a follow on to that, do you spend a lot of time with non-SEAL students and if so how do you get along?

TINA — Socialising?

EVANGELINE — Yeah, that's why electives are so good because we are able to mix in with all the mainstream students and also in sport we get to mix with them. The problem with that is sometimes there are issues like we tease each other about our different standards but most of the time we get along really well, which is a good thing. I think it is really good that we are allowed this opportunity to mix in with mainstream or else it would be, like you said, a complete segregation.

KEELY — That would be just weird.

EVANGELINE — Then we would become kind of — it would be harder for us to have our own career in the future.

MARLEY — Now that I'm in year 11, it's a lot more segregated for me, because of the year 10s and then we've all been moved up with all the mainstream year 10s from last year. So I don't see any of my friends from year 10 during school at all pretty much. But it's also good because it means I get to mix with a lot of the mainstream people in the year above me and the accelerated people. Eleven plus we are all in the same classes.

KEELY — We would be in the same class, Marley and I.

MARLEY — That is a good aspect.

KEELY — It is. Once you hit VCE you kind of know everyone in those two or three year levels. I was going to say my close group of friends are all mainstream. In year 7 I jumped around a bit in friendship groups and I ended up hanging out with these girls. It is a bit odd, there was a bit of conflict I guess because some of them wanted to be in the accelerated program so it was a little bit weird there for a while. Even some of them would get a few higher marks than me in some classes. It depends on the individual, I think. It was never really a big issue that I was in the other program to them. Now we are all in year 11 it's kind of the same.

TINA — I agree with what Keely is saying. At this school even though we are separate it is quite similar in terms that it has helped us realise that we have different abilities and talents and being academic is not the only way you can be accelerated in learning things. We have a lot of extracurricular activities. That is how I met Marley. We do tech crew together. Most of the kids in tech crew are mainly mainstream kids and they are so good in their skills it makes us realise that just because we are accelerated doesn't stop us mixing or learning together.

ROCKSON — I think that in year 7 you usually always stay with your form class in all your subjects so you get really glued to your form class unless you already have known the other people in the other form classes before you came to this high school.

EVANGELINE — Adding on to what he said this is the difficult thing about transition from year 7 to year 8 because our friendship group is so close together as we don't get time to mix in with other form groups that many people had a difficult time transitioning from year 7 to year 8 because of that.

KEELY — Quickly again, I think that a lot of mainstreams at this school do work hard as well. What I'm trying to say, it is not like there is a big difference because a lot of the mainstream students, they just missed out on the accelerated program or they're kind of fuelled by the environment around here or something and they do work hard just like we do to achieve...

The CHAIR — It is not like they are different.

TINA — It is not like they are dumber or smarter. It is like they have different approach to learning.

KEELY — When I did debating with Tina the mainstream students were just as capable when they worked hard.

DANIEL — I have been moved from mainstream last year so there is definitely, like, with the mainstream people they are not dumb, they just don't work — some of them work really hard and just don't achieve marks and some of them work really hard and achieve the marks and then get moved up like I did.

Ms MILLER — Some students have higher abilities in some subjects than others; do you find it difficult to keep up with the subjects that you don't have a high ability in and how do you cope?

EVANGELINE — Definitely.

TINA — Yes.

EVANGELINE — Like science and maths, for me I struggle a lot especially as the school concentrates on that and I feel pushed by the ability of other students in my class to keep up with their standard and then my time for the subjects I actually enjoy is decreased and that is how I struggle.

TINA — I think it set the benchmark quite high. In year 7 and 8 it is a bit hard. I struggled so much in those years and put so much effort into it that it helped me hone my work ethic a little bit. My science and maths has caught up to a level that I am part of that group of people that now do set the standard. In 7 and 8 there is a bit of a struggle if your aptitude isn't in maths or science.

Mr ELASMAR — At your previous schools were other students negative about your giftedness and were the teachers negative towards your academic ability and how did you deal with it?

MARLEY — They weren't really negative towards it but, I don't know, some people kind of got a bit jealous, I guess, which kind of turned into mixed emotions like if I got higher on the NAPLAN...

KEELY — The AIMS test.

MARLEY — And you get really good marks and they get down, they feel down on themselves and you kind of feel a bit bad. It is better being in a school where everyone is at pretty much the same level, at least in the SEAL program. There is not much arguing.

KEELY — Something that is a bit of an issue in year 7, one of my friends in year 7 who was in my class — so she was in the SEAL program, and a lot of students, I think, find this, I never did — but a lot of students are used to being the top of their class because they come from a primary school where they are the only student who really gets these sort of marks and they are so used to flying through everything and they get to year 7 and are down the bottom because they're competing with everyone else. I never found that. In year 7 I was getting average to high marks but I never really got upset when I didn't top the class. It is very hard for a lot of students.

EVANGELINE — Adding on to what Keely said. I was home schooled in primary school so I never went to any other school. I found that it's true what you said about — because I was the only student and I was working at my own level the whole time.

Ms MILLER — Is that here in Melbourne?

EVANGELINE — Yes. When I came to school it was so difficult because I was having to adjust to working at other people's levels not just my own and to meeting the benchmarks.

The CHAIR — Talking about pressure, do you feel that there is a lot of pressure to achieve highly? Pressure in the school, pressure from your family and how do you cope with it?

DANIEL — There definitely is a bit of pressure because we are sort of influenced by our peers. When they get a higher mark than you and you are a lot lower than them it drives you to achieve higher next test and beat them. So it is quite competitive. The teachers do support you, help you achieve those marks as well.

TINA — I think I like pressure. I am one of those people — not a weird one — I thrive on the environment where I'm pressured. Not in a negative way but if I don't have that benchmark and that constant — the people around me sort of racing me on I find that I just tread water. I will become apathetic or unmotivated or feel like I'm already sort of at the level I can be and I can't be bothered. A lot of accelerated kids thrive on this environment that we create against each other. I don't necessarily think it is negative the pressure that is created.

The CHAIR — What about family? Do you feel any pressure from family?

ROCKSON — My family, they usually pressure me slightly just to get me motivated to do the work that I have to do because if I don't, like Tina said, it is like treading water where you don't go anywhere because you think you are at the top when you are not even at the benchmark.

The CHAIR — Do you find it good or challenging?

ROCKSON — It is really good but if it gets too pressurising I find it sometimes annoying.

The CHAIR — What do you do?

ROCKSON — Just relax a bit and work on something you like doing. I think it helps me to relax.

The CHAIR — Do you find the workload in the SEAL program difficult or challenging?

EVANGELINE — Challenging, yes, but if we are organised enough I think all of us are actually capable.

TINA — Is a bit overwhelming but it pushes you to...

EVANGELINE — It is not as challenging at first in year 7, but in year 8, for me especially, it felt like I was being thrown into deep water because it was suddenly all this workload in comparison to year 7.

MARLEY — I don't know. Because I have just gone into year 11 it is kind of weird from going through all accelerated and then being mixed in with mainstream. Once you get to year 11, as you guys said, it is a lot faster. Like, SEAL, we work through things a lot quicker and it is a higher workload. When I got up to year 11 it kind of backed right off. So I kind of — it spun me out a bit and I started working slower. I guess it is a good thing and I guess it is a bad thing.

The CHAIR — Did you skip...

MARLEY — I skipped year 10.

The CHAIR — Now you find year 11 not challenging?

MARLEY — It is challenging but it is kind of hard to adjust to the workload. I like a higher workload and I prefer being pushed more. Now that the year 11 thing — it's not as challenging as it was last year, I guess.

TINA — At the start of year 11, year 11 biology, I find it is going really fast.

KEELY — I find that fast.

TINA — Our teacher is always stressing we are only in year 9 and we have to make up — through hard work we have to make up for the years that we lacked.

Ms MILLER — How does your school use technology and how has that helped your learning experiences?

KEELY — I had a great teacher in year 9 who used the Smartboard every couple of days and that was for the biology class. I just thought it was great. I don't remember some of the exercises she did but she would

get people to write things up and I loved Smartboard because I'd never really used it in any other classes before. It was drag and drop kind of exercises and videos and I don't know what else but I remember thinking that was really useful. It don't think I've had any teachers since who have used it. It was really good.

MARLEY — I had last year in year 9 my science teacher [REDACTED], used the laptops a lot. Really good. She had a projector up on the board and would be doing something and we might be following along. It worked really well technology.

Ms MILLER — What about in music, do you have any stuff in there?

MARLEY — Music, there's not too much going on there technology-wise.

TINA — We have really good blogs at our school, especially the biology blog. When exam time comes we are living on the blog. All your questions are posted, and I don't know if this applies to all teachers, but my science teacher, the blog is like a phone. We say something and he replies. Even if he is out or missed a class and we have pressing things like a SAP or something we can contact him immediately in a safe, cyber friendly way.

KEELY — It is handy to email teachers and things like that.

Mr ELASMAR — Before you mentioned something about you'd like to see some change or improvement in the program. Would you like to add to that?

EVANGELINE — Humanities-wise, involving languages and English especially, I think we should explore more pathways in that and provide SEAL students with more opportunities, not just in maths and sciences, and I think maybe other subjects like religious education or theology because many SEAL students think very deeply about these topics. I have spoken to several of them and they are all really interested in learning about the greater things of life like theology and I think it would be a really good opportunity for SEAL students to learn that.

TINA — Metaphysics.

MARLEY — Music. I think it is great that we're accelerated in maths, science and English, like all the core subjects, but I think it would be good to have pathways where we can go and concentrate on the things we really enjoy. That is the one thing I find about school is that I only do really well at something if I'm engaged and enjoying it. Otherwise I just lose interest.

The CHAIR — Do you find you have been provided with good pathways, particularly, I suppose, those people in year 11, in terms of career opportunities beyond school?

MARLEY — I would have liked to have seen a lot of the TAFE courses and stuff. We weren't really told much about that.

KEELY — I'm not sure. I know what course I'd like to do and I kind of know where I'd like to go from there but when I think about other careers in my area of interest I'm not really sure what else there is.

TINA — We've been given the whole doctor/law run down but that's about it.

DANIEL — We visited TAFE a few times in year 9 and have gone through the courses and see what they do.

TINA — Independently, my friends and I went to Uni days ourselves.

Ms MILLER — You'll be the youngest kids on the campus! Good on you.

TINA — Master programs and things.

KEELY — We do go to some open days as a group. When I was in year 9, about two years ago, at the end of the year they did an excursion week program and a few days we went to Unis and did tours and stuff. They do take us to places to look into things like that, I guess. It is not like there is nothing there.

TINA — In terms of life skills everything is really good at Box Hill. Even though we have the SEAL program we are not too education, like, that is it and that's all your life is about. You get education in life and we get so many students for...

EVANGELINE — Food tech, lots of my friends enjoy doing cooking.

TINA — We have knitting clubs and we have...

EVANGELINE — Choir.

TINA — We have 15 year olds running entire productions on our own and it is really a great opportunity.

DANIEL — There is the mechatronic and solar programs running.

MARLEY — The engineering project.

The CHAIR — How do you think you would cope if you weren't selected into a school that had a SEAL program? How do you think your academic achievements would be at this point without a SEAL program?

MARLEY — I know for me I probably would be very underachieving because I'm one of those people that if I am not pushed I just sit back and do nothing. So if I had have gone to a mainstream school, I would probably be doing really badly, be failing and stuff, but the SEAL program has kind of helped me reach my full potential and a lot of the electives — like the engineering project and the mechatronics we have, that's helped me to kind of decide what I want to do in the future. I don't know, it's good.

The CHAIR — That concludes the questions that we've got for you. Thank you very much for being so open with us and telling us about your experiences. It's been terrific. On behalf of the committee we wish you well in your continued studies. Some have got less to go than others but I think there's certainly a bright future for all of you from what we've heard today. Thanks again.

KEELY — I wanted to say something else about the humanities thing that has been brought up a few times, I quite like humanities as well but the thing is I'm a science girl too so I have always been a bit of both but I never really found I wasn't challenged in humanities. I'm doing year 12 history this year as one of my year 12 subjects. I've always worked just as hard in history as I did in the sciences and another thing I was going to mention was a subject I did last year called Research and Philosophy, which I only learned halfway through last year it was supposed to be for students in their middle year, but it was good because it was for more humanities-minded students and the philosophy side of things was challenging and then for a lot of the year we worked on a big research project, a mini thesis kind of thing. That is a really good pathway for humanities-minded students, I guess. I just wanted to have that said.

Witnesses withdrew.