

# CORRECTED VERSION

## EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

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

Box Hill — 29 August 2011

#### Members

Mr P. Crisp  
Mr N. Elasmar  
Ms E. Miller

Mr D. Southwick  
Ms G. Tierney

Chair: Mr D. Southwick  
Deputy Chair: Ms G. Tierney

#### Staff

Executive Officer: Ms K. Riseley  
Research Officers: Ms M. Scott, Ms A. Madden  
Administration Officer: Ms N. Tyler

#### Witnesses

Mr N. Davis, Acting Principal,  
Ms T. Iacopino, Acting Assistant Principal,  
Ms V. Reynolds, Gifted Education Coordinator,  
Ms M. Andrews, SOSE Coordinator, specialising in SEAL classes,  
Mr N. Hamley, SEAL Engagement,  
Mr M. Jellinek, Science teacher, specialising in SEAL classes,  
Mr K. Johnson, Year 8 Coordinator, and  
Mrs K. Mitchell, Regional Network Leader and School Councillor, Box Hill High School.

**Mrs MITCHELL** — Can you tell me the purpose of the inquiry while we're waiting?

**The CHAIR** — Welcome everybody. It's a very formal process with you on one side and us on the other but the — just to explain as I was mentioning to Kate a minute ago the committee organised this hearing to learn about the SEAL program in Victoria as part of the Education and Training Committee's work. We, as the Joint Parliamentary Committee in Education and Training, have particular terms of reference to look at gifted and talented students and gifted and talented programs in Victoria. So we're visiting a whole range of different schools. We have had submissions that your school has contributed to and now we are taking part in these hearings to gather our evidence to put together a series of recommendations. Thank you for participating in that. Thank you also for your submission as well — your submissions. Thank you for hosting us here and for a terrific lunch.

All the evidence taken at this hearing will be documented through Hansard and the process is the same as any parliamentary process. As we have what is termed parliamentary privilege the same applies to you here today so anything you say is covered by parliamentary privilege but if you wander off to the media this afternoon and then talk about the same sort of thing, that is not covered. So feel free to talk about whatever you like in this room. Also we have the opportunity for a copy of Hansard to be handed over to the school to have a look and see if there is anything that needs correcting, that is not correct. We might just — until we get used to it if you can just give us your first name before you kick off answering the questions. We all have a series of questions to ask. But because of the amount of people we have here if we could limit it to maybe one or two people making comment for each of the questions, to give us the opportunity to get through the extended questions we have got. We do always give the opportunity of a principal to make an introductory comment if they would wish. Is there anything Neil that you'd like to say?

**Mr DAVIS** — Apart from a welcome to you all and it's great that you've been able to take the time to come out. This whole process and program is very, very important for us and it's very deeply rooted in our collective hearts here. We've had a SEAL program running since 1994, I think was the first year. Box Hill was an equal second school in the state to have an accredited SEAL program. Many of our concerns over the years have been about the springing up of other sorts of programs which are probably, I don't know if I'm cynical or not, but in many cases they're marketing programs, not actually addressing the needs of children and so they will appear under a number of different sorts of banners and titles around the place. What makes us really unique is that our program has, for a number of years, tried to balance the enrolment of our SEAL students with our mainstream students whereas many of the other programs around the state the students are heavily outnumbered by mainstream students. A number of issues arise from that. My experience here over the last four years has been that it is a symbiotic relationship between your general entry mainstream students and the SEAL students. They influence each other in a lot of really good, positive ways and children being children there's also, you know, the mischief that children get up to as well. More importantly for me, having been involved personally in gifted and talented education since 1994 at another school, the significant difference that I see here for us is the manner in which we approach our dealings with these students. It's not a simple matter of completing your six years of high school education in five. It is not a simple matter of just belting through the curriculum because the children can handle it. You know, there are a few important differences that we see with these children. I guess the acceleration side of things generally comes about because many of these students will pick things up the first time they're shown whereas most of us need to revisit things a couple of times and in dealing with general entry students maybe that revisiting, let's go over what we did last lesson, that may happen a couple of times. Usually by that stage many of these kids have already lost the plot, they've had enough. There is a whole lot more to it and we talk about the acceleration but we also talk about compaction, enrichment — we also talk about a whole lot of other aspects of this work to provide opportunities for children to explore their passions and their talents.

Just in closing, what I love to hear, and it does actually sadden me a little bit, but what I really love to hear about March each year many of the year 7 SEAL families that we speak to we hear comments like, "This is the first time that my child's had a friend. They've found like minds. It is the first time they've had a play date." It is things like that. It saddens me to realise they have slipped through six or seven years of lost skills in a school where they have not wanted to be at school and have been lost and friendless. I think this is a significant aspect to what we do here. Welcome.

**The CHAIR** — We will kick off the questions and following on from some of what Neil just said. The parent body mentioned in closing remarks that they have a standing issue on their agenda in terms of publicity for the school and the fact that you are bursting at the seams with numbers so they haven't had to publicise because you have very solid intake. So how do gifted students and their parents find out about the SEAL program you offer at Box Hill? How has the word been getting out over the years to cause the growth you have had?

**Ms REYNOLDS** — It has mostly been word of mouth so the success of the program sells itself. Certainly in the early years — Kate would be able to tell you about travelling to primary schools up and down the train line to tell those primary schools about it at their information sessions. I have been here seven years now in the gifted education coordinator position and I haven't needed to do that. But then, what is also heartbreaking is that you get parents late in the year who come and say, "But I didn't know that this program existed and my child has been assessed and has been assessed as gifted and I didn't know that these programs existed." So then — you sort of go word of mouth is fantastic but there is still all these deficiencies in the information that parents get and the hardest thing is that the primary schools — there are primary schools who won't tell the parents of gifted children, first of all they don't want to acknowledge their children are gifted and if they think they might be they still won't tell them about SEAL programs. They think they will be all right at the local school and that notion that there is still a local school that you would then go to as the norm. That seems to still be a barrier.

**The CHAIR** — In your submission it says that 40% of the student population are gifted students, are all the students in your SEAL program gifted and do you make any distinction between students who are gifted and students who are highly able or high achievers?

**Ms REYNOLDS** — We do. We certainly believe that they are all gifted. We don't actually do IQ tests on them but the testing that we do use, the HAST test is a specific, it is the ACER HAST test, specific for High Ability Selection Test, and our selection process, we have enough students sitting our test that we believe that they are all gifted. As well as that we've got a highly secret maths test that we've used which gives us longitudinal data and, in fact, we know that in the maths particularly that the groups that we've been testing have been getting stronger over the last five years or so. So we are quite certain that we do get gifted children in our SEAL program as well as that we use a lot of other processes. We use a lot of outside information. We accept that we encourage them to hand in any standardised testing, so the distinctions and the high distinctions in the University of New South Wales maths competition and NAPLAN data and external reports. We ask for those kinds of things and the parents give us those. Then we run a High Achievers Program which we run solely from within the students that have been accepted into mainstream. We don't test for that extra knowledge, that is run just for the students, we don't test them until they have been accepted into mainstream.

**The CHAIR** — Do you have any gifted students in the SEAL program who also have learning difficulties or disabilities. How do you cater for those students?

**Mrs MITCHELL** — What's the official term for those?

**Ms REYNOLDS** — Twice exceptional.

**Mrs MITCHELL** — It is very tough because often you will get children at the extreme ranges of autism and Aspergers. We probably have an unusually high percentage of children with Aspergers at our school. That has been a relatively recent diagnosis in the history. So we've probably always had them but we're just finding out more now. It can be incredibly difficult. We get children who have great difficulties with handwriting. We have children who have difficulties — huge difficulties socially and emotionally. We have a high percentage of children who are perfectionists and so they have a really high need in terms of psychological comfort and abilities to cope with the normal day-to-day life. So, yeah, we have all sorts of — we even have a child with — we've had hearing impaired children...

**The CHAIR** — So how do you cater for those students?

**Mrs MITCHELL** — He had a cochlear ear implant and we make provision with that. We've got a boy in

our regular classes who was blind, that was really difficult because we got no funding for him because he was a high intellectually-able child. He was in the High Achievers Program. So we didn't get an aide and that was very difficult. We actually had to appeal to Christian groups around to see if they would help us to volunteer because he couldn't see when he was having to use Bunsen burners, know when an oven is hot or cold. You can't have a child in the class — you can't rely on a child in the class doing that. Sometimes it is quite difficult. That is the difficulty because a lot of the gifted children have high social needs and there's no provision so they have — they really have trouble dealing with the psychological issues that they face.

**Ms ANDREWS** — I think it is actually a strength of the school having a large number of students in the program because I found that often it's students who are supporting those students who have difficulties and sometimes as a teacher you have to kind of intervene to give those kids a bit of a break because they are always the ones who are putting up with the kids who are socially not as easy to deal with.

**Mr JELLINEK** — I can't imagine in a situation outside this school how a lot of those kids would actually survive in a school because they really are neglected with regard to their social issues that they have and just because of their high intellectual abilities. Even in this school it is something that has concerned me quite a bit that I just feel that the lower end of our SEAL program is the greatest cause for concern because there's some exceptionally able kids but because of their social issues, because of other learning difficulties, they're sort of — they can fall off the back of the wagon and they tend to linger in the back of the SEAL program whereas they actually could be some of the highest performing kids. They need the same sort of individualised attention that kids get at the lower end of mainstream where you have kids with all sorts of learning difficulties. Just because they're intellectually able it is not recognised that they're still not performing anywhere near what they're capabilities are. If you did it in percentage terms, and say this is what they are capable of and this is what they are doing, there is a huge gap that is just not being attended to.

**Ms MILLER** — Do you have any equity consideration or alternative entry pathways for students who have come from backgrounds of educational disadvantage?

**Mrs MITCHELL** — Do you mean social disadvantage, financial disadvantage; is that what you mean?

**Ms MILLER** — All.

**Mrs MITCHELL** — We have one of the cheapest fee structures in the state. That is one of our big things, that we don't want to discriminate. And also there's been developing the whole industry, testing industry, to a coaching industry to try to coach children into programs and so that's why we continue to run our own tests so that we don't want children who have had endless dollars spent on them to get them up to a standard. In terms of equity, in that way we do it very well. We don't discriminate. We had a blind child so we don't discriminate on the basis of disability. Does that answer your question?

**Ms REYNOLDS** — Certainly within the SEAL program there's a reasonable proportion each year. It is not widely known, but we do have a reasonable proportion each year who are EMA recipients so we do know that we are getting a reasonable proportion of the lower income families — for whatever reason they are lower income — but who still have gifted children. So that, at least, I feel good that we are managing to do, that those parents do know about our programs.

**Ms MILLER** — What is the catchment of students for this school? How far?

**Ms REYNOLDS** — There is the boy who comes from West Preston who catches the train every morning at 7:15. There's Melton. There is the Avonsleigh up in the mountains and the Macclesfield up in the mountains.

**Mr DAVIS** — Is there somebody from the Preston area?

**Mr JOHNSON** — Yes.

**Mrs MITCHELL** — I have to say we do try to discourage that because we don't want children to spend their lives travelling. That is a really important consideration so we do mention that to the parents quite a bit. However, the choice is theirs. What is good is we are right on the railway line and are right in the hub. Even though you might live a long distance it might only take you 20 minutes on the train.

**Ms REYNOLDS** — Except that they've changed the train times.

**Ms MILLER** — That will be a work in progress and we will put that to the side.

**Ms REYNOLDS** — They stopped stopping at Laburnum.

**Mr ELASMAR** — Is there a broad spectrum of ability in the SEAL program and if so how do you cater for this?

**Mrs MITCHELL** — We are testing for the top 8% to 10%. There shouldn't be but there will be because not all children are equally gifted in maths and sciences and humanities. So you might get some incredibly able maths and science students in your class and their English skills particularly, they might have trouble with the handwriting. That is often a difficulty that we have. They might not be so engaged in humanities and vice versa. We get some absolutely exceptionally verbally gifted, linguistically gifted children that might be struggling a little bit with the maths. But they're still overall in the 8% to 10%.

**Mr ELASMAR** — So you find the SEAL program is not challenging enough for some very high ability students?

**Mrs MITCHELL** — I would say it is fairly rare but we do get children who probably won't be challenged even into university. We have had children who have left us and gone on to university and still aren't challenged. So I suppose it depends whether you are talking challenge or engagement. We hope — there was one girl in particular I will never forget who came to us and just loved physics. It wasn't until she did the Australian Science Challenge Competition and got selected to represent Australia and went over to Kazakhstan that she finally found some kids as passionate about physics as she was. Even though she loved being at school and loved the children, there weren't those sorts of minds until she went to a different level.

**Mr JELLINEK** — I find that what you do find is that when given the opportunity, a lot of these kids actually — their capabilities are so much further than what we can even push them within the SEAL program. I'm teaching one class where we've got the kids basically working two years above the standard there. Of the 75 science students 25 were selected to do year 11 biology. This is in year 9. I just handed them back their first test and my year 11 class, which I think is a particularly clever one, on the same test scored — their class average was 20% lower than these year 9 kids two years their junior and just being given that opportunity to extend themselves even further is just phenomenal. On a year 11 test the class average was 82%. It was unbelievable. These kids, because they've been pushed further they respond to it because they have that capability. It is just a matter of exposing it.

**Mrs MITCHELL** — Talk about your geography.

**Ms ANDREWS** — It is the same class. Basically as a teacher we are responsible for dealing with a range of abilities. That is what our job is, to teach all the kids. So you adjust within the class but also between different cohorts as well. So my last semester year 9s I did a development project with them but it was at a certain level and this particular group I knew straight away, "They will need more than this and they can cope with more than this." Not all of them are entirely interested in that extension because it is to do with passion as well and it is to do with interest and some are more interested in the sciences and maths. There are some that are very interested and able to understand much more complex kind of concepts and also some of the debate that goes on around particular concepts. So it is not a matter of geography teaching, "This is development. Here is the definition." It is actually, "This is a contested idea and this is the way that the debate is going out there in the real world at the moment" and then we need to look at statistics and development but there is also issues around who is putting the statistics together and that sort of thing. We covered all of that, which is probably more a much higher level than year 9.

**Mr DAVIS** — I'd like to add too that the staff that we've got teaching our SEAL program are talented in themselves. It takes a real skill and in the first instance to prepare work that's not just open ended, because we do have problems with our SEAL kids where with a good open ended question they just don't know when to stop or even where to stop. Sometimes they really need some good direction. Apart from not knowing where to start often as well. But the other significant thing too is that there is more to these kids than just being brighter than the average child and there's the psychology of these children, which is a deep and meaningful research field in its own right but it's really important that our teaching staff have a good understanding of the psychology of the learning of these children and all the associated issues that go with them. It is all very well to have, in Martin's case, a year 9 — year 11 biology class full of year 9 students and we give them year 11 or year 12 work, you know, it is one thing to do that but more importantly it is the way that that work is offered to those children as an opportunity. We can teach them university level mathematics. That is easy to do but it is the engagement that needs to be drawn out of these children because just about on any single situation you can lose these children in a heartbeat. If the relevance is not there, if the immediate relevance is not there, you've lost them straight away and so nine times out of 10, 99 times out of 100, it is this ability to not only engage but then to get that commitment for them to travel that journey with you as a teacher. These people are fantastic.

**Ms ANDREWS** — We also do a whole — large projects at year 7, 8 and 9 in SOSE and humanities. We do a project in year 7 and a project in year 9 and it is mainstream and the SEAL program kids but it means that they can really extend themselves. With the year 7 one we tried — it is for foundational research skills to get them to understand what research is, particularly to be aware of the dangers of researching on the internet and the pitfalls of researching on the internet. They can actually choose something and take it as far as they want to go in this very large project. They can project management as much as they are capable of doing. We step in if they are not capable. Similarly in year 9 they do a project which they produce a product at the end and we have students take that ball and run with it, probably especially the students in our SEAL program to some extent, and they have done some amazing things. So they can actually extend what they are doing through those projects and they are also cross curricular as well. We are trying to build that up a lot so they cannot just learn in a stream but make connections across subjects as well.

**The CHAIR** — I want to pick up something you said about the high level of engagement with the teachers and particularly your school submission also mentions the fact that there are higher-than-usual demands placed on teachers working with a SEAL program. Maybe if you can point out what some of these demands are and what additional resources or training is required for teachers working in this particular area?

**Mr DAVIS** — I will touch on it very briefly and I think some of my colleagues probably can answer a lot more meaningfully than I can. The demands are that, in essence, we can almost be changing lanes from general entry mainstream history classes to a SEAL class. So our staff have to really know their product exceptionally well but they've also got to have that confidence and that skill within themselves to be able to say, "Look, we need to go a little further than the educational framework. We need some hooks to draw these children in. But I also need to have that skill to be able to manage these children with learning difficulties", which many of them do actually have. We don't recognise that so much generally. We see the kids at the bottom end of the spectrum have all sorts of funding and support available for them. These ones at the other end, we figure they will just survive anyway equally.

**Mrs MITCHELL** — They don't.

**Mr DAVIS** — They equally need at least the same sort of funding opportunities. It is just — they're just the mirror images of each other in a sense. Our teaching staff have got a — have got to balance a whole lot of issues here. In a way it is really like teaching a whole class of students at that bottom end of that spectrum except they are at the other end. They have those same sorts of needs. There's extensive training and resources that are available. Not a whole lot of money, because a lot of the kids need aid support in the classrooms. At the bottom end there is all those things happening but there is nothing at the top end. Our staff need the opportunity to get some further training. They need some aid support in those classrooms as well, even when you have kids performing at the very top end they need some aid support as well, plus, they're constantly having to think on their feet and get that preparation and have the, I guess, having done the preparation and the groundwork themselves to know where they can direct students into further work.

**The CHAIR** — Martin, if you can talk — if we can get it on the record about the blogging and the tech?

**Mr JELLINEK** — So what I've set up for my year 11, year 12, biology classes is just a blog and basically it involves all my resources that I use in class. So it's got all my PowerPoints I have made for them and animations and things like that. There's practise exams, there's links pages and then there is this huge discussion board where kids can come on and make a post which is a question and they just put it out there and other kids will come in and comment. So they may ask a question and other kids will come in and comment and contribute to this whole discussion and I try to let it manage itself a fair bit but often they will call out for some clarification and then I jump in there and have this sort of discourse with them. It is just a great place I can post up when we do a big prac in class and everyone has their individual results I collect them at the end of the lesson, collate them into class results and I can put them up there that they can sort of write up their reports on and they just tend to use it as a resource. A lot of my year 12s were complaining that whilst we have our school intranet they were unable to get the things at home so had to remember to bring USB to school. So they can now access all those resources there but it is actually the discussion board that has turned out to be the main thing.

Another thing I just wanted to comment on what Neil was saying, through my teaching degree I found there was absolutely nothing at all that we got with regard to gifted education. Nothing was said at all. I'm currently undertaking my masters and a large focus of that is gifted ed. I have found things that were discussed in class I have just walked straight back into the classroom, implemented them to the most unbelievable results. I think that just half of that, what I'm getting out of the masters, if some of that was provided in terms of professional development for staff here it would just make life so much easier.

**The CHAIR** — Do you think that sort of thing should also be offered in your undergrad teaching?

**Mr JELLINEK** — Most definitely. It is completely missing. I think they focus on pretty much every other special needs group in education bar gifted ed. I don't think we even had half a lecture dedicated to it in the under grad.

**Mrs MITCHELL** — The unis will probably say people don't get it until they get their under grad degree. It is a more effective study if it is done at post-grad study. I don't think he will mind me saying this, Martin was a cynic when he first came until he actually worked in it and saw it himself and saw what it did for the kids and how they react.

**Ms REYNOLDS** — The other thing worth mentioning is, of course, the school when Kate was trying to get a number of teachers to undertake masters level studies, and particularly the Psychology of the Gifted at Monash Uni, and ran into all sorts of financial issues in trying to provide the financial support to teachers to do that. There was all sorts of headaches involved with that. So even for the schools to be able to support teachers to do those subjects, financially there's all sorts of intricacies and fringe benefit tax things and it was really complicated. There has to be some better system for enabling teachers to undertake post-graduate. I had certainly done other post-graduate work at my own expense before I came here.

**Ms IACOPINO** — You get highly experienced teachers coming into the school and for the first time are faced with a SEAL class and sort of the shock they go through. They come back and say, "What I prepared for a week I did in one day. I have to go home and come up with a whole lot more stuff. These kids are interested and asking me lots of questions. They want more work." So there is a lot more preparation. There is a lot more correcting. The kids will follow up and say, "What did you think of that?" Just a whole lot more work involved with these students because they are pushing it themselves. I know myself when I started here that I had a very bright science group and the first assignment that I set and they had to present it, it was just terrible, they just wouldn't stop talking. It was something I'd never faced before. It was a real shock.

**Ms MILLER** — The committee has been told that the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development facilitates a network between all SEAL schools, can you tell us how this network works and what are the benefits of participating in this network?

**Ms REYNOLDS** — I have mostly been involved with that and try to involve other staff at times as well. I enjoy going and connecting with my colleagues but it has been so — there has been so many different

people coordinating it over the last three years in particular and we've had different people at — not quite at every meeting as the person coordinating it, that it becomes very frustrating. It's been fantastic from the point of view of bringing in guest speakers that we wouldn't normally otherwise have access to or things like that or only through conferences that we have to pay for. So the fact that it's supported by the Department is great. But, a few other colleagues who have also done post-graduate qualifications in gifted, we feel regularly that we are also there as the support people for the constant procession of new coordinators. So the other schools have — in many cases they don't have the same level of commitment as Box Hill has had to the coordination and we are constantly getting young, new, inexperienced teachers who have been given a SEAL job — “We need someone to do it. You're it.” — and they come in with very little training. So while there is a collegiate effect, and that is good in some ways, it also can be very frustrating that I don't always get the chance to learn more things or new things because I'm spending most of that meeting supporting other people.

**Mr DAVIS** — Can I just jump in and add a little more too. Historically it involved accredited schools. So there was a certain...

**The CHAIR** — Benchmark.

**Mr DAVIS** — Yes. Right now we have any school that likes to say it has a SEAL program is effectively involved and, sadly, many of the programs around the place are not true SEAL programs. It might just be a streaming of some brighter children. It might be that you have half a dozen pretty good kids in the school and then you put together a few more and you have a class and you have a class and call it a SEAL class. Being a bit of a cynic, as I mentioned earlier, it is a marketing strategy where there are a number of neighbourhood schools in real competition with each other to draw the students.

**Ms MILLER** — I was going to say about the uniformity, do you think there should be greater uniformity of SEAL programs across all SEAL schools and, if so, how do you think this could be achieved?

**Ms REYNOLDS** — It's a double-edged sword.

**Mr DAVIS** — I agree. It is a double-edged sword. I think, you know, as a question without notice it's interesting because I think on the one hand there are some children out there that would otherwise be lost and so something good is happening somewhere for many of these children. What saddens me is that most places tend to believe it's just, “Let's race through the curriculum and get it done really quickly.” We have children here now, we have had to completely rethink what we are doing because they are not ready to leave us after five years. So we've got to have a fairly interesting structure with a middle year that one of the students was referring to earlier. I think in a lot of ways we are not doing many of these kids many favours by just rushing them through every single thing and they're being accelerated through English and science and maths and phys-ed because they have to get it all done in five years. There's much more depth to what these children require and without, I think, a lot of the fundamental understanding of how these children learn many of them will still be lost in the system.

**Mr HAMLEY** — The model of having 40% SEAL, 60% mainstream is something we are proud of. We think — I think as a community we think this is a fantastic model. The model of just having one or two classes at a year level is not ideal for lots of reasons so this model of having a large percentage of both working side by side, the symbiosis is just — you can't — we think it is the way to go, I think.

**Mrs MITCHELL** — But you can't have every school do that. That is the problem, you can't. This is the big issue that needs to be resolved at a governmental level because there is only a small percentage of children who are gifted who have these particular needs. What we have found for the gifted children to have this balance rather than one little elite stream is so much better for the children and for other children, you have to have them in each region. You can't have it over here in the east, you need something in the west and south and north and so on. You can't have every school doing it, which is the situation we have at the moment, because you are just diluting your pool and you are not giving the service. I can give you an example. If we have, say, 800 kids to Whitehorse in year 7, 10% are gifted, 80 kids, divide those over five schools, 14 kids each. That's not going to help anyone. You will lose probably 10 of those kids to Melbourne and Mac Rob in year 9 so each school will be left with four. It doesn't do anything. You have to be able to cluster the children together and that means making a decision about which school is going to



be able to do it. The schools then have to commit. It really concerns me that even with the new Select Entry Schools, are they passionate about the needs of these children? Are they really wanting the best? Do they see them as a distinct group of children who have special needs? And are we then able to cater for them? They are not just to get good VCE results and improve your NAPLAN scores or your VCE scores, this is are we genuinely interested in developing the intellectual talents of these Australian kids? Our kids — it's funny, some of the brightest kids, even though they are quite capable of getting the 99.9 don't want to because they don't want to do that. They want to be an engineer so they say, "Miss, I only need 85 so that is what I will work for." Or, "I want to go and do software development and I only need 92 for that. That is all I will work for." There was one particular boy last year who was absolutely brilliant and he developed, with a whole group of kids, the Faculty of Engineering Technology. Just decided to do this themselves. So they have set up this amazing thing. He was also involved in the school production doing sound and was a prefect and doing so many things and I kept on saying, "Are you working? Don't forget your studies." Then his score came in and it wasn't as good as I knew he could get and I was so worried. I thought, "Don't tell me you haven't got the score you need to get in and you didn't do enough work." He said, "Relax, I got it easily. I got in with three points to spare." You have to understand that these kids are unique and you can't put them in little boxes. You don't know what they are going to be. One of our best maths/science children is now doing a Masters in Opera. He is going to be the latest David Hobson. He will just be incredible. He could have been a doctor if he wanted to, but no. You have to provide a whole variety of experiences.

**Mr JELLINEK** — When I was saying to my class that I was coming into this they just said, "Make sure you tell them how important it is that we have people that we can talk to." So many of them just related how horrible primary school was for them and they just couldn't relate to anyone and then they have just come here and it is this collection of like minds, the social and emotional wellbeing is unbelievable.

**Mr HAMLEY** — That is what I found as well. This is larger than one or two class collection, it is 40%, so there is a critical mass of kids that — where they can come and find someone who likes to play some wacko game they have never heard of and go, "You play that too?" They have friends. It is so important for their whole school life. They don't get bullied, they don't get ridiculed, they have friends and get invited to parties.

**Ms MILLER** — The students commented on that.

**The CHAIR** — Can I come back to many submissions have suggested that schools should have a Gifted and Talented Coordinator to facilitate appropriate learning of gifted and talented students. Can you give a brief overview of your role and the benefits of having a Gifted and Talented Coordinator in a school?

**Ms REYNOLDS** — This is my seventh year. I haven't been here for the whole time of the program. I had already said I had done some studies in gifted education previously because — I won't go there. The role really is fairly broad ranging and it involves supporting parents, students and staff in many ways. It involves supporting the staff with professional development particularly. So I have been running professional development courses every year trying to encourage people to come to the in-house ones and I use the Australian Quality Teacher Framework, the package that came out, because by using that it enables them to register that for VIT for their teacher registration. So running professional development within the school, encouraging people to participate in professional development outside of the school and working with staff to try and just often just to discuss the issues around the needs of the gifted children and how they approach them with their class and so forth. With the parents, it involves running meetings and we call it the Parent Support Group. We run meetings — two terms we run two and the other two terms we run one meeting. That was at the request of the parents. They actually wanted some less formal meetings where they could talk to each other and spend time discussing issues. We sort of have a structure to those and have a guest speaker for them. We always talk about pathways and, you know, a range of things and the final one at the end of each year we evaluate the programs through the parents and present the information from that evaluation to the parents and also then Kate uses that information in working out her staffing and her programming and those sorts of things. I have less to do with the student support now we've instituted a separate SEAL Engagement Welfare Coordinator. When I was first here there was a lot of involvement with students who, for various reasons, were really struggling with the program. We certainly do move students in and out of the program if we need to and I used to be heavily involved in working out those sorts of issues as well.

**The CHAIR** — What about professional development in supporting some of the other teachers; is that part of your role?

**Ms REYNOLDS** — That is what I am saying. When I've used the Australian Quality Teacher Package, AQTF, the package sent out in 2005 and I use that program. I run that on weekends and after school so I have had all day sessions on Saturdays and Sundays, we have lunch as well so try to bring them in and say "free lunch". So things like that. Saturdays and Sundays depending on when people can make it and so on and also sessions after school where they work through some of those aspects of the package and also run a new teachers' session for new teachers to the school to talk about what it involves and what kids look like and why we run it and all those sorts of things. Kate always does that aspect also with the new teachers in their induction. So they have a session on the needs of gifted children in their induction as well. So it really covers all three aspects; the teachers, the parents and the students.

**Mrs MITCHELL** — We like to keep abreast of all the research. It is hard, there is not a lot of good Australian research but — so a lot might come from America but we still like to feed that out to our staff and present them with as many opportunities as they can. But you have to understand we don't get one cent additional funding for any of this. This is all just done on top of. But our school has a huge commitment to gifted education and that is why we have a SEAL Welfare Coordinator, we have a Gifted Coordinator as well and the APs are heavily involved, as is myself.

**Ms REYNOLDS** — Most of the other SEAL schools, the coordinators are quite stunned at the commitment made by the school to my position in terms of the time commitment and being part of the leadership team commitment. They find that quite remarkable to put it mildly.

**Mrs MITCHELL** — It is essential to do it properly.

**The CHAIR** — That comes back to the earlier point made about...

**Ms REYNOLDS** — Can I quickly go back on one point when you were talking about the uniformity of SEAL, when I said the double-edged sword, the notion that we end up having a selection process for the SEAL schools that would be centralised like the selective schools I think would be a real negative. From our perspective we use such a wide range of information. We have parent information forms, we use primary school teachers' information — while in some ways it would be good to say we know that we are then covering all the gifted kids across Victoria if we then also did it in just that way we would miss a whole lot of unusual quirky gifted kids who might not do well on centralised tests. So I would really be very loathe to support the idea that we would do something uniform for testing but some sort of connection with testing across the SEAL schools would be beneficial.

**The CHAIR** — Just turning that on its head, leaving the students coming in but more so the program offering and consistency of picking up on the earlier points about many people using it, more of a marketing tool and not necessarily having the full complemented program, would you see that there could be an opportunity in having a sort of a quality assurance across the board to meet these criteria before you can actually promote yourself as a SEAL school?

**Mr JELLINEK** — I think a lot of SEAL teaching is not as much about the curriculum but about pedagogy. If there needs to be some sort of uniformity it should be in the qualifications of the teachers actually teaching this program because SEAL is all about how it is taught — in depth exploration and things like that. It is not about, "This is what you teach." That's not where the major differentiation lies.

**Mrs MITCHELL** — To do it successfully you have to get their social and emotional needs right first. That is the bottom thing. First of all you have to have the school commitment and then you have to have the professional development of the teachers, their social and emotional levels right, and then curriculum — the curriculum is the last.

**The CHAIR** — But coming back to your point of having a coordinator in the school and the commitment you have made to the school, do you think those things combined are the sorts of things that schools need to have before you tick the magic box and say "yes".

**Mrs MITCHELL** — Plus the commitment to the social and emotional. I can't emphasise how much the psychological needs need to be addressed.

**Ms REYNOLDS** — Without a doubt.

**The CHAIR** — Just very quickly, the welfare coordinator — the role of the welfare coordinator?

**Mr HAMLEY** — That's me. We've touched on a lot of the points already. We do have a lot of kids, more than normal, of the Asperger spectrum-type students who we deal with. So that takes quite a bit of time. There's a lot of time I spend with kids who become stressed because of parental expectations as well. There is a lot of kids who — it's funny. I took some kids to a sporting event the other day and they were chatting away in the back of my car and we were going to play badminton. It was four Chinese girls and they were saying things like, "You know, we're Asian, my dad, if we don't become doctors or lawyers we're failures." They were laughing about it but in the same sense that this is something we deal with commonly is the sense of the kids having high expectations. As Kate said, but they don't always. Most of them don't want to be doctors and lawyers. They want to be teachers and lots of whatever — politicians. That's another thing we deal with.

**Mrs MITCHELL** — We have to deal with time management, organisational skills.

**Ms REYNOLDS** — Huge area.

**Mr HAMLEY** — It is not just SEAL kids. A lot of these kids have flown through high school. They fly through, it is so easy, they never have to think about being organised and taking books home because it's — they do it so quick at school they've never had to take a book home in their life. So there is lots of those sorts of things.

**The CHAIR** — I will have to wrap it up there. Thank you very much for certainly hosting us here today and the contributions that you have made which have been very, very fruitful for us and very, very important contributions that will make up a very important part of our report. Thank you for lending us your students and your board as well and parents. That is a very important part of the puzzle as well. There are a number of key stakeholders in all of this. We appreciate that. Thank you.

**Mr DAVIS** — If you need to, please get back to us.

**Ms REYNOLDS** — Come and talk to us again. We will tell you more things.

**Mr DAVIS** — We have a vested interest in all this.

**Mrs MITCHELL** — These kids are unique and every child is unique and their needs are important too.

**Witnesses withdrew.**