Parliament of Victoria

Parliamentary Inquiry into the Education of Gifted and Talented Students

Submission from the

Victorian Catholic Schools Parent Body (VCSPB)

31 May 2011

Terms of reference

(a) The effectiveness of current policies and programs for gifted and talented students, with particular consideration of, but not limited to:
   (i) identification of gifted and talented students
   (ii) equity of access to quality educational choices for gifted and talented students and their families
   (iii) impact on the learning, development and wellbeing of gifted and talented students
(b) the scope, coverage and effectiveness of current policies and programs for students from both metropolitan and regional school communities, school leaders, teachers and parents and carers to support gifted and talented students
(c) opportunities and strategies for enhancing support for gifted and talented students, their parents and carers, teachers and school leaders
(d) opportunities for improved educational offerings for gifted and talented students through collaboration across all school sectors and with community, business and industry

PREAMBLE

The Victorian Catholic Schools’ Parent Body (VCSPB) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into the Education of Gifted and Talented Students.

The VCSPB represents parents of students in Victorian Catholic schools at diocesan, state and national levels, through school boards or school based parent support groups.

The VCSPB supports the work of Victorian Catholic education authorities in advancing the interests of Catholic schools and their students, particularly in those areas where parent input can strengthen the quality of Catholic school provision.

The VCSPB speaks from a perspective of parents who value education in the Catholic faith and tradition for their children, but also as taxpayers and as interested citizens.
Our contribution to the inquiry is referenced to our position as parents, and our representative role with respect to the Catholic sector in Victoria.

This statement deals with the VCSPB’s general views regarding the education of gifted and talented students. The VCSPB’s submission to the inquiry addresses a limited number of issues that are important to Catholic school parents and seeks to highlight parents’ perspectives on these. As far as possible the response is organised under the headings suggested in the invitation from the Education and Training Committee.

1. How the concepts of giftedness and talent should be defined

The VCSPB has not considered the technical definition of gifted and talented and has for the purposes of this submission assumed the definitions of giftedness and talent adopted by Francois Gagné as accepted by various education authorities.

**Giftedness** refers to a student's outstanding potential and ability in one or more domains, (e.g. intellectual, creative).

**Talent** refers to outstanding performance in one or more fields of human activity. Talent emerges from ability as a consequence of the student's learning experience (Gagné, 1991).


2. The key benefits and issues surrounding programs for gifted and talented students, including any gaps identified in current programs

3. Any relevant projects currently underway specific to the education of gifted and talented students

4. Equity of access to programs for all gifted and talented students in Victoria

Parents of children in all schools want to see achievement of quality outcomes for all children. The VCSPB believes that every Australian child, regardless of the school he or she attends or his or her personal circumstances, is entitled to the best education that our nation can provide.

Catholic school communities hold the strong view that, as a matter of equity and justice, all children should be provided the opportunities in their school environment to fulfill their potential. This applies as much to those identified as gifted and talented as those with special needs and the vast majority that are neither.

There is, however, some evidence from the data from the 2009 report of the OECD Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) that Australia is not sufficiently challenging and developing its higher achieving students (see [http://www.acer.edu.au/ozpisa/key-findings/](http://www.acer.edu.au/ozpisa/key-findings/)).
Despite good intentions to ensure all children receive the necessary attention to fulfill their potential, the reality suggests that children with special needs are allocated a higher priority than the gifted and talented. The identification and support of gifted and talented children is often seen to be a lower priority as their progress (normally accelerated) is typically sustained through their schooling.

While the importance of identifying at risk children who would otherwise almost certainly fall behind is undeniable, the gifted and talented also need to be identified and supported. Failure to do so is a serious loss. The gifted and talented have the potential to make great contributions to human achievements in the arts, sciences, mathematics and technology. Attainment of full potential enables such students to enrich the community.

If we want to minimise the risk of losing the potentially significant contribution of a gifted and talented child to society, we need to understand where the likely causes of the loss may be.

5. Addressing the issue of underperformance among gifted and talented students

As a parent group, we understand the importance of family support to all children. The school can only achieve so much without support from the home. Potentially the key risk is that the home environment is not supportive of the gifted and talented. While this of course applies to all children, the difference is that in the case of the gifted and talented the downside of not fulfilling that child’s potential is significant.

Gifted and talented children do not choose their parents. They will emerge from diverse family backgrounds, including parents of differing capacities, different cultures and, most importantly, differing values (or priorities) with respect to educational outcomes. Parents may not be aware of programs for gifted and talented students.

Clearly those gifted and talented children with parents who are able and willing to provide a supportive home environment are less likely to be underachieving. If gifted and talented children require support from their home environments, it seems very important to identify those home environments (that is, parental abilities and attitudes) that are unlikely to provide the necessary support.

It is a matter of priority to identify home environments that may offer less support and to provide practical means to schools and/or gifted and talented students to compensate for this disadvantage.

There needs to be support programs and information for parents of gifted and talented students, especially parents who are otherwise not able to provide full support to their gifted and talented children. Where that support still fails to deliver the required outcome (that is, a change in parental priorities), then the school needs to provide extra support at the schooling level.

6. Overcoming negative attitudes and misconceptions surrounding giftedness and talent
7. Mechanisms to improve the capacity of teachers to identify and adequately respond to gifted and talented students

The VCSPB believes that pre-service teacher education courses in Victoria, as well as in-service professional learning opportunities for teachers, should prepare teachers to develop differentiated curriculum for gifted and talented students and teaching approaches to meet the preferred learning styles of gifted and talented students. Schools and teachers should foster a culture for inclusion and development of gifted and talented students. Funding should be directed at teacher professional learning and curriculum development in this area.

Teachers need to be more aware of the options available for improved identification of gifted and talented students, such as the use of a range of testing and assessments including specific purpose instruments such as the Higher Ability Selection test (HAST) developed by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER).

Cooperation and sharing of the limited available expertise in the area of education of gifted and talented students should occur between schools and across school sectors.

8. any broader implications for school communities arising from the education of gifted and talented students

FINAL COMMENTS

The VCSPB wishes the Review Committee success in identifying those factors that may contribute to better outcomes for the education of gifted and talented students. As a parent representative group, we acknowledge the importance of such a review and we thank you for the opportunity for us to canvass these issues amongst our own community and report to you through this submission.

Dino Rebellato
VCSPB CHAIRPERSON