



Gifted Support Network Inc.

Supporting families with gifted children

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May 31, 2011

Ms Kerryn Risely
Executive Officer
Education and Training Committee
Parliament House
Spring Street
EAST MELBOURNE 3002

Re: Inquiry into the Education of Gifted and Talented Students

Dear Ms Risely,

Please find attached Gifted Support Network's submission to the Education and Training Committee's Inquiry into the Education of Gifted and Talented Students.

Gifted Support Network is a not-for-profit incorporated organisation supporting families with gifted children in the south-eastern suburbs of Melbourne. We have a very active membership base of more than 110 families and teachers.

A sub-committee of Gifted Support Network conducted a survey to help inform this submission. The submission features the voice of parents; giving life to the statements and statistics.

On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank you for conducting this inquiry and for providing this opportunity for our voices to be heard.

Yours sincerely,

Louise Broadbent
President,
Gifted Support Network Inc.

Submission to the
Victorian Government Inquiry into
the Education of
Gifted and Talented Students

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1 Executive Summary

Many gifted children start school as highly engaged learners, yet rapidly become disengaged. This is because the educational environment fails to address the speed, depth, and complexity of learning in gifted children, as well as the increased need for stimulation and creative freedom. Age-based educational expectations and social groupings do not cater for the asynchronous development, heightened sensitivity, and emotional intensity of these children, who often also have a highly developed sense of morality and social justice. These problems are further compounded by low levels of identification of gifted children by educators, who themselves generally receive inadequate training in giftedness.

Gifted Support Network conducted a survey to help inform this submission. This submission will feature the voice of parents; giving life to the statements and statistics.

While Australian society actively nurtures gifts in the areas of sport and, to a lesser degree, the arts, we balk at nurturing intellectual gifts. This is a shameful waste of a wonderful human resource.

“All we are asking for is equality. Our daughter should have the same opportunity to learn something new EVERY DAY like other children. She should not be punished because she is advanced. We are not asking for the world - we are only asking that our child be given the opportunity to learn something new in her day at school. If we can't do that, then something is truly, truly, horrendously wrong with the system.”

Strong themes emerged from the survey and are further developed throughout this document:

- Parents feel that their gifted child is not getting a fair chance at an appropriate education. They should be allowed equal opportunities for challenging educational experiences everyday.
- The provision of an appropriate curriculum for gifted children is necessary to alleviate many issues faced by them, such as boredom leading to behavioural issues.
- Opportunities for appropriate education in primary school and the early years of high school are wasted. Most gifted children are ‘spinning their wheels’ while waiting for the more rigorous learning available to them in later secondary school.
- The compacted SEAL program offered in secondary schools received many positive comments. Parents want a similar program offered in primary schools.
- Parents are frustrated at having to re-educate their child’s teachers each year. There is no handover from year to year and not many teachers understand the needs of gifted children.

How we educate our children reflects the kind of society we want to live in. If we foster education and technological advancement to produce well-adjusted citizens with high personal self-esteem, their ultimate contribution to society will be effective. This should be the case for gifted children as well as for all others.

2 Gifted Support Network

Gifted Support Network is a not-for-profit incorporated organisation supporting families with gifted children in the south-eastern suburbs of Melbourne. We have a very active membership base of more than 110 families and teachers. The services we offer are:

- evening seminars with professional speakers four times a year;
- regular opportunities for parents to discuss aspects of parenting the gifted child;
- opportunities for gifted children and their parents to socialise. These are age-based and include Mini-Minds for preschoolers, Primary Minds (prep-age 10), Tweens (age 10-13) and Teens;
- a comprehensive library of books on gifted children for members;
- advocacy on gifted issues in the community through stalls at community days;
- a bi-annual Expo showcasing companies and professionals offering services to gifted children, such as WiseOnes, GATEWAYS, CHIP, psychologists etc.

The seminars are attended by up to 70 people and include an opportunity to network over supper. Some people travel over an hour to attend. We regularly receive thank you emails after talks from people grateful for the knowledge shared and the feeling that they are not alone dealing with the issues of parenting their gifted child.

Gifted Support Network does not receive any external funding or support. A team of dedicated, volunteer parents are responsible for coordinating the comprehensive suite of activities we offer. Our committee and members have taken responsibility for educating themselves about gifted children. This education includes attending seminars, reading research papers and books written on gifted children and their educational provisions, and accessing support from other parents at Gifted Support Network events.

2.1 2011 Member Survey

To help inform Gifted Support Network's response to this inquiry, we surveyed our members. A phenomenal 61 comprehensive responses were received (55% of our membership). Reading the results one gets a sense of the many emotions respondents experience when dealing with the current education system. It is clear from the survey that many parents have educated themselves on the issues of the gifted person. Underlying this is the frustration, disappointment, and difficulties that are being faced everyday by parents. Hopefully Gifted Support Network's submission will go a long way to advocating for our children.

2.2 Background

In 2001, our organisation, then known as Bayside Young Active Minds, prepared a submission to the Federal Government's inquiry into gifted and talented children. It is frustrating that 10 years later, the issues remain the same. It is our fervent hope that the Victorian Government will put in place fair and wise policies that allow gifted children the same chance to shine as all other children in our education system.

“My daughter comes home and says she is 'revolted' by not learning anything at school. To hear those words from my six year old's mouth makes my heart hurt.”

3 Identification

(a) 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;

Within Gifted Support Network most gifted children are identified by proactive action taken by parents. Parents often find a good deal of resistance from schools when seeking an assessment for their child.

“Most primary schools we visited had no idea how to cater for such an early and fluent reader. There was very little information or support offered; we had to find out about assessments and psychologists ourselves.”

Even when an IQ assessment is on file at a school for a given student, parents often find that each year they need to inform the class teacher of the child’s potential and the existence of previous reports/tests to support this. There needs to be a procedure in place in all schools to pass this key information on from year to year. 80% of survey respondents believe this is a high priority.

3.1 Assessment

Parents often pay to have their child assessed outside the school system by a psychologist specialising in gifted children. The psychologist usually provides a detailed report that the school can use to cater for the child’s needs. When the IQ report is presented to the school, the parents are under the expectation that this will provide momentum to gain access to a more appropriate education for their child. It is disappointing when the school offers to put action in place and then doesn’t, or worse, does not accept that any changes in the child’s schooling are required.

“Her prep teacher also thought she was very bright but when we brought up the topic of assessment she scoffed at it. As her prep year progressed and she became bored with the work because she was so far advanced, we knew we had to take it on board ourselves to get her tested. We knew if we had the assessment done there could be no denying her access to extension in the classroom. We needed proof. At no point did the school ever even offer to extend her, let alone get her tested. This was extremely disappointing to us. It was all (and still is) left up to us.”

Even when NAPLAN results indicate that a child could be gifted, schools do not always use this as an indicator to change what is being taught.

It is pleasing that we did receive this positive example of a child who was properly identified and supported at school. This needs to become the norm.

“We have never had any problem with our child’s gifted status being recognised. The support we received from the primary school, led by the Principal, was excellent. Our child was offered vertical acceleration in literacy from Grade 2 to Grade 6 level and for the rest of the time stayed with the Grade 2 class. This was very well supported by the teaching staff who also made sure that a Grade 6 mentor was assigned to our child to help make the acceleration experience more comfortable.”

3.2 Twice Exceptional - 2e

When a gifted child is diagnosed with a disability, they are called 2e or 'twice exceptional' or gifted-learning-disabled (GLD). 20% of survey respondents had at least one child in this category. It is very important to note that a child with a high IQ cannot overcome a disability. A detailed discussion of the issues associated with Twice Exceptional children are outside the scope of this document, but we have included the following points because consideration needs to be given to this area.

Two confounding issues exist when trying to describe 2e students – their gifts can overcome their disabilities as they learn compensatory strategies, and at the other end of the spectrum, their disabilities can conceal their gifted talents. Thus, under-identification is even more prevalent in this group than for the 'regular' gifted population.

The diagnosis of Aspergers is relatively recent. Gifted Aspergers children are usually mis-diagnosed as 'gifted with eccentric traits'. They may have controlling, single-minded behaviours, be sensitive to sound, taste or smell, suffer anxiety, display impulsive behaviours, have anger problems, and can be socially inept. However, no matter how severe the disability (i.e. even if a child has dysgraphia, bowel disorders, severe behaviour issues, sensory processing disorders and anxiety/depression, all associated with their Aspergers), if they also have a high IQ, they do not qualify for the aid to which other Aspergers children are entitled.

“We have often felt that we were alone with no tangible support from the education system. All children, gifted or disabled or normal, all have a right to an appropriate education to nurture their innate talents.”

3.3 Recommendations To Improve Identification

- Inclusion of thorough training in giftedness for early childhood educators and maternal and child health workers.
- Creation of gifted education specialist positions, requiring a postgraduate qualification in gifted education, as a resource in all schools, thus giving all teachers and parents access to this level of expertise.
- Use of identification tools in all preschools and schools, including observational parent/ teacher checklists.
- Use of ongoing pre-testing by all teachers at the beginning of each topic (including additional above-level testing where indicated) to determine what children know before they undertake the work.
- Implementation of procedures in all schools to pass key information about the gifted student from one year to the next.

4 Equity

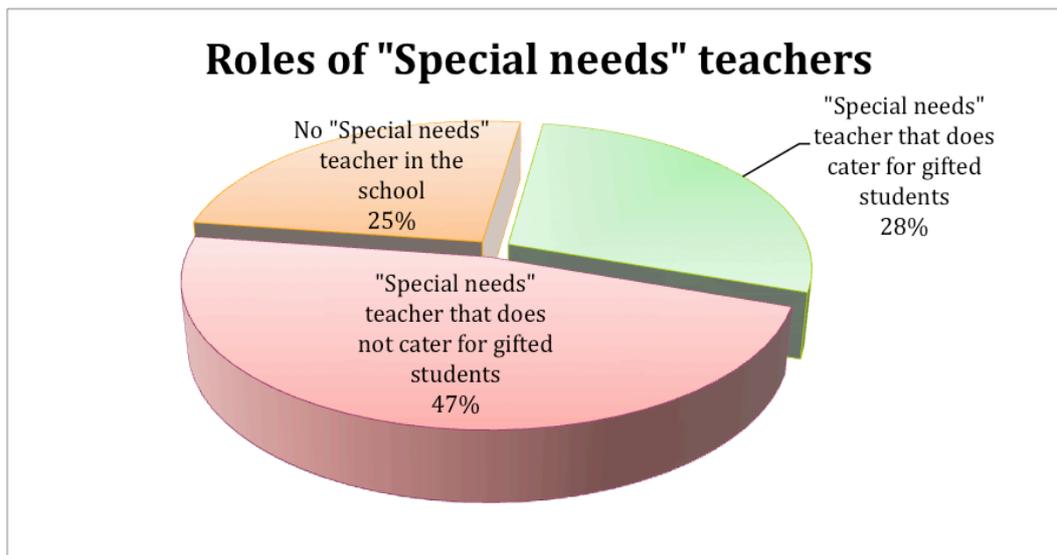
(a) the effectiveness of current policies and programs for gifted and talented students, with particular consideration of, but not limited to:

(ii) equity of access to quality educational choices for gifted and talented students and their families

“I feel that the point of equal access is very hard to argue against, very easy to understand and accept. It should be something a parent of a gifted child can measure too. The education system can and should provide equal access already. There is no need for more resources. The inquiry should hear how the system is failing to provide equal access today and asked to monitor and enforce fairness in the system for all.”

4.1 Special needs teachers

75% of children represented in the survey had a special needs teacher at their school. However, only 28% of children had a special needs teacher who works with gifted children.



Gifted children need to be provided assistance with their learning at school (at whatever level learning is occurring), in a similar way that remedial aid is provided to disabled children to assist with their learning. This will ensure that gifted children receive equity of access to an appropriate education.

“I work in the disability sector and am well aware of the way that parents struggle for the support needs of their children. I don't think that increasing funding for gifted children should take away from children with disabilities or other special needs. However, I do feel that gifted children have a right to the kind of education they need and that the school system should cater for them as children with special needs.”

Once a parent finds out or accepts that a child is gifted, there is often a steep learning curve (mostly by mothers) to educate themselves in order to advocate for their gifted child. Advocating for your gifted child is an ongoing process throughout the school years. It is time consuming, frustrating, and only sometimes, a rewarding process.

“It’s a shame, as developmentally he really wants more challenge but the kinder is reluctant to do anything that might draw attention to an early reader in case it upsets other parents.”

4.2 Priority Access

Some schools are known to ‘give all kids a turn’ when offering places to the few activities that are specifically designed to cater for gifted students. Always offering the extension activities to the gifted children is not seen as ‘fair’ by teachers. Access to places at externally run activities and competitions is often limited in this way. One wonders how the teacher would feel about sharing the remedial programs amongst the class.

It is also known that schools choose ‘bright’ children, rather than gifted children for extension groups and off-campus activities, as ‘bright’ children work well in groups. ‘Bright’ children enjoy school, work hard and are challenged with the work they are asked to do. The gifted child may be viewed as difficult to get along with, and there is a fear that they may not represent the school well.

91% of parents surveyed said they are paying for extra-curricular educational activities for their children to try to compensate for the lack of stimulus during school hours and to try to satisfy their child’s thirst for learning.

“We attend GATEWAYS workshops and private piano lessons, as well as small group work with a psychologist who specializes in gifted and highly able kids. We do this because our son rarely gets to ‘spread his wings’ in the school system. At the new school, our son spends one session per week with the enrichment/extension teacher which is wonderful, but nowhere near enough.”

Although many schools promote their gifted policy, in practice, there is no consistent, measurable approach for progression outside the child’s year level or VELS level. We need to erase the notion of going up only one or two grades, and instead, encourage learning at the gifted child’s capacity (whatever that may be). It would then follow that school reports would report on the child’s progress on above-level learning. A report showing your grade one child’s progress on grade one maths is a waste when the child can do grade five maths with ease.

A gifted child has a sense that they are not like other children. As an example, from a young age they know that they do not require repetition to learn a task, maybe only needing to see it once or twice, whereas the majority of the class require 10 to 15 repetitions. And the converse is also true – that other children have a sense that the gifted child is not like them. This can result in isolation of the gifted child even if that child does want to integrate with others. For the gifted child, not having their difference acknowledged can be confusing and isolating.

“One point I would make (I am now 21) is the difficulty that some students (including myself) have socially due to different ways of thinking that may not fit the mainstream. As a result of this I was socially isolated for many years at school which had a detrimental affect on my mood and confidence, both at the time and later in life. Teachers need to be properly trained to adjust school activities rather than adopting a one-size-fits-all approach. As an example, students were often asked to give presentations on a topic of choice. This was very difficult for me as I would often not be able to decide on a topic, for my (perhaps unfounded) fear of ridicule, leaving my presentations to the very last minute and underachieving significantly as a result. A better approach would have been for the teacher to prescribe for me a particular topic which I could

then cover in detail without being so worried about how the choice would be received by my peers.”

4.3 Recommendations To Address Equity

- Every school must have educators qualified in gifted education to provide specialist classroom support.
- A policy that each gifted child requires opportunities to be engaged in a learning environment everyday at an appropriately challenging level (not just “horizontal” enrichment).
- A change of mindset is required of educators: it is fair for a gifted student to have priority access to services for gifted students.
- A suite of programs for teaching gifted children in a mixed ability classroom needs to be determined. Further research may be required into the suitability of the differentiated curriculum when a child needs to be taught at a level which is three or more years above the year-level they are in.
- A gifted child needs to feel comfortable working at a different level in the classroom. This could be achieved if other children in the class working at different levels, even if it is not the same level as the gifted child.
- If a school cannot provide appropriate extension in a subject, the child should have a right to access distance education, and to do the work in class time.

5 Development and Wellbeing

(a) effectiveness of current policies and programs for gifted and talented students, with particular consideration of, but not limited to:

(iii) impact on the learning, development and wellbeing of gifted and talented students

Gifted children have a thirst for knowledge and learning that is much more intense than for mainstream children. Knowledge is happiness to the gifted child. Learning is their right. Spending many years in inappropriate schooling leads not only to their potential not being reached, but anxiety that can lead to mental and psychological issues.

Gifted children are often highly sensitive and emotional. Anxiety can develop because they know they are different and may have few or no friends, particularly at school. Being isolated makes them targets for bullies at school.

Gifted students need to “learn how to learn”. If opportunities to learn do not come frequently until the high school years, then it can be too late to develop the skills required. They can then have a crisis of self-confidence which results in anxiety, and may lead to depression. Gifted students need opportunities to have to work hard at something to achieve well.

Parents are often frustrated by the gap between their child’s capability at home, and the level of work that the same child demonstrates at school. Some students dumb themselves down to fit in. This is especially the case for gifted girls.

Gifted children can become disengaged with their learning if they are already familiar with a topic covered in class, or if the pace is too slow. This can create a problem where a child who was once thriving in a particular subject completely loses interest. For instance, a young child who has an avid interest in numbers can, by late primary school, loathe maths because the content is inappropriate for their pace of learning. It is devastating for parents to witness this happening to their child.

As parents, we recognise that our child has great potential, yet we watch - somewhat helplessly - as the school system not just dampens their enthusiasm, but puts the light out altogether.

“He has lost his love of learning since he started school. He insists on only doing what is required of him, as his friends won’t like him if he shows them more. His favourite subject was maths and he now dislikes it as he feels its repetitious and it never progresses for him.”

5.1 Boredom

Gifted students are often bored at school. Pre-testing of a topic is not common in schools, so many students sit through topics when they already know the content. The gifted student who is bored in class usually works out coping strategies which can include behaviour problems such as disruptive and distracting behaviour. This can become a pattern which can be difficult to break in later school years. The focus for the school is then on the child’s behaviour, whereas providing an appropriate curriculum would alleviate the source of the problem without disruption to the entire class.

5.2 Learning Styles

Gifted children do not learn in the same way as other children. For instance, reading can increase exponentially, plateau for a while, then improve exponentially again. Most teachers do not understand that a child can learn like this.

“Our son, in grade prep, could not read although he had already been assessed with an IQ in the gifted range. We engaged a gifted professional who (after working with our child and examining his IQ assessment) recommended that he be accelerated to grade 1. To the schools credit, this was done during term 3. In term 4 he was struggling with small chapter books. By Christmas he was reading the newspaper. This ‘extraordinary’ improvement is typical for a gifted child.”

5.3 Recommendations Concerning Development and Wellbeing

- Use of ongoing pre-testing by all teachers at the beginning of each topic (including additional above-level testing where indicated) to help alleviate behaviour issues brought about by boredom.
- The provision of an appropriate curriculum for gifted children is necessary to alleviate many issues faced by them. This directly creates a happier and more confident child and the benefits are numerous to the child, their families and educators.
- Research to be undertaken into the causes of anxiety and depression specific to gifted children being educated in Victorian classrooms. The aim of this research is to reduce the cost to society by minimizing the need to engage psychiatrists, psychologists and other health professionals due to psychological issues.
- Teachers need to be educated about the different ways that gifted children learn, eg their asynchronous, non-linear development. They need to appreciate that the gifted child comes as a ‘package’ which may include heightened sensitivity and ‘challenging’ behaviours.

6 Scope, Coverage and Effectiveness

(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

Understanding the nature of giftedness is essential for a changed attitude to policy development. These children are entitled to a challenging and stimulating environment in which to learn. Their need for a differentiated curriculum is as great as the learning disabled, who currently (and deservedly) receive realistic support.

The scope, coverage and effectiveness of current policy surrounding gifted education is too often ineffective due to a lack of understanding and acceptance of the gifted child in the school system. The term 'giftedness' is a misnomer because of its association with privilege, achievement and success. In practice, gifted children often feel alienated because they are painfully aware of being different. Many mask their giftedness in order to fit in with age peers, even though this means underachieving. Underachievement causes gifted children to be overlooked.

“I would back off if I could be confident that the school had programs that cater to gifted children and was committed to providing educational activities that meet their needs, but as it is they have no gifted and talented policy and very few extension/enrichment activities. Unless provision of these programs and in-school support is legislated and funded (as it is for other special needs children) then schools have little incentive to offer these programs and our children will continue to be disadvantaged.”

“A teacher wouldn't expect a black child to pretend to be white. So it seems equally ridiculous that a gifted child should be expected to be anything but themselves.”

6.1 Gifted IQ Range

There is little understanding that even within the 'gifted' IQ range, support required by the gifted child varies considerably. As an example, the need for a differentiated curriculum increases with the level of giftedness. Our education system caters well for the majority, 68% of whom have an IQ ranging between 85 and 115. It also supports children with an IQ of 30 below the average of 100 (that is IQ of 70 or below), who are unlikely to be integrated into a normal classroom, even with assistance. These children are rightly afforded schools to cater to them specifically. However, gifted children with an equivalent variation of 30 (IQ of 130 or above) do not receive any support whatsoever. A highly gifted child (IQ 145 and above) is expected to work at the same pace and level as children with an IQ of 100 – even though they are just as exceptional as a child with an IQ of 55.

The erroneous perception that gifted children do not need support perpetuates under-resourcing in this area. Because our education system is primarily focused on outcomes that are inappropriate for these children, their educational needs are unmet. While a significant proportion of gifted children are not high achievers at school, most of those who are performing well (at the level expected of their grade) are still underachieving their potential, in an environment that does not provide challenging learning opportunities.

6.2 Acceleration

There is no current policy to deal effectively with acceleration of gifted students. Acceleration can be a full-year acceleration also known as a grade-skip, or single subject acceleration. The effectiveness of whether either type of acceleration is successful depends on a number of factors including:

- The willingness of the receiving teacher to integrate the child into their class and address any issues (or perceived issues). This includes sensitively handling other students and parents who may be affronted by the situation.
- The child's ability must place them in the top cohort of the group they are moving into.
- The child must be willing to undertake the acceleration.
- Teachers in the school must be informed of the acceleration and given appropriate reasons why it is being undertaken.

The risks of not accelerating the child should also be considered.

6.2.1 Subject Acceleration

Subject acceleration allows the child to remain with their age-based class for most of the day, but they are able attend a class in a higher year level for a specific subject. Maths and literacy are the two most common subjects where subject acceleration occurs.

6.2.2 Vertical timetabling

If all year levels had maths at the same time of the day, there would be no barrier to subject acceleration. This is known as 'vertical timetabling'. Vertical timetabling is a simple, effective, no-cost solution to providing an opportunity for the child to learn at their appropriate level every day, and yet, in many cases, teachers and/or principals actively oppose these measures. One would expect that every gifted child would benefit from at least one subject acceleration, however only 59% of survey respondents said their children had received any subject acceleration.

“Subject acceleration was excellent. My child was no longer bored and was much happier. As a result, she became a much friendlier person and for the first time had a large group of friends.”

“Our eldest child is highly gifted across a wide range of subjects. Even with the two grade skips many classes run at a painfully slow pace for her. She's capable of working at a much higher level than she does presently, but it's hard for the school to accommodate that as they don't use vertical timetabling or curriculum compacting. The curriculum doesn't really allow students to work at their own pace.”

6.2.3 Full Year Acceleration

Full-year acceleration is also an effective support for some gifted children. However, once again, there is a lack of clear policy for schools. In the end, it is left to the parents to fight for the child, and possibly against the principal and teacher's desires. There is clear research to prove that acceleration is an excellent method of addressing some of the gifted child's needs, and when done with the full support of the principal, and the receiving teacher, it can be very effective.

42% of survey respondents said their child had been accelerated at least one full year. 69% of these accelerations occurred in grade prep, one or two.

“I think that acceleration was necessary and I don't regret it at all. My child did not fit into her grade level but has fitted in since being accelerated. The teachers were concerned with the social side of acceleration, but this is where she most benefitted.”

“The recommendation by the psychologist who assessed him was that he should be accelerated by a year but the school refused to consider it as an option. We're still trying to find out what they are offering as a substitute.”

6.2.4 SEAL (Select Entry Accelerated Learning)

Where there is clear policy on acceleration is within the SEAL programs offered at Victorian state secondary schools. The most positive comments that Gifted Support Network received in the survey were regarding SEAL programs. As the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (Education Department) probably also receives the same feedback, it seems strange that equivalent compacting of the curriculum has not been made available in primary schools. The assumption that gifted children require thirteen years to cover the pre-university curriculum is fundamentally flawed.

“My son is now in a SEAL program in year 7 and is studying year 8 and 9 subjects. He is incredibly happy and is finally thriving. He is with like-minded children. It is a fantastic environment for gifted children. We desperately need this kind of learning environment for primary school students like NSW's Opportunity Schools. We feel like we are biding time to have our second child start in a SEAL program so she can fly too.”

“Primary school is excruciatingly boring if undertaken by a gifted child at the pace designed for the average student.”

6.3 Individual Learning Plans (ILPs)

Many schools provide gifted children with Individual Learning Plans (ILPs). Unfortunately, few parents surveyed had a positive experience with the implementation of an ILP.

“The independent learning plan does not seem to vary widely from the existing curriculum. It is theoretical; it doesn't change anything in practice.”

“The ILP was very airy fairy - all about encourage and support and no concrete objectives and measurements.”

“ILP! Don't get me started - it took a year to develop six page confusing form (yr7), and was ineffective (Yr 8) because teachers didn't know how to use it, is now second term in Year 9 and still waiting for this year's ILP.”

“Tried ILPs in primary school but they took the form of something like, ‘he will sit still, pay attention in class & as a reward he can challenge himself’.”

“ILPs are not of any value – at my child's school all children have them. We now choose not to peruse our child's ILP as it has no detail or value attached to his education. However, in meetings this plan is used to demonstrate the school's actions and cover their needs.”

6.4 Rural Families

Children in rural areas are often in dire need of assistance due to their remote location. Rural children are unable to attend after-school activities that stimulate them, visit museums, libraries etc to which their city counterparts have easy access.

Gifted Support Network receives emails and phone calls from parents of gifted children in the country. The additional complexity parenting such children presents, because of their location, is astounding. In the city, there are opportunities to participate in seminars and network with other gifted families through various support groups. This normalises the experience for many. Rural families are unable to participate in these activities which further exacerbates their sense of isolation.

“Since our son started high school I have found the experience of trying to partner with the school to be frustrating and depressing - which has ended up being not good for my health. I persisted with the school in the hope that there was something that could be done. I no longer have this hope and we do the best we can to provide a loving and understanding home environment. We live in rural Victoria which limits access to services.”

6.5 Recommendations Concerning Scope, Coverage and Effectiveness

- Funding of ongoing Australian research into the educational, social, and emotional needs of the gifted.
- Research the introduction of a SEAL-style compacted curriculum into the primary years.
- Support for disadvantaged families and communities to gain access to appropriate educational, assessment and counseling services. This would include rural and low socio-economic areas.
- Creation of umbrella organisations at Federal, State and local levels to design, establish, coordinate and evaluate programs for the gifted. Also, to act as a resource for community-based organisations and individuals catering to the needs of gifted children.

7 Enhancing Support

(c) opportunities and strategies for enhancing support for gifted and talented students, their parents and carers, teachers and school leaders

The lack of support available for gifted children demonstrates complete ignorance of the difficulties faced by these children and their families. This lack of basic understanding is comparable to the pre-1950's attitude to disability and is the major cause of inadequate resourcing.

The experience of being gifted is not widely understood. Increased intellectual capacity (not to be confused with performance) is associated with emotional complexity and intensity as well as increased physical and emotional sensitivity.

7.1 Family Support

Appropriate information for parents who have a newly identified gifted child would assist in alleviating unnecessary stress for parents finding themselves in this situation. A 'diagnosis' of 'gifted' is not usually celebrated and broadcast from the rooftops. Many Gifted Support Network families have not told their extended families, and those who have, often find the 'diagnosis' is not accepted. Parents are unable to share this information with friends or parents from school in any meaningful way, as the parenting experience is quite removed from parenting the non-gifted child. It can be a very isolating experience in the beginning.

“When my son was in grade prep, he was reading the first book in the Harry Potter series. I had to encourage him to keep his books in his reader bag in the playground after school. Neither he nor I needed any additional inappropriate comments or confrontation from other parents.”

Information provided to parents should be practical and help to normalise the situation so that families realise they are not alone. Access to books, websites, seminars and families in the same situation allows families to make choices that will suit the needs of their gifted child in an informed manner.

“We send our daughter to gifted programs such as CHIP and GATEWAYS when we can - when it is financially and geographically suitable. These programs give her the kind of education she craves. When we pick her up from GATEWAYS, she is a different child - engaged, animated, excited and thoughtful. These programs have been a lifesaver for us and we only wish that we could provide this level of education for her every day. We can only imagine what she could achieve if she was encouraged in this way and offered so many opportunities for extension and expression at school.”

Parenting a gifted child is often exhausting because of their energy and highly sensitive emotions. Aside from the academic issues, parents need to be given appropriate information on why their child is like this. Understanding the child as a whole enables parents to make better choices for themselves and their families.

When a child has been identified as gifted, parents should be provided with access to resources to enhance their parenting from the professional who assessed the child (often a psychologist or the Maternal and Child Health Nurse). In particular, identifying a gifted child with Aspergers is very important in determining the care that parents and schools need to provide.

There is no centralised avenue to provide parents with appropriate and timely direction. Gifted Support Network provide answers and support when parents who think their child is gifted (and 95% of them are right) need to know:

- Where do you go to get your child assessed?
- What do the assessment results mean?
- What are the pros and cons for assessment? Is it regulated?
- What types of assessments are available and what will schools accept or understand?
- If an assessment recommends acceleration how do they go about achieving this and who can support them through the process?
- Which schools have proven experience with the strengths that this specific child displays?
- What characteristics does a school have that makes them better for a particular gifted child?
- What obligations are there on a school to meet the needs of a gifted child?
- What can a parent ask for and what is it fair to expect a school to provide?
- What are the differences between the State, Catholic and Independent systems?
- Where does a parent turn to when the school is not accepting or catering for their child's special needs?

7.2 School Support

Schools can utilise existing resources more effectively, starting with appropriate professional development. Teachers who have an interest in this area, who want to help the gifted child, who are prepared to utilise what is already offered, AND are prepared to teach these children outside their grade objectives should be encouraged in their pursuits. Enhancing support in a school could initially be done just by identifying which teachers actually understand the needs of a gifted child and encourage these teachers to reach out to the gifted community to better accommodate their needs at an appropriate learning level.

The survey results highlight many different ways that schools attempt to support gifted children including Independent Learning Programs, differentiated curriculums and acceleration. What was apparent was some of them did not always benefit the child in question. As these adaptations to a gifted child's schooling, when implemented correctly, are proven strategies to support their learning, one assumes that schools do not always understand how to implement them properly.

Schools, parents and any professionals supporting the child should be meeting on a regular basis. Meetings to discuss a child who has been recently accelerated should be held at least once per term. Due to the changing pace of learning and issues that arise with gifted children in the regular classroom, a minimum of twice yearly meetings should be held on an ongoing basis.

Some schools do reasonably well in addressing the needs of a gifted child. However, from the results of our survey, it shows that many are not so successful. It is this lack of consistency and irregularity that could be addressed through supporting all schools to develop an action plan and procedures required to assist gifted children in line with the Victorian Education Department's objective on inclusive education for every child.

“In my opinion, my child has received 0 minutes of instruction in mathematics so far this year (after one term). While the class has had maths lessons, she has not learned one new concept or method. This is not acceptable.”

Just as remedial aides are available in each school to address the needs of children at the lower end of the bell curve, provision should also be made for children who have been

assessed with an IQ above 130. Their learning capabilities and comprehension are beyond that of the existing educational model for each grade. Just as remedial children suffer emotionally as well as academically if their needs are not met through additional assistance, this is also the case with gifted children.

7.3 Online Support

The information that is available on the web deals with the theory – how to identify gifted children, different schooling options and extra-curricular programs. However, there is no information available to parents or teachers detailing what has been tried (and with what level of success) in which schools. So, a parent can read about and request that their gifted child receives single subject acceleration, but the school may have no experience, or be unwilling to timetable the necessary changes. Without practical support from the Education Department, both the school and parents are left to experiment.

As there is currently no position with sole responsibility for gifted education within the Victorian Education Department, there is no centralised collection of data or information in respect of the education of gifted children. There is no-one within the government (or elsewhere) that is collating information about where gifted children are schooled, what programs are being offered to them within and outside the school, and the success or otherwise of these initiatives. Instead, it is left to principals and teachers to try and find available resources if indeed they have the incentive or initiative to get that far.

“We worked with our school for 3 years with the hope that they would provide accelerated support for our daughter. Unfortunately there were minimal resources to provide this. As a result our daughter became increasingly disengaged. We have moved her to a school that provides extension both within the classroom and outside of the classroom. She has come to life again and is a completely different child.”

7.4 Recommendations Concerning Enhancing Support

- The Victorian Education Department needs to mandate minimum provisions such as access to accelerated curriculum for highly gifted children.
- Funding regular Professional Development seminars for educators such as those offered by Gifted Support Network to teach them the various issues that affect the gifted child and offer further solutions to enhance the learning experience of such children.
- Funding within the Victorian Education Department to handle enquiries from parents and schools on gifted issues. This would include providing up-to-date information on gifted assessors and teaching practices.
- The Victorian Education Department should set up an ongoing Working Group who meet regularly. Members would include parent groups, gifted professionals (both Australian and International), Catholic Education Office, Independent Schools and Education Departments in other Australian States and Territories.

8 Improved Educational Offerings

(d) opportunities for improved educational offerings for gifted and talented students through collaboration across all school sectors and with community, business and industry.

The appropriateness of the daily classroom environment is paramount to the successful integration of the gifted child. Many opportunities that enrich the education of a gifted child also benefit other members of the class.

“The current school system offers no flexibility whatsoever. Children should be able to move through it according to their ability, not according to a pre-ordained program. My three children have all been accelerated, and would have suffered without it. I have watched other children of similar or greater ability who were not offered the opportunity, because their parents didn't fight for it as we did.”

In Victorian schools, there is no funding available for extra provisions for gifted children. Instead, schools must utilise whatever support is available from the 'reading recovery teacher' or school psychologist. In most families' experience, such resources are scarce and limited to those children that academically struggle. Indeed, in one experience a parent was specifically told that an IQ test was recommended so that the school could consider subject or year level acceleration, but that the school psychologist was not available to them for the test. They had to seek an IQ assessment privately. The school was already running at a deficit and the psychologist was required for those students with learning difficulties.

“He had been doing really well in pre-prep and prep largely due to teachers who offered him extension activities in maths and literacy which kept him challenged. This unfortunately wasn't the case in year one where things began to fall apart.”

Many parents take it upon themselves to provide appropriate educational experiences for their gifted children outside of school hours. This is an unfair burden on parents, many of whom are unable to continue programs that their children love due to financial and time constraints.

“Primary School is so 'dumbed down' that it is essential that gifted children do lots of things outside of school; music, drama, languages, and activities or classes in their special interests. This allows them to understand that school is only one little pond, not the whole ocean. They also see that the whole world is not as boring and slow as school is, and that there are other people like themselves out there in the world, and that there is a better future to look forward to.”

“I am a teacher and I feel that I need to do things with my gifted daughter after school because she is not getting enough stimulation in school - mainly language activities and sometimes joining in workshops with other like-minded children through CHIP events etc.”

“Our daughter needs to have experiences with gifted peers, so she attends Gifted Support Network activities and GATEWAYS. If she does not have these opportunities, she becomes very whingey and 'tunes out' at school.”

Educational offerings harnessed through the community, business and industry include:

- Mentorship in the area of a child's special interest
- Ongoing 'work experience' where a teenager may work one day a week on an ongoing basis during the school year. Alleviates stress for the child and school by providing an alternative focus for the child.
- Schools working with organizations in a way that provides benefit to both. The focus being on providing students opportunities that they otherwise wouldn't have.

"Monash University chose Bentleigh West Primary School to be a part of the BIOeyes project. This is an innovative, educational outreach program. The program will be progressively rolled out to further schools across Australia."

- Incursions enable students to be exposed to environments that provide a richer experience within the regular classroom. Gifted students who are passionate about a particular area studied could be provided with further opportunities to engage their interest.

8.1 Recommendations To Improve Educational Offerings

- Australian researchers should be engaged to determine what would make the best educational offerings for gifted children in Victorian schools.
- The Victorian Education Department should look to other states and internationally for examples of improved gifted education techniques.