



Submission of the Victorian Independent Education Union

Parliamentary Inquiry into the Education of Gifted and Talented Students

May 2011

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 The Victorian Independent Education Union (VIEU) is pleased to have the opportunity to make a submission to the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into the Education of Gifted and Talented Students.
- 1.2 VIEU represents staff, including teachers, principals and school support staff, in Catholic and independent schools.
- 1.3 VIEU notes that the Terms of Reference of the Inquiry focus particularly on the policies and programs for gifted and talented students, evaluations of their effectiveness and strategies to enhance effectiveness. It also invites comment on a range of other areas, including concepts of giftedness and talent, and issues of negative attitudes and misconceptions.
- 1.4 VIEU believes it is timely to take cognisance of the diversity of learners and to properly identify approaches to more effectively meet individual student needs. However, this is a complex task and it is important that simplistic definitions and understandings of particular groups of learners do not result in simplistic, piecemeal and band-aid approaches in policy and programs. Such approaches often result in faddish and unsustainable programs which are accompanied by one-off grants of money. They will often have little effect on systemic changes to the delivery of effective learning opportunities for the diverse student population in schools.

2.0 Identification of learning needs for effective programming and resourcing

- 2.1 There is a growing body of research which is providing teachers and school leaders with deeper insight into the processes involved in how children and young people learn and into the factors that influence successful learning. Through this research, teachers are developing deeper knowledge of how the brain develops, how learning involves interconnected networks across the different parts of the brain, and that some ways of learning can be more efficient than others in respect to different subjects, skills etc. Factors effecting successful learning are interrelated. Nutrition and general health interact with targeted and timely educational intervention strategies.
- 2.2 There is now a wealth of information from analysis of data on student

performance that highlight the significant diversity in the cognitive, language, emotional and psychomotor development of students in same age cohorts. Geoff Masters of ACER has done some considerable work in this area which highlights this significant diversity. He has highlighted, for example, that in looking at the entire distribution of reading levels of students in year 2, we are able to identify that the very best readers in Year 2 are above the average year 5 student. At the same time we can often identify a long tail of year 2 students with relatively low reading ability. Similarly, he has referred to data which shows some students in year 7 mathematics are still performing at the level of an average year 2 or 3 student. Masters has referred in his work to the UK education researcher, Wynne Harlen who has concluded that differences in mathematics achievement by the end of primary school amount to a least six or seven years of schooling. Such observations, Masters claims, are leading educational researchers to the conclusion that school attainment is only loosely related to age.

- 2.3 This diversity of performance, coupled with what we know about the complex process of learning presents significant challenges for schools and individual teachers in accurately identifying individual student's levels and learning needs and in developing effective learning opportunities to scaffold learning for all students. Ensuring that every student is presented with the maximum challenging learning opportunity appropriate to their current level in classes of 25 to 30 students is a mammoth and one can well say, impossible task. Despite the resourcing inadequacies, schools are expecting teachers to develop and deliver "differentiated curriculum" to meet the needs of their students, who by and large remain grouped in age-determined classes.
- 2.4 The challenge for school policy and in particular, resourcing, is moving beyond approaches which target the middle or average in any class or age cohort and provide appropriate challenging learning opportunities to facilitate the ongoing development of all students . However, given the current school resourcing approach, the other key challenge is around prioritising essential work to be done. If our educational and social goals are to ensure that Australian schooling promotes equity and excellence, and that all young Australians become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, active and informed citizens (Melbourne Declaration 2008), then students performing below the identified levels year after year remain a serious

challenge for Australian governments.

3.0 The Definition of Gifted and Talented

- 3.1 Particularly in the light of the complexity of the issues raised above, VIEU is concerned that the term “Gifted and Talented” continues to be a poorly developed concept and one that is pulled out from time to time to appear to be meeting the needs of students at the upper end of performance in a year level class.
- 3.2 It is a term that in no way adequately defines the learning or social emotional needs of a student. It is not a term homogeneously or uniformly understood and used by educators, much less parents. Students identified for programs targeted at the “gifted and talented” are most often students performing at the upper range of outcome levels in particular subjects or programs.

4.0 Current School Approaches

- 4.1 Essentially schools focus on three approaches to programming for students loosely defined as gifted and talented:
- differentiated curriculum approaches which aim to give all students learning activities which challenge and extend them. This is most effectively done when student assessment tools are sophisticated and accurate, and activities are designed to scaffold the student’s skills and knowledge to the next level of performance or learning outcome. This is most effective when it is an holistic approach, based on all areas of student development. Differentiated learning is however very time and resource intensive because it relies on highly effective and ongoing assessment and program development;
 - accelerated programs which allow a student who has achieved the learning objectives of a course of study to move into the next level of a course before the main cohort of students;
 - enhancement programs which are usually one-off, short programs focused on a particular area of student skill or interest. Unfortunately these programs are short term fixes to the issue of providing something specific for the “gifted and talented” students.
- 4.2 In primary schools in particular, there is growing pressure from parents who

have identified their child as gifted in a particular area and who are wanting the school to extend their child in this area. Primary schools report that this is becoming a form of “market pressure” at point of enrolment. There is also growing pressure from parents who are wanting their child accelerated to a higher year level. Schools report needing to convince parents that it is most often not appropriate to do this because the child needs to stay with their age cohort for emotional/social developmental reasons.

- 4.3 There is a growing pressure on schools and teachers to develop more and more Individual Learning Plans (ILPs), not only for students with disabilities and learning difficulties, but for students whose parent are demanding individual programs in particular areas. This is putting increased pressure on teachers who are struggling to develop and deliver more and more ILPs without any targeted resourcing. The bulk of students with learning difficulties are not additionally resourced from targeted student disability programs. The limitations on resourcing means that schools can not employ the necessary learning support staff to assist in classes with the diversity of individual learning needs nor give staff sufficient time for individual student assessment and planning.
- 4.4 The union is aware that under the pressure to implement enhancement programs etc some schools are diverting resources away from students with learning difficulties.

5.0 Necessary Approaches

- 5.1 To enable schools and individual teachers and school support staff to effectively address the individual needs of students, schools need to be resourced and enabled to offer alternatives to grade-based, one size fits all approaches to school curriculum and classroom teaching.
- 5.2 School structures need to enable a flexible mix of approaches - personalised learning plans, individual and small group teaching and accelerated learning opportunities.

5.3 Staff resourcing schedules, professional development opportunities and other resource support need to be focused on capacity building. This should be done by more appropriately recognizing the challenges teachers and schools face in catering for individual differences in mixed ability classes, enabling teachers to more effectively identify individual student learning needs through excellent assessment instruments and diagnostic tools, and providing adequate time and staff to be able to cater for individual needs.

6.0 Conclusion

Whilst it is laudable to explore more fully the issues surrounding 'gifted and talented' students, the underpinning policy driver must be to ensure that all students achieve their best and capitalise on their talents.

VIEU remains concerned that schools and their staff are not resourced to a high enough level to appropriately deliver differential, individualised programs of support for both the gifted and those who are struggling to attain minimum standards of achievement.