

Submission
to the
Australian Department of Education
Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System

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Summary

This experiential submission posits that, for an Expert Panel whose Consultation Paper repeatedly expresses a desire to provide for the learning needs of 'all' students, it is inexplicable that the Paper then goes on to focus on a list of only *some* diversity or equity groups. The submission asks why one of the numerically larger diversity groups has been completely ignored: intellectually **gifted students** (representing 10% of the student population).

In response to the Review's priority area 1, the submission suggests that gifted students should be **added** to the Consultation Paper's **equity groups** and, in response to the Consultation Paper's question, outlines some strategies and approaches which have been **proven to support** the learning of gifted students. Reasons are presented as to why gifted education is **important for students** on the one hand and **for Australia** on the other, and what **Australia can expect** if gifted students' educational needs continue to be ignored.

In response to the Review's priority area 3, the submission also proffers some explanations of why it is difficult to **attract and retain teachers**, and what can be done with respect to **disruptive classrooms**.

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1. Context

This submission is made in response to the call for submissions by the Australian Department of Education Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System [Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System - Department of Education, Australian Government](#) (*'Review'*).

I note the Expert Panel's advice that submissions will be accepted until 2 August 2023.

Author's familiarity with the population of educators, parents and students whose views are reported here

Since 2015 I have been an [REDACTED], but I make this submission in my ***personal capacity***, and I note that it has not been endorsed by, and does not necessarily reflect the views of, [REDACTED].

Since 2008 I have made over 130 presentations for teachers and parents at education conferences, universities and schools on five continents on a wide variety of education-related topics.

In this context, I have also liaised informally with numerous primary and secondary teachers, educational leaders, government officials and academics who approach me after my talks. Many of these people email me years after the event to report confidentially what is going on in their schools, education departments and universities, and to ask me what they can do about it.

I have long been active in voluntary associations and organisations focusing on various aspects of education, many of whose members have been or are practising teachers or parents. Most of these bodies have, in one way or another, been concerned with gifted students.

This submission presents an aggregation of my everyday experiences over the past two decades in volunteering and lecturing in this field, and the experiences of many hundreds of teachers, education leaders, government officials and academics, as confidentially reported to me by educators themselves, and as passed on to me by parents citing what they have been told by their child's teachers.

I have permission from these people to relay their concerns, as long as I always do that in a de-identified way. Indeed in many cases, some have not only granted their permission, but have also vociferously pleaded with me to reveal what they have told me, since they are not 'allowed' to do

that under the terms of their employment or under their professional codes of conduct.

The examples which I have drawn on in this submission stem largely from my work in NSW and Queensland - the two jurisdictions in which I live, and where I have the most experience in liaising with teachers and parents. However, they are representative of my more limited experience in supporting teachers and parents in other Australian jurisdictions as well. This is not an issue confined to, or emblematic of, two eastern States alone.

I include the biographical information above to explain the genesis of my familiarity with this population – not as an assertion that my claims herein reflect the views of any of the voluntary associations with whom I work, or that I in any way have authority to speak on their behalf.

Confidentiality

This is **NOT** a **confidential** submission, and I expressly grant permission for it to be published on the Panel's website and/or circulated to anyone whom the Panel believes might wish to see it.

2. Narrowing the scope of this submission

I refer to the Review's Terms of Reference [Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System Terms of Reference - Department of Education, Australian Government](#) and the questions posed in its Consultation Paper [Better and Fairer Education System - Consultation Paper - Department of Education, Australian Government](#)

This submission will be confined to the Review's priority areas 1 and 3:

1. What targets and reforms should be **included in the next NSRA** to drive real improvements in student outcomes, with a **particular focus** on students who are most at risk of falling behind and in need of more assistance - for students from low socio-economic backgrounds, regional, rural and remote Australia, students with disability, First Nations students and students from a language background other than English.
3. How the next agreement can support schools to attract and retain **teachers?**

In the interests of simplicity, references and footnotes have not been included in this submission, but these can be furnished on request.

Some arguments have been repeated in two or more portions of the submission, in case initial coders choose to read only selected topics below.

3. 'All' students?

We are told that:

The Review is an opportunity to drive real and measurable improvements for *all* students, particularly those most at risk of falling behind, by lifting outcomes, supporting student wellbeing, attracting and retaining teachers and improving transparency and accountability.

The Consultation Paper is sprinkled with aspirational references to 'all students' and 'every student'.

Examples include [emphasis added]:

- Meeting the needs of **all** students -- Page 3
- ...goals that can advance **every** student at every school -- Page 8
- Excellence in education should enable **all** students to achieve their ambitions and realise their potential -- Page 9
- **Every** student should be supported as a whole person and enabled to meet their potential by having their learning needs met. -- Page 9
- ... recognising the needs of **all** students -- Page 12
- ... the support **all** students require to succeed -- Page 22

Why does the Consultation Paper keep telling us that the Review is concerned with **all** students when the Paper does not address the needs of 10 per cent of **all** students: intellectually gifted students?

Our education systems are increasingly recognising that an emphasis on addressing the needs of *all* students is related to educational equity, and that all the aspirational claims made with respect to inclusion of students with disability apply equally to other diversity groups, including gifted students.

All children are entitled to have their learning needs met in school, whether they have learning delays or are ready for a more advanced curriculum than their chronological-age peers.

One of the mantras of the full inclusion ideology proponents is, "All means all". Surely gifted students represent a subset of 'all'.

'All' is a small word, but its circumference is (or should be) wide enough to include students who are gifted. Gifted children deserve the same consideration as their neurotypical peers.

It is by now a cliché to assert that every child is entitled to equity of access to the opportunities that education can provide for them to learn, achieve, and thrive. Every student deserves educational experiences that help them develop their potential in ways that stimulate creativity in the context of an education that meets their needs and enhances their futures.

Gifted students are no different. They have their own legitimate claim on our sense of fairness and equity, our policy priorities, and our taxpayer dollars. Because of high intellectual ability or high academic achievement, gifted students have specific and sometimes unusual educational needs. They may require something more than can be offered in the average classroom designed for the average student, or delivered by teachers untrained in gifted education.

To provide the most appropriate educational experience for gifted students, schools must offer high-quality programs and services for those who would most benefit from them.

Through benign neglect, longstanding prejudices, or outright hostility, gifted students are often not afforded such opportunities. Without supportive educational opportunities, gifted children may underachieve, disengage, drop out and experience mental health needs, personal and social difficulties and generally diminished wellbeing. But the latter are invariably caused by the mismatch between the child and the curriculum which leads to the underachievement – not by the giftedness per se.

Of course, in discussing *intellectually* gifted students, it is acknowledged that there are many other domains of giftedness (eg, creative, physical), but this submission focuses on the education of children who are *intellectually* gifted, as this is the population which gifted education advocates have identified as being the most immediately needy.

Contrary to popular myth, intellectually gifted students are found in virtually every classroom in Australia. There is no evidence behind the oft-repeated erroneous assertion that gifted students are found only or principally in high-SES 'leafy' suburbs, in elite private schools, and amongst certain recently arrived migrant groups or heavily tutored cohorts.

In fact, gifted children are found across all socio-economic, cultural, ethnic and religious groups and communities, independent of factors such as gender, Indigenous heritage, geographical isolation, ethnicity, native

language, poorly educated parents, and non-intellectual disability. They are probably sitting – some would say hiding - in almost every mixed-ability classroom in Australia. We can expect that in each mainstream classroom of 30 students, at least 3 will be gifted students - whether they have already been identified as such or not, and whether they have been admitted to a gifted program or not.

Gifted students constitute a cohort worthy of inclusion in the word 'all'.

4. Equity groups – why are gifted students not included in your lists of equity groups?

Throughout the Consultation Paper, the categories of priority equity cohorts include:

- First Nations students, students with disability, students in regional, rural and remote areas, students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, and students from a non-English speaking background. -- Page 8
- the 'priority equity cohorts' ... Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, students living in regional, rural and remote locations, students with disability and students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds. -- Page 10
- ...students who are more likely to encounter systemic barriers within the education system that make them less likely to achieve strong educational outcomes. These are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, students living in regional, rural and remote locations, students with disability and students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds. -- Page 11

Why are our education systems supposed to focus on the groups of students listed above, but not also consider the approximately 10% of students who are intellectually gifted and who will be found in virtually every classroom in Australia? And needless to say, some students who are intellectually gifted will also intersectionally fall within one or more of the equity groups listed above.

Of course gifted students are no more important or worthy than students in all other diversity groups, but surely they are at least *as* deserving of attention in a Review of this nature.

Further, why is this Review purporting to focus on students 'most at risk of falling *behind*'? [Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System - Department of Education, Australian Government](#)

Intellectually gifted students are at risk of not only falling behind but also:

- *dropping out* early because they sit in a mixed-ability classroom every day and learn nothing – not because they are incapable of learning, but rather because they have learned it all several years ago; and
- being lost to the *homeschooling* sector.

Each of these undesirable consequences is dealt with more fully (Parts 4.1 and 4.2) below.

Gifted students are tired of watching adults focus only, or primarily, on the equity groups listed in the Consultation Paper, and they are tired of teachers who carry on interminably about wellbeing and mental health and all sorts of 'frills' which used to be the province of parents, not the education system.

It is ironic that many of our education system's supports and extra programs and extra funding are devoted to promoting opportunities to foster the learning of virtually *all* students - except those students who are most capable of it.

Why bother striving for the academic mountaintop in a system which seems to be intent on rewarding mediocrity? Where is the motivation to excel when you can see all too well that what the system values is lifting the NAPLAN performance of those who are struggling to learn or who are not interested in learning?

Many schools seem to be now preoccupied with low-achieving children, and all the school's extra programs and supports tend to be aimed at improving the learning of pupils who may be struggling with basic skills in reading, writing, and arithmetic. Such schools understandably invest their resources in boosting their lower achievers. The education system is also most inclined to judge teachers by their success in doing that, and accordingly, least inclined to have much energy, time or money for students already well above the minimum proficiency bar.

For example, all university providers of initial teacher education (ITE) profess to believe that everyone training to be a teacher should be well prepared to identify and respond to children with *disability*, or children whose capacity to learn is otherwise less than that which characterises the majority of their classmates. *Not* to provide such training, these universities argue, would be to send newly-qualified teachers into schools without the skills they need to ensure that children with disability are able to develop, to the fullest, such abilities and skills as they *do* possess.

That argument, however, is not mirrored when it comes to gifted students. Every year graduate teachers enter classrooms without the slightest notion of what to do with students in their classroom in the top 10% of intellectual ability. Very few ITE providers offer gifted education as a compulsory, or even an elective, undergraduate course.

Further, if we focus on '**reducing differences in outcomes across students**', [Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System - Department of Education, Australian Government](#) does this not imply that the mandated curriculum and its standards will have to be 'dumbed down' until virtually every student can learn that curriculum and meet those standards? Who will be left to excel – to design and operate Australia's new whizz-bang submarines and to discover a 'cure' for COVID?

We are losing some of our brightest minds. This is not in Australia's long-term best interests.

4.1 Dropout amongst gifted students whose needs are not being met at school

After 20 years of advocacy for gifted learners, I am tired of parents telling me stories of a child with an IQ in the 99.7 percentile wanting to drop out of school, when that child knows more about insects and rockets and Marxism and Oliver Cromwell and magic realism than I will ever know – or care to know. How sad that a gifted child's journey through school has to finish up in such an educational cul-de-sac.

Every gifted child who decides to drop out of school for whatever reason is a tragedy. Australia has arguably lost one more potential contributor to our next generation of leaders.

Who will be left to study physics and other so-called 'hard' or advanced subjects in senior secondary if too many of the students for whom such subjects are designed (ie, gifted students) have already dropped those subjects – or have dropped out altogether – by Year 12: [HSC students ditch difficult subjects in search of band 6 results \(smh.com.au\)](#)

Further, by not providing the appropriate understanding and assistance when gifted students are little, are we determining in advance that for the next 60 years they have a greater chance of draining the welfare system than contributing to the taxation one?

What will be the long-term implications for Australia of gifted students dropping out and not proceeding to tertiary education? Strategically (and some would say 'selfishly'), it is in Australia's own self-interest to support gifted education and foster the development of gifted students so that

they may enhance the future cultural, material and economic well-being of Australia. Our next generation vaccines and submarines may depend on it.

We need to ensure that our gifted students do not drop out.

4.2 Trend towards home schooling amongst gifted students when schools clearly have no clue how to teach them

Home schooling has grown in significant numbers in all Australian states and territories in recent years. From 2017 to 2021, rates of home schooling in NSW doubled – page 4 here:

<https://educationstandards.nsw.edu.au/wps/wcm/connect/c2212e83-c476-4da6-89b5-dd12b8ce8e9a/home-schooling-data-reports-relating-to-2021.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CVID=>

Since the unforeseen inception of remote home learning during COVID lockdown, gifted education advocates are currently hearing anecdotally that more and more gifted students, having now returned to face-to-face classes at school, are begging their parents to allow them to quit school or to start home schooling.

During COVID remote learning, many gifted students were able to easily complete all their assigned learning tasks by around 10 am every day, having the rest of the day at home to research black holes or fire ants or submarines or viruses or whatever they were genuinely interested in, or to pursue extracurricular activities – or alas, to play video games. For such students, the return to school was a nightmare. Gifted students reported that in F2F classrooms, teachers have lost the ability to ‘mute’ the trouble makers and time wasters.

Similarly, the COVID remote home learning experience served to reveal to parents of gifted children just how little their children were truly learning at school, how low were teachers’ expectations, how simplified was the mandated curriculum, how totally inappropriate were the materials being sent home for their children to complete, and how quickly, effortlessly and dismissively their children could compete all their assigned work.

Parents began to form the view that their children must be wasting most of their time at school each day. Some began to wonder why they got out of bed to drive children to school day after day.

Remote learning also gave parents a forced insight into what home schooling might be like, allowing some to conclude, “It actually wouldn’t be all that hard. And he seems so much happier at home.”

Accordingly, lately when a gifted child asks to drop out or to home school, such parents are starting to enthusiastically acquiesce.

Said one child: "After COVID remote learning, I realise that I don't want to go back to school because I am just wasting my time there - and I always have been. I spend my days waiting for the other kids to catch up. All I usually do is watch the teacher look after other kids. She doesn't really teach them anything. She just takes care of them, and watches them to make sure they don't hurt each other or throw stuff around. Even if I ask her a question, she still looks over my shoulder at other kids while she speaks to me. I am not very important. The kids who have meltdowns and throw things are more important and get way more attention."

We need to find a way to ensure that gifted students somehow form the view that school is a place worth attending.

5. Why should gifted students be added as an equity group?

The Consultation Paper notes that there may be "...other students who are likely to face significant barriers that impact their educational outcomes. These are students in out-of-home care, some students with English as an additional language or dialect (EAL/D), students from refugee backgrounds, and students in the youth justice systems." -- Page 11

The Paper asks, "Should the next NSRA add additional priority equity cohorts? For example, should it add children and young people living in out-of-home care and students who speak English as an additional language or dialect? What are the risks and benefits of identifying additional cohorts? -- Page 20

Yet again, gifted students are not even mentioned as a possible additional priority equity group – as if they don't exist.

Could I suggest that gifted students be added to your list in the question on Page 20?

What follows is a summary of the rationale behind that suggestion:

Two bi-partisan federal Senate Select Committee inquiries into gifted education, held in 1988 and in 2001, found that there is inadequate support for, and recognition of, gifted children in Australian schools. They concluded that gifted students are the **most educationally disadvantaged** population in Australia. No later federal inquiries into gifted education have ever been held.

Notwithstanding the notional or perfunctory inclusion of gifted students in [unenforceable] education policies within every state and territory of Australia, gifted students are still not usually referenced and not included at all at the federal level.

However, there are at least 400,000 gifted students in Australian schools, and still Australia lacks a national, cohesive and co-ordinated approach to gifted education.

Gifted learners are not mentioned in any key Australian government, department or agency documents governing education. Neither are they mentioned in the AITSL Standards. No other minority population or diversity group suffers from this invisibility.

For example, in the 2021 federal Quality Initial Teacher Education Review (**the forerunner of the current Panel**), at least 7 public submissions were focussed on ITE about gifted education for student teachers. Yet the final report contained exactly one off-hand mention of gifted students in a list of 'other concerns' raised by stakeholders. None of the 7 submissions' recommendations was included or commented upon, even in a negative way. Ignoring the arguments of gifted education proponents is worse than thoughtfully refuting them.

The percentage of students achieving in the top bands in international competitions has declined significantly in recent years. We need both national and state leadership to help arrest this decline.

The lack of comprehensive national priorities in gifted education means that Australia has declining academic results, disconnected students, and a society immersed in the evidence-free belief that 'giftedness is elitist' or that 'gifted students will always be just fine on their own, without support or coaching'. No one believes that in the case of a gifted tennis player or a gifted violinist.

6. Approaches which have been proven to support the learning of gifted students

The Consultation Paper tells us that:

- Panel members are keen to hear about approaches that have been proven to support student learning. -- Page 4

The Paper correctly asserts:

- ...excellence would be evident in a greater proportion of students achieving at the highest levels of academic performance, and the

likelihood of being a high achiever not being predicted by the level of socio-economic advantage that a student has in their household, school or community -- Page 10

Yet there is no recommendation for the implementation of strategies to meet the needs of the 10% of students most capable of learning.

We already *know* what “approaches have been proven to support” gifted students. We have decades of research clarifying the strategies which support most gifted students: inter alia, acceleration, ability grouping, cluster grouping, pull-out programs, extension, curriculum compacting, even an advanced and enriched curriculum which gifted students are able to work through and master at their own pace before being allowed to move on to more challenging material.

Neither mere ‘differentiation’ nor its enigmatic and unproven cousin, ‘UDL’, in mixed-ability classrooms would qualify as one of those proven strategies.

6.1 Gifted students cannot always ‘teach themselves’

Too many in education are unfortunately influenced by myths and misconceptions concerning gifted children. One such myth is that gifted children are so clever that they can always teach themselves without adult guidance and encouragement, and that accordingly teachers do not need special training in gifted education.

Though some gifted learners are indeed sometimes able to learn independently, it does not follow that they *should* be left to always learn in this way, disconnected from teachers and unscrutinised by any formative assessment. In fact, the significant role played by skilled coaches as a crucial catalyst in the process of talent development means that for gifted learners, a trusting relationship with an adult is particularly significant.

We do not expect gifted young tennis players to improve without coaching, or gifted young pianists to flourish without a music teacher. Why then would a gifted young mathematician or writer be left to cope on their own, simply because adults perceive them to be ‘already going too fast’ or ‘already ahead of the others’?

Academic learning isn’t that different from sports or music or anything else in life: if we want to get better at something, more time on task always striving for improvement under excellent tutelage is an essential part of the equation.

While regular mixed-ability classes may be more or less appropriate for the majority of the student population, gifted children learn best when

they are routinely and rigorously challenged. They need equitable identification in the first instance. Equally important however is investing the energy to provide access to a suitably robust curriculum, appropriately trained teachers, and diverse programming practices which match gifted students' level of readiness to learn.

We know that acceleration and ability grouping produce generally positive outcomes. When well-designed and carefully implemented by well trained teachers, these interventions have been long proven to boost the achievement of gifted students. Sadly, far too many schools don't offer these interventions, don't employ teachers with skills to implement them well, or view them as 'elitist' or 'inequitable'.

6.2 Acceleration

In some cases, gifted children need to be moved ahead where the material to be mastered is more complex and difficult (and hence probably more interesting to the child). This is called 'acceleration'. Contrary to a commonly believed myth, academic acceleration has no negative long-term effects on the psychological wellbeing of accelerated children. <https://news.vanderbilt.edu/2020/08/03/academic-acceleration-has-no-negative-long-term-effects-on-the-psychological-well-being-of-gifted-youth/#:~:text=A%20new%20longitudinal%20study%20published,or%20a%20combination%20of%20advanced>

Acceleration is an academic intervention that allows students to progress through an educational program at a rate that is faster, or at an age that is younger, than typical. It can be implemented in at least twenty forms, with the most common being whole grade skipping or receiving higher-level instruction in a single subject. It is one of the most-studied intervention strategies in all of education, with overwhelming evidence of positive effects on student achievement.

6.2 Grouping

In other cases, in order to flourish academically, gifted students need to be grouped, sometimes or always, with others of like mind and similar intellectual ability, not necessarily those of similar age. This is called 'ability grouping' or preferably 'grouping by readiness to learn' – sometimes shortened to 'readiness grouping'.

Research has shown that grouping is positive for gifted students, but is not detrimental to their peers. There are few or no negative effects for medium- and low-achieving students. Indeed, some formerly 'B' students have reported that, once all the annoying 'A' students are removed from the class cohort, "I finally get a fair shot at being the class dux."

For gifted children, flourishing academically, socially and emotionally is supported by fostering a sense of belonging alongside like minds. For some gifted, the problem is not so much the low level of the curriculum or the enforced slow pace of learning, as the feeling of never truly belonging anywhere, not being a part of what is going on at school.

No child appreciates the privilege of acceptance more sharply than those without it:

“If the girls are always talking about clothes and movie stars, and the boys are always talking about basketball and cars, where can I fit in? Even my teachers are usually too busy to talk with me about my areas of academic interest, and occasionally when they do, they tend to look past me to ensure that others in the classroom are not throwing things or hurting each other.”

7. Why is gifted education important for gifted students?

7.1 Right to learn

All children have the **right to learn something new at school every day.**

Many gifted students are not learning anything at school, day after day, not because they are incapable of learning, but rather because they have learned it all many years ago. To them the mandated curriculum is redundant, repetitive, boring and slow.

Human rights documents tell us that children have a ‘right to education’, but what exactly *is* a right to education? Is it the right to be enrolled and show up day after day at a building called ‘School’ and sit quietly and watch for 13 years while adults teach other students what the gifted child learned long ago?

Or is it rather a ‘right’ to learn something new every day?

Gifted children are generally denied educational justice if they fail to receive an education that adequately challenges them. It is imperative that gifted students experience at least one year’s growth for every year spent at school, regardless of their advanced point of entry into the mandated curriculum. They must not be viewed as an educational annoyance, a childhood oddity, or an emblem of privilege. They must come to see school as a place where their prior learning is recognised, and where new learning is enthusiastically cherished.

One little boy said to his teacher at the end of virtually every day: “I don’t feel I’ve learned anything here today, Miss. Could you please tell me

something that I've learned because, when she picks me up today, my mum will want to know."

Forcing gifted students to always tread water in mainstream mixed-ability classrooms merely results in students who are bored, frustrated, disengaged, peerless and largely ignored. Gifted students are those whose potential and achievement are most significantly blunted by bad policy.

Gifted students who are given the same coursework repeatedly will usually succeed with it, but will experience no growth for their time spent on the tasks. Over time, gifted students become discouraged, and they may underachieve by rushing through work, doing the bare minimum, or refusing to do their work altogether.

This negatively affects their whole education: a clever, creative mind ignored and left bored and unchallenged will eventually find ways to pass the time. This is where teachers and parents may begin to notice an unmotivated attitude and even behaviour problems. "I simply can't bear to watch her teach this same material one more time. What to do? I know! I'll push the kid next door off his chair. That ought to get me out of here for a while for some kind of punishment. Being in detention is better than being in here."

7.2 Right to struggle

Incarcerating gifted children in mixed-ability classroom with non-challenging work deprives them of the opportunity to ever learn to **struggle**. The mandated curriculum is just too 'easy' and can be mastered in a flash. They may be able to put off homework until the last minute and still complete it as the school bus pulls into the carpark because the material takes no effort to master.

As gifted students progress through school, however, and the work gradually becomes less familiar, a student who has never been adequately challenged suddenly finds themselves in a situation where they need to allocate extra time to work through difficult assignments. They begin to wonder: "Maybe I'm not smart after all. Otherwise, I wouldn't have to TRY to do this new work."

When students appreciate that errors in their own or their peers' work promote greater clarity and understanding, they come to appreciate that small failures can be a source of valuable information and an impetus for growth. With this insight, they become increasingly confident about grappling with ever more difficult concepts and problems, and they develop habits and attitudes that will help them to tackle the inevitable vicissitudes of life later on with courage and optimism. Perhaps most

importantly in the school context, they become less hesitant about asking when they need help.

There is no justification for denying gifted students access to the struggles inherent in rigorous academic learning. Lessons and assignments cannot build resilience if they are simplistic and below ability level. Assignments and assessments must stretch students and demand a deep level of engagement. Otherwise, nothing is learned. The gifted child comes to believe, "School is easy and always will be."

An education that fails to challenge a gifted student has implications for motivation and learning and wellbeing. Gifted children who lack motivation or interest in school because they are given only educational opportunities challenging enough for 'average' learners are less likely to flourish, because flourishing is linked to eagerness to learn. Educational attainment or success in school is directly linked to the level of motivation children experience vis-a-vis the sorts of educational tasks and projects they are expected to complete.

An education that fails to challenge the gifted – or worse, which engenders boredom – is no education at all because the main benefit that schools allegedly are supposed to provide is learning. If there is no new learning, the gifted student comes to think of school as a form of neglect.

The personal and academic cost of such neglect to underachieving gifted students can be enormous. Repeated academic under-performance and disengagement over many years can see the child's resilience meter stuck on zero, with the result that their school underachievement may solidify into an entrenched pattern, even after leaving school.

On the other hand, when gifted students are valued, understood, supported and nurtured by well-trained and well-intentioned teachers at school, most go on to be healthy and happy contributors to society.

8. Why is gifted education important for Australia?

When clever children thrive, we all benefit.

If we care about having successful Australians tomorrow, we need successful students today. If we offer gifted students a mediocre education today, we condemn ourselves to a mediocre future tomorrow.

Maximizing the potential of Australia's gifted learners, thereby enhancing this pool of young talent, is essential, not only in the

interests of those students themselves, but also for their families *and* for the country as a whole.

Intellectually gifted children are those who have the greatest potential to become Australia's next generation of leaders and innovators, and ultimately the greatest potential to contribute to the economic and social welfare of the nation, and to enrich us in multi-faceted ways.

The gifted portion of today's school population will produce tomorrow's outstanding inventors, vaccine hunters, mathematicians, engineers, submarine designers, airline pilots, poets, judges, and creative business executives. They constitute the engine which will trigger society's progress. Meeting their needs at school now is undeniably central to building the future economic prosperity of Australia.

In an age where knowledge creation and innovation are of paramount importance, gifted children are the nation's greatest resource, and neglecting their needs will risk leaving our nation behind in an increasingly competitive global market.

If we squander this resource, if we fail to provide our teachers with the knowledge which they need to nourish our brightest minds, and if we sacrifice the education of gifted students at the altar of struggling ones, we will make the Australians of tomorrow pay for the neglect of sound policy and planning by the politicians of today.

Demand for top talent in the corporate world and elsewhere is exploding while the supply is threatened, as the education system allows exceptional potential to shrivel up, and as other nations do more to retain their own outstanding performers. Australia needs to add a new strand to educational reform: not just giving a helping hand to underachieving or average performers, but also identifying and nurturing our intellectual so-called 'superstars'.

If Australians treated gifted education as if their future depended on it [it does...], we would ensure that our gifted education programs expand the reservoir of people who will contribute to creative innovations in the arts and sciences and to all areas of human endeavour designed to make the world a better place.

The problem, of course, is not that Australia has a shortage of clever children. Rather it's that such children generally aren't receiving the education they need to develop their potential, thereby allowing other countries to forge ahead.

Prime Minister Albanese, in his victory speech on the night of the 21 May 2022 election, gave the following undertaking:

"No one left behind because we should always look after the disadvantaged and the vulnerable. But also **no one held back**, because we should always support aspiration and opportunity. That is what my government will do.

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-05-22/anthony-albanese-acceptance-speech-full-transcript/101088736>

Surely, neglecting to support aspiration and opportunity in educational settings by not providing gifted students with the education which they need and deserve constitutes the epitome of 'holding back'.

How can persisting with this neglect amount to a 'Better and Fairer Education System'?

9. Gifted children grown up

Consider all the Australians who are every day working round the clock in labs and staring down microscopes, searching for a more effective COVID vaccine or an instant COVID nasal screening test or a universal COVID treatment or a COVID cure?

Who are these people?

They are gifted children grown up of course – gifted children who, for whatever reason, managed to stay in school and score the ATAR which they needed to study medicine or medical science at university. Gifted children who, for whatever reason, resisted the temptation to drop out or give up.

Australia needs these gifted adults now more than ever.

10. Teachers – how can schools attract and support them?

The Consultation Paper canvasses several reasons why teachers may be leaving the profession early -- Page 28

The Paper asks: "16. What change(s) would support teachers to remain in the profession?" -- Page 31

The Consultation Paper correctly notes that teachers are “feeling overloaded by the expectation that they solve students’ social and emotional issues.” -- Page 24

It suggests further that: “High workload continues to be the most significant stress factor identified by school leaders and teachers, with school leaders reporting that increasing workloads are affecting their health and wellbeing.” -- Page 28

What is the genesis of this grim set of circumstances?

Teachers report to me that they originally chose teaching because they wanted to teach reading and math and science to children who were ready and eager to learn.

However, teachers are told now that school is no longer about academic subjects, or educating the next generation of Australia’s leaders, thinkers, vaccine hunters and poets.

Rather, school is now all about ‘wellbeing’.

The constant emphasis on wellbeing at the expense of academics does not augur well for education in general, and especially not for gifted education.

Teachers note that schools are simply no longer schools.

Schools have become principally agents of social and political change and [largely unsuccessful...] providers of mental health support. Further, schools have increasingly morphed into socially contrived entities designed to unilaterally solve all of society’s evils and iron out all its inequities, and thus meet the social work and wellbeing needs of every child – at the expense of the child’s academic ones.

So, if teachers are busy all day playing the roles of social workers and nurses and counsellors, they necessarily spend less of each day teaching literacy and numeracy - the subjects which are being assessed by tests such as NAPLAN and PISA. When teachers get tired of covering off all the ‘frills’ after around 5 years, they just quit, and a whole new crew of socially indoctrinated recruits fronts up to save the world.

Of course no one is arguing that society’s evils and inequities don’t deserve attention. Rather teachers are questioning why it’s now increasingly *their* job to do that.

Teachers are increasingly being asked to assume the role of unofficial, school-based quasi-parents and carers. Whether they want to or not,

teachers are now expected to cover in their classrooms all sorts of topics which used to be the exclusive province of families. They are told that this is necessary in the interests of 'equity', because so many children come from 'disadvantaged' homes where such topics are not raised or taught or even considered. Yes, that's true perhaps, but why is that a teacher's problem? And was it not always thus?

There are simply some things that are outside a teacher's control.

Needless to say, no one denies that there are inequities in society. But **why are schools and untrained teachers being asked to find the solution to all of society's problems?**

Schools did not invent or cause all of society's ills and inequities. Why must schools be called upon to unilaterally fix them? Who decides which problems are worth making schools the scapegoats for in this way - and which problems are not? Teachers? Education departments? Perhaps academics who themselves were 25 years younger the last time they set foot in a school classroom? Or have never been trained as teachers at all?

And teachers are painfully aware that members of a variety of other professions would be more skilled, and have better success, at addressing the myriad of the non-academic and non-pedagogical issues and tasks which teachers are now being called upon to 'fix'.

Schools are reportedly making decisions to put academic instruction on hold, or to decrease the portion of academic instruction during the school week, so that they can engage in more activities specifically focused on student wellbeing (sometimes called social-emotional learning). The risk in taking this approach is that students fall further behind academically.

Surely there is no conflict between academic success and wellbeing. The two are complimentary. Academic achievement breeds self-confidence and motivation (hence 'wellbeing'), while wellbeing underpins the perseverance required to continue to achieve academic success.

Yet teachers complain to me that a large portion of what they are required to focus on in professional development (PD) sessions relates to topics which have little or nothing to do with teaching academic subjects. They assert that the majority of PD topics they are being offered relate more to 'wellbeing' or 'frills' rather than academics.

Here is a list of tasks and topics which teachers claim they have been told to now prioritise above the teaching of 'mere' academic subjects (in random order):

- consent education
- driver education

- pedestrian safety
- train safety
- drug education
- dealing with bullies
- trauma informed practice
- media literacy
- financial literacy
- restorative justice
- buddy programs
- teacher welfare
- NCCD
- preparing for NAPLAN
- policy compliance training
- growing vegetables and herbs, and planting seeds
- sleep hygiene
- healthy eating (for students and for teachers)
- animal cruelty
- supporting parents recovering from trauma
- public transport etiquette
- the new NSW Disability Strategy
- the new NSW inclusive education policy
- the new NSW behaviour policy
- the new NSW suspensions policy
- the new NSW restrictive practices policy
- how to deliver remote learning
- cyber safety
- bushfire safety
- flood safety
- bicycle safety
- beach and water safety
- chemical safety
- electricity safety
- evils of plastic straws and takeaway food containers
- planning for and responding to disasters
- administration of medicines
- wellbeing and mental health considerations for both students and teachers
- gender fluidity
- coaching children on how their parents should vote in the 'Voice' referendum
- engaging fathers in their children's learning
- individualised instruction
- personalised instruction
- targeted interventions (used to be called remediation)
- snake bites
- elementary first aid
- anaphylaxis

- family planning
- ableism
- pandemic coughing and sneezing etiquette
- mask-wearing etiquette
- asbestos avoidance
- positioning, operation and cleaning of classroom air filters and purifiers
- non-binary genders
- climate change (or climate emergency)
- something called 'indispensable skills for planetary survival'
- reporting domestic violence
- child protection
- differentiation
- UDL
- RtI
- MTSS
- neurodiversity
- mindset
- Aboriginal cultural training
- anti-racism
- counselling Aboriginal students who are perpetrating violence on each other
- how to design pride flags, Aboriginal flags and political slogans to be emblazoned on students' official school uniform items such as school bags and hats
- how to coach students in encouraging their parents to vote YES in the referendum
- playground supervision
- car pickup supervision
- teachers Code of Conduct, and not speaking out about anything in public
- teaching anxiety reducing skills
- peace education
- nutrition
- obesity
- smoking
- vaping
- safe alcohol use
- safe partying
- personal hygiene
- menstrual hygiene
- service learning and educating a selfless and compassionate generation
- email etiquette
- controlling student behaviour without touching
- women in leadership
- 'cultural competency'

- healthy ways to deal with workload intensification
- spotting the signs of radicalisation in classrooms
- how to manage students' friendships
- caring for pets
- table manners, how to set a table and how to use cutlery at a table.

Of course, not every teacher at every Year level is being asked to teach, or to enrol for PD on, each and every one of these topics. However, I had been receiving so many "You'll never guess what I've been told to do PD on NOW!!" complaints, I began to record them. The above list is the result (so far).

Teachers complain that they are forced to spend less of their classroom time on teaching reading, science and math, and more time dealing with the confusing array of disparate topics listed above. Teachers note that they are progressively being told to add more and more tasks and duties, and to plan for these on their dining room table on Sunday mornings.

Most importantly, teachers wonder how they are meant to respond to the needs of an ever-increasing number of students with serious mental health concerns – conditions which sometimes result in disordered and disruptive behaviour in the classroom (see Part 11 below).

While always very sympathetic to the needs of these students, teachers wonder what they can realistically do in their classrooms with no training, all the while still teaching the mandated curriculum to the rest of the class. Why are there too few school psychologists to assist? [Students' mental health is a big issue for schools – but teachers should only be part of the solution \(theconversation.com\)](http://theconversation.com)

Similarly, teachers wonder why they must be required to single-handedly meet the needs of an ever-increasing number of students with complex and serious disabilities (and sometimes the disruptive and dangerous behaviours occasioned by the concomitants of those disabilities) – students who are progressively being transferred into mainstream from special schools, sometimes forcibly against their parents' wishes.

This initiative is called 'full inclusion' and is allegedly required by UN instruments which Australia may have signed up to, but which are not enshrined in Australian domestic law and are hence unenforceable.

Yet there is an education department policy on inclusion in both NSW and Queensland and in other jurisdictions. The policies are meant to be implemented largely by regular classroom teachers whose ITE experiences would have never included any mention of the ideology of inclusion.

11. Disruptive classrooms

The Consultation Paper correctly asserts that, "Evidence also shows that disruption in classrooms can negatively impact the learning outcomes of other students." -- Page 19

Parents regularly report to me that their children are now afraid to go to school because the classrooms are so disruptive and disordered and noisy and inclusive and diversified as to be downright dangerous.

A chair thrown across a classroom by a child with disability (who allegedly 'can't help it') hurts just as much as a chair thrown deliberately by another child or an adult for some reason unrelated to disability.

11.1 What is currently happening in our classrooms?

In my experience, the vast majority of teachers do the very best they can for most students, most of the time. When they don't, it is not because of ill will, but rather because they have simply never been trained to do what is suddenly being expected of them.

Accordingly, teachers wonder how they are meant to address the needs of an ever-increasing number of students with serious mental health concerns – conditions which sometimes result in disordered and disruptive behaviour in the classroom.

While always very sympathetic to the needs of these students, teachers wonder what they can realistically do in their classrooms with no training, all the while still teaching the mandated curriculum to the rest of the class. Why are there so few school psychologists to assist? [Students' mental health is a big issue for schools – but teachers should only be part of the solution \(theconversation.com\)](http://theconversation.com)

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Yet there is an education department policy on inclusion in both NSW and Queensland.

11.2 Reactions from teachers

Said one teacher:

This new inclusion stuff is not what I signed up for.

I am not a nurse or an occupational therapist or a psychologist. I am not trained to insert feeding tubes or to oil wheelchairs or to counsel students with mental health concerns.

Of course, I wish only the best for students with disability, and of course I agree that, like all children, they deserve the best education our schools can offer, but I have not been trained to meet their complex needs – and a one-weekend PD course on so-called 'inclusion' or 'differentiation' or 'UDL' or 'neurodiversity' won't do the trick.

My classroom these days is perpetually disorderly and chaotic, and I am told that my students must now have the freedom to wander the room and sit wherever they choose – for as long as they choose. Otherwise, according to some in my staff room, I would be over-disciplining and over-regulating my students, and this is allegedly no longer allowed.

I am constantly afraid that my principal will walk past my classroom and witness the bedlam which usually prevails in there. Will I 'get in trouble'? Will I be sent on yet another 'behaviour management' PD course on my own time?

I am told that all behaviour is 'just communication', and I must discover what I am doing wrong to prompt my behaviour-disordered students to act this way. Really? Why is it always a teacher's fault if students are yelling and swearing and fighting and throwing things?

I am the only adult in my classroom. I am constantly being told to do more and more, without ever having anything taken away. Teachers are being disrespectfully asked to do too much for too many with too little time and for too little pay.

Some days lately, all I seem to do is manage behaviour and intervene in violent fights amongst students.

I am no longer teaching. I am just providing day care and crowd control.

Too many of my formerly engaged and academically ambitious students are now learning nothing, day after day, except perhaps how to minimise physical injury if another student decides to throw chairs or scissors. I used to have time to talk to these serious

students about their interests and academic passions, but now I find I am unable to do that without simultaneously looking over the student's shoulder to check who is hitting who, and who has run away.

I used to have time to regularly offer remedial instruction to students with so-called 'mild' disabilities such as dyslexia, but now I am totally preoccupied with the very complex needs of students with forms of disability whose challenges are not remediable (at least not by me).

As for implementing adjustments for students with disability, I used to do this routinely and happily, but now I have so many students with varying forms of disability, I can barely keep track of who is supposed to get what, let alone actually implement the recommended adjustments.

When I compare the yearly learning growth of the students in my classroom several years ago with my students today, I am forced to conclude that the latter are learning nowhere near as much as the former. But then, learning growth is said to be inconsequential now – all that matters is 'wellbeing'.

One of my students announced that he wouldn't be coming to school the following day because, 'I have sat quietly and watched for the last 2 weeks while you have taught the very same material over and over, and still some kids don't get it. All they want to do is muck up and cause trouble for other kids. I simply cannot bear to sit and watch you teach it all over again when everyone is talking and no one is listening.'

The full inclusionists are trying to re-model the airplane, whilst the airplane is in full flight. And it's just not what I signed up for.

The Department of Education pays my mortgage, and I dearly need for that to continue to happen. But the minute that's paid off, I'm gone!

I know that, by quitting my job, I will arguably be adding to the teacher shortage. There was a time when that would have given me pause. There was a time when I would have worried that the majority of my students are simply not learning the basics which they will need as building blocks for future education or careers. There was a time when I would have been keenly interested in my students. Now, I just don't care."

Most of the articles in the education press about the so-called teacher 'shortage' proffer some possible reasons as to why so many teachers are quitting. The sentiments of the teacher above are usually hidden under a reason called 'workload'. Because of the constraints imposed by their codes of conduct, teachers in the public system are not allowed to verbalise their true reasons for leaving, since the reasons are deemed politically incorrect and even shameful. But if we scratch the surface, and provide an anonymous format, we do hear the truth:

The job is simply no longer what they signed up for.

Other teachers are mostly concerned about the amount of time they are expected to take away from their teaching to devote to everyone's 'wellbeing' in an attempt to manage behaviour and return to an orderly classroom where everyone allegedly has lots of wellbeing and accordingly will not misbehave.

This is representative:

They should take all the money which they are currently devoting to wellbeing and useless PD ([Exorbitant fees, too theoretical and no follow up: much PD for teachers is useless — EducationHQ](#)), and use it to hire people to work with me in my classroom. Needn't be another fully qualified teacher – just another adult to share my load and to chase after the serial runners and escapees, and to take injured children to the school nurse without me having to leave the classroom. That would certainly improve MY wellbeing!

Why are teachers now expected to put up with unprecedented levels of violence against themselves? From both students and parents? And why are teachers no longer surprised to walk into a staffroom to find a colleague bloodied and crying? Or to be told that a colleague has had to go home to have a shower after being spat on by a student?

And why do so many teachers just accept this treatment and not report what is happening? [Teachers most at-risk of assault, but unlikely to claim — EducationHQ](#)

Why is it politically incorrect to suggest that students with chronically disruptive or dangerous behaviour should not be allowed to remain in mainstream classrooms until that behaviour improves? [Why do we accept unsafe classrooms and abusive parents as the norm? — EducationHQ](#)

Surely it's cheaper for schools to nip such behaviour in the bud than for society to have to address it when these students become adults.

The Disability Royal Commission does not seem to be very interested in disruptive classrooms. Based on the Commission's documents and education public hearings, the Commission seems to have focussed largely on students with catastrophic disability, severe physical disability, severe intellectual impairment, and disabilities which result in exceedingly disruptive and sometimes dangerous classroom behaviour.

Further, witnesses called at the Commission's public hearings to date have generally been presenting only one side of a very complicated educational picture. The other side has been neglected.

For example, in one Commission public hearing, everyone seemed to agree that a child with disability who had been punished or suspended (I can't recall which) for having kicked a teacher in the knee or the leg had been treated appallingly. It would have been interesting to hear testimony also from the hapless teacher so kicked. I am not a teacher, but I have spoken to many who have been injured in the workplace by children with disability occasioning disruptive behaviour.

An injury stemming from having been kicked hurts just as much, whether it stems from the perpetrator's anger or is an involuntary concomitant of a child's disability.

And while that kicking was going on, who was watching? Who was being affected by it? Were the other children calmly learning to read or do math, or were they worrying about who might be getting kicked next?

The witnesses at public hearings to date have been focussing largely on the alleged advantages of full inclusion in mainstream classrooms for students with disability (no matter how severe), and children who have been physically abused by educators and locked in cages and such. Granted, this makes for riveting TV, but it is not necessarily representative of *all* children with disability who are supposed to be entitled to a safe and meaningful learning environment, who are supposed to be legislatively protected, and who are supposed to be the subject of the Commission's deliberations.

I know of a teacher who tried to pull a squirming serial runner down from a schoolyard fence (which of course entailed touching and restraining the child). This was to prevent the child from climbing the fence and making his way onto a busy road (something which had happened before). The teacher was reprimanded by a more senior teacher for physically restraining the child, and was instructed to complete copious amounts of paperwork about the incident (on their own time). That teacher reacted by bursting into the principal's office, throwing their keys and ID on the desk, and announcing, "That's it! I quit!" And we wonder why we have a teacher shortage.

11.2 Reactions from parents

In addition, I am concerned about **parent** inquiries increasingly being sent to me asking how parents can transfer their child out of an inclusive classroom, and into a calm, quiet, orderly classroom without behaviour issues, because the parents and the child's teachers have perceived that the child's academic achievement, attentional level and motivation markedly decrease as the range of diversity in inclusive classrooms increases.

This question is typical of those regularly sent to me:

"Can you recommend a private school because my child is now school refusing because they are so frightened of a few in the class who are having meltdowns and throwing things.

My child is constantly in fear of being injured by other students, and the easiest way to avoid that, from my child's point of view, is to simply not be at school at all. Ever since remote learning during lockdown, my child has been begging me to start home-schooling. They see it as safer.

I have brought my (and other parents') concerns to the attention of the school, and they are sympathetic, and they agree that the behaviour is unacceptable and dangerous. They contend, however, that they can't do anything about it because the children with behaviours of concern must stay in the classroom and can no longer be sent home or taken out of the classroom to calm down because '...that's the law. We are no longer able to suspend children for this sort of behaviour. And we are no longer allowed to physically restrain a child even if it means preventing injury to your child. So I'm afraid you will just have to put up with it.'

And then they warn me not to speak out about this because there is already enough dissension among the parent body, and the P+C is already on the verge of imploding.

So we are now looking for a private school. But so many other parents now are doing the same thing, the waitlists are long and slow.

We can afford a mid-tier private school, but not an elite one, and we can't afford for me to quit my job so that I can home-school full time. We live in [name of suburb]. Is there a nice quiet private school near us?

My child used to love going to school back when the classrooms were calm and orderly. But now I am so afraid of what will happen

if my child continues to refuse to get in the car in the mornings. Aside from what this is doing to my child's academic progress, this is a fight I just don't need every morning when I'm trying to get to work."

In response to questions such as this, I never suggest specific schools (private or otherwise) by name, as a school culture depends largely on who is in charge from year to year, and I can't keep up with that.

I am, however, sympathetic to this kind of request and its genesis. These parents don't bear ill will towards children with disability who are now being directed to mainstream classrooms. It's not a question of these parents not wanting their children to ever associate with children with disability in any activity or to know that children with disability exist. The parents just want their own child to get in the car.

We are always told by full inclusion proponents that *all* the research has shown that full inclusion is always best for ALL students, including those *without* disability. A closer look at such 'research' finds it to be often non-generalisable. The amount of heterodox research going the other way suggests that this blanket and categorical statement is apocryphal. But the assertion is rarely questioned or challenged for fear of being seen as being not respectful of children with disability, and hence politically incorrect.

Nevertheless, a search of the literature will reveal studies showing that the academic performance of students without disability goes DOWN in behaviourally disordered classrooms until the students with the disruptive or dangerous behaviour are removed, and then, during the suspension, the academic performance of the students without the disordered behaviour who are left behind in the classroom goes UP again. In other words, disruptive and dangerous behaviour is an issue not only for the wellbeing of students who display that behaviour (which of course it is), but also for the academic achievement and wellbeing of all the other students who do not.

I submit that, for a child without disability such as the school-refusing child described in the quotation above, mandatory full inclusion is not always 'best for everyone'.

How can encasing students every day in such disruptive classrooms contribute to a 'Better and Fairer Education System'?

12 . Further information and contributions

I am grateful for the opportunity to make this submission, and I am happy to appear and give oral testimony at any public or private hearings, or to participate in any focus groups which are to be held in Brisbane or Sydney or online, and to answer supplementary questions with respect to this submission.