

Report on the Peter Scaife Information Session

Peter Scaife is the Manager of Gifted and Talented Education in the Department of Education and Training (serving all state schools). He spent several hours speaking with some forty GATCA members in early July.

Peter spoke well and at length on a range of issues, but primarily about recent efforts in the secondary system (which he explains is because of the announcement of several recent Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) programs in the secondary area).

Peter was quite candid in his support of parents and GATCA, and in his understanding of many of their issues. As a parent of gifted children, he understands firsthand the issues which relate to meeting the intellectual, social and emotional needs of gifted children.

Peter understood that quality of provision was variable. He observed that there were many reasons why there was a variation in the quality of delivery, some of which he touched on in responding to questions. He spoke about how there was an increased focus on this area in the last two years and how some of these issues were being addressed. For example, he spoke about how currently the Department had brokered opportunities and scholarships for its teachers to access high level professional learning from universities: the University of New South Wales, Murdoch University and Monash University are now delivering Certificate and Masters programs in gifted education. About 20 teachers had won scholarships in the past year. He observed that there were increasing numbers of teachers pursuing qualifications privately and that the Department supported its teachers through scholarships. He also informed members about how the opportunities for different programs had increased and explained the range of Gifted and Specialist programs available.

He commented on the Gifted and Talented Branch which consists of about 6 staff, and explained that he branch had been trying to advocate in a variety of forums to alert people to the needs of gifted students. He is keen to work with and support GATCA in achieving the common goals which are to improve opportunities and programs for gifted students.

A long question and answer session revealed a lot of frustration with individual schools and teachers (particularly in the primary area) and the role of the Department in dealing with those issues. It was very clear that the majority of parent concern focussed on the area of early childhood and primary school education.

One set of questioning in particular led to considerable discussion and a type of resolution, whereby he agreed that it would be very valuable for his team to listen to GATCA and to use the knowledge and motivations that members have. He agreed the suggestion that parents could present views through GATCA to the GATE Branch. He also suggested that Primary Specialist Pippa Gillett who is a member of the GATE team, could speak with GATCA parents at a later date. She is a passionate advocate for provision of gifted education opportunities in primary and especially, early childhood education. This was very well received.

A large and spontaneous round of applause greeted the suggestion that GATCA and DET have an increasingly good working relationship and this could improve further. As a result, GATCA is planning a series of Focus Groups, in which many of the parents present at the evening (and many others from the membership) will meet to discuss key issues and concerns. We plan to develop recommendations which GATCA will present to the GATE team, as well as to other educational decision makers, to the media and to politicians. If you would like to find out more about these focus groups please do contact me through GATCA.

John Bailey