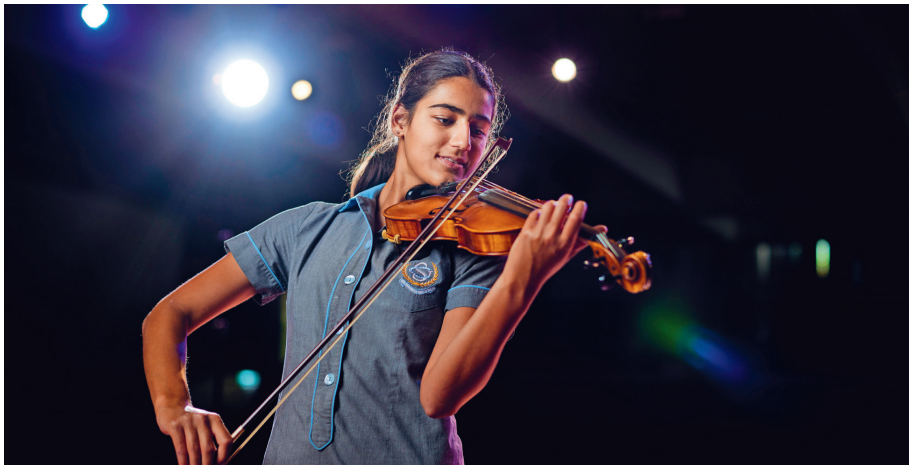
Enabling gifted and talented students



Schools tailor their teaching approaches to the needs of gifted and talented students in many different ways, writes **Larissa Ham**.

Being a gifted student may be a blessing, but it can sometimes feel like a curse without the right educational programs in place.

"Gifted students don't have a great start unless they're really supported," says Elka Gaensler, head of the Learning Plus program at St Catherine's School in Melbourne.

Incredibly bright students can sometimes get very frustrated, angry or depressed, says Gaensler, who holds a master of gifted education.

"I had one child in year 2 [at a previous school] who was operating at year 11 maths level, and he thought he was not good at maths. He wasn't responding the same way as everyone else, so he was questioning himself."

Students can also become disengaged or present with behavioural issues if they're not challenged in the right ways. Others are "twice-exceptional" – gifted, but with a learning disability such as autism spectrum disorder.

Fortunately, schools such as St Catherine's, and Meriden in Sydney, are among those tailoring their approach to help gifted and high-potential students shine.

Meriden's dean of lateral learning, Priscilla Curran, says the school, which is well known for its music program, has a track record of strong academic results and tends to attract smart, highly motivated students.

Curran says high-potential students are those whose potential exceeds that of students the same age in one or more of four domains: intellectual, creative, social-emotional and physical. Gifted students' potential, on the other hand, significantly exceeds that of their peers.

She says many staff have undertaken short courses in gifted education, and know the characteristics to look out for. These traits include advanced language skills, a mature sense of humour, the ability to ask insightful questions, highly creative or divergent thinking, curiosity, and the ability to understand abstract ideas.

ACHIEVERS
SCHOOLS ADAPT PROGRAMS TO SUIT TALENTED STUDENTS SUCH AS RHEA WERNER, OF ST CATHERINE'S SCHOOL (ABOVE), AND EARTH SCIENCE OLYMPIAD MEDALLIST JACINTA REES, OF MERIDEN (TOP RIGHT).

"You might also pick up on a student who's got a really specialised knowledge or interest in a particular area," says Curran.

Some students with a high IQ may find social situations a bit tricky, or prefer the company of older students or adults.

In Meriden's junior school, staff use a range of information sources to identify high-potential students, including teacher observations, class assessments, work samples, adaptive standardised tests, external assessments and feedback from parents.

The senior school is similar, says Curran, though some students may arrive having already undertaken a psychometric test. Then there's the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC) and the AGAT, a general ability test.

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In year 7, students sit an Academic Assessment Services (AAS) test, which helps staff stream classes for that year based on ability. "Then we would use our own internal assessments and observations to work out class placements after that," says Curran.

Gaensler says St Catherine's identifies high-potential or gifted girls in a number of ways.

"Our students undertake research-based assessments providing an in-depth understanding of their potential, including AAS testing and WISC assessments, as well as conversations with the students and their parents."

From there, if students aren't demonstrating their potential, a tailored program is devised to meet their needs.

St Catherine's is also a member of the Boroondara Gifted Network, which provides more challenging activities for highly capable students.

"Many students are also offered enhancement activities, and year 12 students can select to do university subjects as part of their course," says Gaensler.

St Catherine's and Meriden draw on the work of Canadian psychologist Professor Francoys Gagne. His model of giftedness and talent differentiates between gifts, which he sees as natural abilities, and talents, said to be systematically developed from those gifts if the right catalysts are in place.

Luckily, both schools provide plenty of opportunity for such talent to take shape.

At St Catherine's, a range of honours programs extend students in areas such as science or maths.

There are events such as the National Youth Science Forum, the International Chemistry Quiz, or Melbourne University's electrical engineering competition, SuperHack. And in the worldwide Future Problem Solving Program, students develop a solution to a problem expected 20 years into the future.

Meanwhile, one year 11 student is working with Harvard University's public health incubator in the quest to prevent eating disorders.

At Meriden, there's a wide range of co-curricular activities to suit all students, such as a philosophy club and TED-Ed club, which led to one student travelling to New York to speak.

On a day-to-day level, teachers are trained to differentiate class work so students across all classes can be extended, says Curran.

There are also programs for elite musicians and sportspeople, and a partnership with Cambridge International, where students can study the accredited subjects global perspectives (geography) and science as an extension.

A variety of external events, such as the da Vinci Decathlon, Tournament of Minds and the Sydney Philosothon, are also available.

Alumni also regularly return to speak to students, sharing their stories of success in fields including maths, science, technology and engineering.

Curran says this gives the girls the chance to "be what they can see".

"I think it just provides a great targeted environment to further our gifted girls and our high potential students, to really develop their gifts into talents," she says.

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