

## **New South Wales Secondary Principals' Council**

### **Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Workplace Relations**

# **Inquiry into the Education of Boys.**

#### **SYMPTOMS OF A CURRENT CRISIS**

The current focus on boys' education seems to have developed from two concerns:

1. The disproportionate representation of boys in statistics on school discipline issues (including suspensions), school welfare programs, incidence of truancy, remedial classes in schools, drug abuse in the community, violence, suicide, vehicle accidents, family break down, police and court time and more. Behind the human stories about these issues given prominence in the media are untold and poorly understood stories about boys and masculinity. What is more apparent is that the social and economic cost of significant numbers of boys being at risk (and placing others at risk) is immense.

2. The academic performance of boys has certainly become newsworthy over the past few years and the media has made much of the “under-performance” of boys in the School Certificate and the HSC. This has trivialised the issue into a boys Vs girls debate and ignores the advantages which boys and men realise in the post-school environment. The trivialisation of the debate can be seen in the responses from extremists in the men’s movement who focus on the apparent need for boys to “catch up with” or even be ahead of girls. It is also seen in the corresponding response from some feminists who resist any school programs which exclusively focus on boys. The higher performance of girls is not universal, is not new and a partial biological explanation can be found in the uneven rate of brain development of boys and girls. It is true, however that important changes (outlined below) have tended to favour girls in the last couple of decades:

#### **FACTORS AFFECTING THE EDUCATION OF BOYS**

There are economic and structural issues affecting the education of boys as well as the social, cultural and educational factors which form part of the terms of reference of the current Inquiry into the Education of Boys. *The omission of economic and structural factors in the terms of reference is most serious and may reflect a lack of*

*understanding of all the issues and may limit the scope of the Inquiry and the subsequent success of its recommendations.*

## **A. Economic/structural Issues**

1. Economic and structural change in Australia since the 1970s has created a mismatch between the capabilities of school leavers and the nature/levels of skills required in the workplace. While this affects both boys and girls the most significant impact is on those boys with traditional “male” skills who leave school and line up for jobs which no longer exist. *It should also be noted that it is this structural change and resulting mismatch, not any deficiencies in schools, which has fuelled the so-called literacy crisis of the 1990s.* Lower skilled boys in particular are competing for jobs further up the employment ladder, jobs for which they are poorly equipped (and “illiterate”).
2. The restructured economy increasingly demands capabilities which are arguably better identified with the abilities of girls rather than those of boys. The key competencies explained in the Meyer Report in the early 1990s, for example, significantly include “female” competencies such as communicating ideas and information, planning and organising activities, working with others (and in teams) and cultural understandings. The typical “male” competencies include using mathematical ideas and techniques, using technology and solving problems. The “female” qualities are increasingly important for both initial employment and subsequent advancement in new jobs, in spite of the glass ceiling factor for girls which is very real in some industries.
3. Schools and school systems have certainly moved to adjust to the requirements of the new economy. It is hardly surprising that external examinations and school curriculum has correspondingly shifted to emphasise these requirements. Schools have always been justly proud of the way they prepare young people for the “real world”. In the process, however, the changes within schools have given rise to misleading accusations that schools have become “feminine” institutions which are somehow no longer “boy friendly”.
4. Over the same period of time girls' education programs have successfully encouraged girls to develop the “male” skills and qualities described above. In effect, girls have been allowed and encouraged to cross the “gender divide” in their learning, choice of subjects and take-up of opportunities. In the process they have probably gained a double “advantage”: the economy has shifted in their direction and they have also successfully developed in the areas of “boys” skills and interests.

## **B. Social/cultural/gender Issues**

1. The socialisation of many boys within families, schools and community life is distorted by the increasing absence of appropriate and constructive male role models. Numerous studies refer to the “underfathering” of boys in the increasing percentage of families where the male role model is busy, inappropriate or simply non-existent. Boys come to rely on alternative and usually unbalanced models of masculinity

which abound in the media, peer and popular culture. These other sources readily model such qualities as restrictive emotionality, concern with power and status, excessive self-reliance, homophobia, anti-authoritarian bravado, anti-intellectualism and non-relational attitudes towards sexuality.

2. Where male role modelling exists it is often dated and divorced from new social realities which boys face in school and beyond. Gender-related work practices have changed faster than is realised in many families. In some families and communities (including schools) the dominant understandings held by boys about appropriate masculinity is still one based on unequal power relationships with girls and women. Schools need to help these boys discover a masculinity that is not formed at the expense of other people. This places considerable responsibility on schools to provide a balance in male role modelling, quite difficult in a feminised workforce.

3. Schools and teachers (including principals) contribute to the way in which boys' masculinity is constructed. Schools are often giving boys mixed messages about appropriate gender attitudes and behaviour. There are sometimes dated and destructive gender messages contained in secondary school organisation (especially in curriculum and discipline structures) and in the structure of activities such as sport.

4. The issue for schools is that the development of hegemonic male qualities in many boys inhibits their capacity to develop the skills and competencies described above. Reading, writing, communicating and working in groups are hardly priorities for those boys whose masculinity was created or affirmed in ways which valued competition, win-lose relationships and physical (rather than intellectual) power. These boys certainly account for much of the disharmony in our schools and certainly inhibit their own learning and that of others.

## **STRATEGIES FOR BOYS**

### **A gender inclusive framework.....**

It is essential that strategies in boys' education be developed within a gender inclusive policy framework as operates in NSW. This is the only framework which can be used to justify programs for girls and for boys. Strategies for both boys and girls within such a framework should seek to prepare young people for the whole range of competencies required by the changing workplace so that they can access meaningful employment and secure livelihood. This means that both boys and girls need to be encouraged and resourced to take up opportunities and develop those competencies which they may find less intuitive and which may stand at odds with their construction of gender.

Schools should be encouraged and resourced to:

\* analyse and reflect on the ways in which they contribute to gender understandings held by both boys and girls in positive and negative ways, and to develop strategies to convey appropriate messages to young people about gender,

- \* equip boys and girls to discriminate amongst the messages they receive about gender and to learn at school about gender, the diversity of masculinities and femininities and gender related social issues,
- \* allow and encourage boys and girls to diversify the ways in which they develop, view and express their own masculinity and femininity: this relates to what they do at school, what subjects they study, the opportunities they have, games they play and more,
- \* create environments in which it is safe for boys and girls to develop and express more diverse forms of masculinity and femininity.

None of this is about “turning boys into girls” or vice versa, as is sometimes claimed by critics of gender equity programs. It is about schools continuing to equip young people for a changing real world and skilling them to gain a secure livelihood.

### **....with gender specific approaches**

A gender inclusive framework should allow a specific boys’ education strategy alongside a continuing strategy for girls. A gender inclusive framework does not imply “equal time” and “equal resources” at all times for boys and girls. Such a framework must not inhibit the development of boys’ education programs which have an exclusive boys’ focus, are ongoing, properly resourced and address the big issues contained in this submission. There is a need for a boys’ education strategy and this may, in the short to medium term, require the same levels of support and resourcing which has contributed towards the apparent success of strategies for girls since the mid 1980s.

### **Some cautions**

There is a great range of strategies in boys’ education which claim to be successful. Some schools focus on specific programs, others adopt a range of measures. Examples include programs such as the “machismo program” (Picton High School), “access program” (organised by Rotary) and many more. The strategies reflect a wide range of positions and viewpoints on boys and masculinity, including viewpoints rejected in this submission. Care should be taken to:

- \* understand what view of gender/masculinity and “boys' education” is reflected in a particular strategy,
- \* validate the claims made by the proponents of particular approaches and strategies,
- \* in the case of validated and successful strategies, making sure that any contextual issues which contribute to such success are well known. This will prevent hasty “transplanting” of strategies into other schools without adequate prior school development.

The focus of some strategies is to identify and focus on “male” modes of learning in order to make schools “boy friendly” (again?). Teachers need to understand the many ways in which both boys and girls learn. Teaching strategies need to cater for the diversity that is present in every classroom, including in same-sex settings. All boys need to have the opportunity to learn in a variety of ways: teaching styles which focus on “male” modes of learning may benefit some boys but equally have the potential to:

1. disenfranchise those boys who learn in different ways,
2. reinforce stereotypes which are not helpful for boys in social settings or in seeking employment.

### **Types of strategies**

Current boys' education strategies operating in schools are quite well documented and the details are not the subject of this submission. Such strategies seem to fit into a number of categories:

1. Structural/welfare strategies. These include mentoring for boys, links with fathers and families, pastoral care structures and processes, workplace training, middle schooling structures and processes, school environmental changes.
2. Curriculum/teaching strategies. Programs in this area touch on preferred "boys" learning styles, subject choices, boys' literacy strategies, media studies, the sports curriculum, affirmative action for boys in the creative and expressive arts, emphases on strategies in emotional intelligence, learning about gender in specific subjects or across the curriculum.
3. Integrated. Some schools adopt a whole school approach invariably aimed at changing the school culture. In some of these schools it is difficult to identify specific programs which alone make a difference but the significance of whole school cultural change should not be ignored.

### **Systemic changes**

In addition to specific school strategies mention should be made of required systemic changes, including the following:

1. Employment of more men in the teaching profession. In primary schools in particular there are simply fewer men to use as suitable role models for young boys. As it is, the feminisation of the teaching profession sends a clear and unbalanced gender message to boys.
2. An understanding of gender equity principles needs to become more prominent in the training, recruitment and subsequent promotion of teachers
3. Gender equity principles and strategies need to accompany and enhance the success of other systemic priorities such as literacy, drug education and student welfare.

### **Conclusion**

This submission has referred to the social and economic cost of significant numbers of boys being at risk and placing others at risk. There is a considerable opportunity cost for schools and for society if action is not taken to address the issues identified in this submission. The New South Wales Secondary Principals' Council applauds the establishment of the current Inquiry and asks that serious consideration be given to the issues in this submission.

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