

BOYS IN EDUCATION. A submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Workplace Relations from Chatswood High School Council

There is little doubt that measures taken to remediate the performance of girls in terms of education and employment opportunities over the past two decades were very much overdue. The question which now arises apropos the status of boys is- Have we unintentionally created a new imbalance in emphasis and direction?

Educators, sociologists, welfare groups and parent groups have identified numbers of areas of great concern with the education of boys. These include:-

- General academic performance
- Literacy
- Sexual identity
- Self image and self esteem
- Commitment to and identification with school's objectives.

Chatswood High School, located on Sydney's North Shore, absorbed a large population of boys after the closure of Crows Nest Boys' High School. As one of the few Comprehensive High Schools on Sydney's North Shore, CHS has found itself attempting to provide specialised programs accommodating girls, while facing an ever-growing male population with the consequent needs of boys. The school has a high enrolment of students from a vast range of cultural backgrounds, a factor which may also affect achievements in literacy and expectations of families.

Such complex demands on a school require resourcing which is both detailed and adequate. The ability to plan for boys' education is severely compromised by lack of funding in all areas of education, lack of staff, lack of materials, inadequately maintained buildings and equipment and the demoralising stresses and demands these factors make on teachers and students alike.

Chatswood High School has a strong record of initiatives with boys' education which we would be pleased to document for the Committee. The fact is that without proper resourcing these are very difficult to implement.

Issues identified by Mrs P Dunn and Mrs J Jones staff in charge of Boys' Welfare at CHS are as follows:

- The masculine identity in today's world. The need to re-adjust to contemporary realities not only affects students, but in many cases will have been a factor in the lives of their parents. Men can no longer be seen as the automatic "bread winner" in families. They cannot expect that faithful service will secure a job, identity and income for life - or that education and training at any one period in life will be sufficient to provide employment and a contingent sense of direction and self-esteem. The search for other outlets and means of Identification can often be escapist or defiant or self-destructive.
- Academic Performance. Bright male students will usually perform well in Australian schools with sufficient encouragement if the school "culture"

endorses academic achievement. Our school is no exception, where good results are obtained from top students, but where it is often difficult to maximise the performance of middle-range students- Many students come from single parent families in which boys must attempt to cope with separation from fathers. Alternatively, in many families both parents work long hours and students are not supervised after school. The self-discipline to attend to homework from an early age without supervision is an unrealistic demand on children.

Boys have a tendency to follow the example that it's "cool to be a fool," to release tensions by energetic displays which can be inappropriate in classroom situations - or by defiant behaviour. They require reassuring structures and programs which encourage enjoyable compliance. Many boys would benefit from simple after school homework sessions which need the support of funding.

Many concerned with boys at CHS echo the opinion of Newcastle academic Richard Fletcher that both the intensity of academic demands on boys, and the current accents in taking experience from the concrete to a more abstract agenda - create poor learning situations for males. It is Fletcher's opinion that we have "dis-gendered" education, and we are now asking boys to think and behave as we expect girls to. Mrs P Dunn cites her efforts in teaching boys about sexual harrasment and violence. Boys and men are depicted as the perpetrators against women in this course. She has decribed the upset and sense of injustice felt by many boys who in the process of a "sensitising" program feel accused and judged. It was not part of her brief to explain that boys too are the objects of sexual assault.

Concern with the curriculum in schools highlights the shrinking of traditional "male" subjects - those hands-on courses such as woodwork and design. The fact is that boys suffer from literacy difficulties to a much greater extent than girls and whereas in the past boys could achieve and distinguish themselves in such areas, they are now required to complete ever more complex and lengthy research assignments. For both bright and average students this emphasis on research, reading and the presentation of reports is a further imposition and invitation to failure.

Chatswood High School is proud of its record in offering boys activities which include Mediation and Peer Support, anger management courses, HELP/ TAFE programs, sports incentives, and many extra curricular activities. The latter include bands, Duke of Edinburgh Award, Web design groups, chess, debating and drama.

We thank the Committee for the opportunity to participate in its enquiry and would welcome further chances to be part of this. Please contact:

Mr Bob Selinger, Acting Principal
Chatswood High School
Centennial Avenue
CHATSWOOD NSW 2067

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