

**SUBMISSION  
OF THE CATHOLIC SECONDARY PRINCIPALS' ASSOCIATION (WA)  
TO THE PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY INTO  
THE EDUCATION OF BOYS AND RELATED MATTERS**

The Catholic Secondary Principals' Association of Western Australia (CSPA) is constituted of all Principals of Catholic secondary schools in western Australia. Its 48 members represent a range of schools; single-sex and co-educational; metropolitan, rural and remote; secondary only and K-12; with secondary enrolments of less than 20 to over 1200.

The CSPA notes in the first instance a very strong concern related to social and cultural issues that impinge on the development of boys. Suicide rates, mental ill-health, imprisonment and detention rates, ADHD diagnosis, drug addiction, binge drinking and other risk-taking behaviours, all appear to be noticeably higher for boys than for girls. Whilst these are not purely educational issues, they impinge directly on the educational achievement of boys. We note too, that for many boys, schools may be the last possibility for the formation of a sound values structure.

The experience of CSPA members indicates that the problems that appear to be affecting boys in co-educational schools are not absent from all-boys' schools. This would reinforce the view of members that many fundamental issues related to educational achievement and the acquisition of appropriate social skills and behaviours, lie outside the school environment, and are not determined by the structure, processes and internal dynamics of schools themselves.

Nevertheless, as educators who work specifically within a values-based paradigm, the CSPA believes it brings to the discussion the expertise, experience and judgement to provide leadership and direction in grappling with the issues involved in this complex question.

The CSPA believes that schools must seek to articulate an understanding of masculinity and to formulate ways in which masculinity is to be valued and prized in schools.

The CSPA notes that whilst this is not only an issue for schools (cultural understandings of masculinity being influenced by a great many factors, from family and socio-cultural heritage to media and advertising) schools did, and continue to, work pro-actively with the change in the perceived role and status of women that has occurred over the last 35 to 40 years.

Members note that behaviours associated with some models of masculinity are not acceptable. For example, excessively 'macho' images of masculinity promote behaviours that can be aggressive and insensitive; some models of masculinity rely on an exclusivity of gender roles that hampers full personal development and imposes restricted roles on women and girls. Additionally, the myth of the inarticulate male is played out in the difficulty in getting boys to participate in classroom discussion, particularly about anything related to the affective dimension.

It is essential that discussions about the meaning of masculinity and the developing self-concept of young men incorporates an understanding of the multiplicity of ways of expressing masculinity (as well as femininity). It is important that schools and teachers avoid the creation of stereotypes, however idealised. There thus needs to be honesty by adults within the classroom about the fluidity and developmental nature of definitions of masculinity (and femininity) and an acceptance of multiple expressions of masculinity.

In assisting in the healthy construction of meanings of masculinity, the provision of healthy role models within the school environment is particularly important. Members note the very great shortage of male teachers in all areas of school education, reducing the number of accessible role models for boys. To address this problem will require an increase in the community standing of the teaching profession. Members note that rhetoric is an inadequate encouragement for high-achieving students to enter the profession. They note too that a quantum salary increase and the establishment of appropriate long-term career incentives for classroom teachers are essential elements in any attempt to address this issue. The CSPA notes that whilst the depletion of male teachers is a particular problem, female teachers too need to provide appropriate modelling and mentoring for boys.

The CSPA believes there is a need for focussed research to determine the best methods of education for boys (including pedagogical method, class structures, and school organisation). Methodologies and learning structures in classrooms currently favour girls and encourage disengagement and alienation by boys. There is some concern that the embrace of collaborative learning methods may

give rise to difficulties for boys, whose social and relational skills are often not so well developed as those of their female peers. There is anecdotal evidence that whilst girls respond well to group work, exercising superior socialisation skills and the use of conversation as a means of learning, boys do not respond so positively nor do they achieve as well as in more directed learning situations. This is not to say that such pedagogy is necessarily inappropriate for boys; simply that there needs to be some focussed research into the area.

Additionally, there is a need for teacher training programs specifically to address the need for greater understanding by teachers of different learning styles and strategies, and a need for enhanced Professional Development of teachers in this area.

Similarly, the CSPA believes that the structures of syllabi and curricula need to be reviewed. The CSPA notes that changes in various syllabi, including the nature and structure of assessment (particularly, for example in senior physical science areas) were considerably adjusted in the 1980s specifically to make them more attractive to girl students – to their interests and preferred learning styles. This experience indicates that such a review, focussing on the interests and preferred learning styles of boys, could lead to amendment or increasing flexibility of such syllabi.

Nevertheless, the CSPA is concerned that initiatives to improve boys' educational outcomes should not be developed in such a way as to confirm stereotypical views of the ways that boys and girls function. While general observations may be drawn, it is nevertheless the case that many boys perform well in student-centred, interactive, participatory classrooms, just as many girls perform strongly in more teacher-centred and closely directed classrooms. Particular pedagogical style and classroom organisation should not be imposed as a template on all learning situations; teachers need to be skilled to develop methodologies that support boys and girls and that respond to the individual nature and needs of students. Such an approach is firmly based in a holistic approach to education, founded in a strong sense of the value of each student as an individual.

Research to date would tend to confirm that, despite their generally positive response to more structured learning situations, boys learn best through relationship. The importance of the relational element of all teaching-learning situations, however structured, must be affirmed if all students are to achieve their potential. Further research is required to assist in the identification of the competencies that early adolescent boys need to acquire in order to enhance both learning and relationship skills, and to enhance their confidence in both.

It is the case that while schools presently have the expertise and the opportunity to effect strong programs to support the stronger development of boys, they presently lack the resources. These resources are monetary – teaching staff are

already severely taxed in terms of time, presence and energy; the extra time and energy needed to focus on the development, implementation and evaluation of such programs can only be provided by freeing up staff from other duties.

There is some further anecdotal evidence that the introduction of Middle Schooling has been of some advantage to students. Some schools report that the increased involvement of a smaller number of teachers with students in middle school years has ensured that boys in need of support are not overlooked. The movement to a student-centred approach within this structure has in some cases developed the decision-making experience and authority of boys. One Principal articulated the advantages of Middle Schooling for boys as offering the 'holy quadrella' – power, choice, fun and social interaction. Again, the Association would encourage commitment of funds to permit a serious review of the outcomes of Middle Schooling, with particular reference to the its impact on boys, in areas of academic achievement and social and personal development.

Additionally, the value of Visual and Performing Arts in encouraging the acceptance of boys' participation in a range of activities both within and beyond the classroom has been noted by members. Where boys are involved in these areas of the curriculum, there has been an increased development of communication skills and an increased willingness of boys to participate in classroom discussion in other areas of the curriculum.

The CSPA believes there is a need for gender education in schools. The questions of what it means to be male and female; how people relate within and between genders; attitudes and behaviours related to understandings of gender identity need to be specifically addressed in the classroom. It is acknowledged that such discussions currently occur within the context of English and English Literature classes; it is the belief of the CSPA that such issues need to be addressed in other areas of the curriculum as well. For example, the use of the scientific method, and its impact on different learning styles, might in itself be a relevant area of discussion in a Science class.

To assist in this development of young peoples' understanding of issues related to gender identity, and associated behaviours and attitudes that impact strongly though not solely on boys' school-based achievement, professional development opportunities need to be provided for teachers, teachers in training, and parents. Such education needs to promote understandings of gender that are neither blaming nor categorising, that are free of phobia and bias, and are focussed on individual freedoms, sanctity of the person, and compassionate care for all.

The Association recognises the importance of providing a range of heroes and mentors for boys. Programs which have specifically included fathers or other significant male adults in the educational program of boys have shown considerable benefit.

One such trial program in a co-educational school involved the structuring of gender-based English classes in lower secondary levels; fathers or other significant male adults were invited to an introductory evening at the commencement of the program; one or two fathers were included in the class each week; and a journalling exercise by fathers and students as they worked through common texts, led to enhanced outcomes. These were noted particularly in an increased commitment to completing set work, and an increased participation in classroom discussion and activities. Teachers concerned also noted informally an enhanced enjoyment of and willingness to engage in reading outside the classroom and set curriculum.

The Association believes that such trial programs should be extended and funds should be made available to encourage such innovation and to review the outcomes in a systematic way.

There is a need to find alternative ways to recognise achievement of boys within schools. It is noted that forms of recognition currently used in schools seem to lack traction with boys, with the possible exception of recognition of sporting and related achievements.

Schools should be encouraged to undertake a genuine consultation with their students to determine ways in which school-based achievement could be recognised in ways which boys value.

The Association is mindful that the need to focus on issues relating to boys – both societal and educational – must not be undertaken in a way that detracts from the continued need to enhance the performance of girls. The indicators of greater educational success of girls – higher retention and graduation rates, higher rates of enrolment in TAFE and university courses, must not presage a withdrawal of resources or interest in the maintenance and continued improvement of girls. The issue is not to be addressed as one of attempting to produce some form of balance.

The Association would like to note that many of the problems associated with enhancing the educational and social development of boys are *more apparent* in country schools. Not only are many of the external pressures – perceived lack of employment and other post-school outcomes, limited access to social services and so on – greater in these areas, schools in country and remote areas face particular difficulties. For example, many country schools (particularly primary schools) find it impossible to employ any male teachers. In one country area, specialist secondary male teachers are being shared with the nearby primary school to ensure at least a limited male presence in primary school classrooms. For many of these schools, enrolments are simply not large enough to accommodate the possibility of single-gender classes. Appropriate funding support, initially to trial such initiatives, is supported by the Association.

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The Association believes that, as so many of the issues impinging on the outcomes of boys' education originate outside the school, government policy as well as school policies and structures must reflect a genuine commitment to the concept of parents and teachers as full partners in the educational endeavour.

The Association reiterates that many of the perceived problems related to the apparent underachievement of boys in school, and of related behavioural problems, are symptomatic of a number of issues, many of which lie outside the school. Our society needs to focus energy, expertise and compassion in order to address some of the deeper issues of our society that this collection of problems is indicating. The most helpful initiatives of government will lie in providing funds and resources for research that leads to a better understanding of the complexity of issues involved, rather than in the introduction of particular templates of solutions applied within the boundaries of school and classroom, and isolated from linked initiatives in our broader society.

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