

THE UNIVERSITY OF
NEW SOUTH WALES
SCHOOL OF HISTORY

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Thank you for the opportunity to express views on the education of boys as solicited in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on June 10, 2000. I write as the mother of a teenage boy, as a parent actively involved in school committees, and as a senior lecturer at the University of New South Wales where I observe and teach male and female students at undergraduate and post-graduate levels.

My husband and I initially enrolled our son in our local primary school. We made a commitment to public education as crucial to good citizenship and democracy. We both attended Parents and Teachers meetings, and I worked in the classroom once a week for three years assisting in the remedial reading program. Our son studied in public school from K-3. We were satisfied with the education provided in the years kindergarten through year 2. In year 3 we could no longer ignore the school's policy of promoting the education of girls at the expense of boys. In year 3, seven enrichment programs were offered by the school exclusively for girls in mathematics and science. When I asked the principal for similar enrichment programs for boys the response was to offer one seminar in behaviour modification. To my request for seminars in mathematics and science, the principal responded: "Jean, after year 3 you'll soon realise boys are just a problem." The principal also told me that for parents of our socio-economic class public school was just a holding place before progress to private school. During this same year I had occasion to meet with my son's teacher and the deputy principal to inquire about classroom standards. For example, homework was assigned, but often not marked and returned to students for periods of up to three weeks. The teacher's corrections to spelling were often faulty, and the general attitude conveyed to students, from my observations in the classroom, was that scuba diving was of more importance than an education.

My husband and I moved our son in year 4 to a private, co-educational school that states its mission to be assisting each c to reach their fullest potential in terms of learning and personal growth. We now pay \$8000.00 per year so that teachers will take an interest in the education of boys and in stimulating a love of learning in all children. We find that the reports on our son's academic work are genuine assessments in terms of strengths and weaknesses and, from meetings with teachers and the school principal and deputy principal, that there is a commitment to learning that encourages boys and girls. I find this observation confirmed each week as I volunteer at the school.

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I come to several conclusions from my experience with the public and private school systems of Sydney.

1. The public schools send a clear message that boys do not matter. Is this a consequence of the feminisation of the teaching profession?

2. Public schools send a clear message that mediocrity is the goal in scholastic attainment and in personal presentation. I observed teachers arriving late, sloverly in dress, and wanting enthusiasm for their profession.

3. The principal is a crucial leader. Teachers in the private and public schools all come from the same university Arts and Education programs. In public schools there is no informed evaluation of the pupils' progress; in private schools there is constant, critical evaluation.

4. Private schools encourage children to want to do well.

All teachers and parents are struck by the differences in style and development of boys and girls. As a generalisation, girls often present work that is neat, of a higher standard of appearance than boys. There is the temptation to be impressed by form over content. Girls develop fine motor coordination earlier than boys. Most teachers at primary level are female, and I believe a pattern starts very early on in schools of rewarding girls and denigrating the efforts of boys. Steve Bidulph has argued that boys should start school a full year later than girls as one way to recognise this gender difference in development and to allow boys to begin when they are ready. I think this is an issue for the Committee to consider.

I also believe the Committee should consider the very fundamentals of a democratic society lie in the provision of an education that is uniformly excellent for all children, regardless of class, ethnicity, religion or gender. The education system has made a commitment to improving the learning of girls. It is time to make the same commitment to boys, within the context that equality of education for all children should be the norm. In the meantime, I resent the enormous financial sacrifice we have to make because the current system of public education is harmful to the intellectual and personal growth of their male pupils.

Yours sincerely,

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