



Western Australian Council of State School Organisations  
**Submission to the Inquiry into the Education of Boys**

House of Representatives Standing Committee on  
Employment, Education and Workplace Relations.

Presented by: Shelley Norrish  
PRESIDENT

Prepared by: Phil Harrold  
POLICY & RESEARCH OFFICER

July 2000

## INTRODUCTION

The WA Council of State School Organisations (WACSSO) is the representative voice of Parents & Citizens' Associations in Western Australia. There are 630 government school P&C Associations directly affiliated to WACSSO.

The Council welcomes an investigation into the education of boys and notes that its establishment is as a result of ongoing community concern about the problems that boys face within the education system. Many parents have expressed concern over the issues facing boys and as such WACSSO is hopeful that the Inquiry will result in pro-active steps that address these problems.

Whilst accepting that there are real problems being encountered by boys in the education system it is of concern to WACSSO that any investigation into these will result in a series of actions that risk ignoring (or adding to) the problems faced by girls. The Council is hopeful that this will not be the case and have addressed this issue within this submission.

In summary, the concerns expressed by parent groups, educators, and within the mass media about the problems experienced by boys have focused upon:

- Boys underachievement in literacy as well as English and arts subjects generally;
- Behavioural problems of boys in the classroom;
- High suicide rates and low self esteem amongst boys;
- Low participation of boys in certain subjects.

WACSSO is keen to see the problems listed above addressed by the education community and believes that the concerns require system-wide solutions and a pro-active commitment by authorities. WACSSO believes that the challenge in addressing these problems is to find solutions that meet the problems being experienced by boys without adversely effecting the good work being done to improve the education of girls.

The opportunities that exist in meeting the challenges of gender equity are great and WACSSO looks forward to a collaborative working relationship between parents, teachers and administrators in working towards effective solutions that result in all children being able to develop their full potential.

## THE WA COUNCIL OF STATE SCHOOL ORGANISATIONS (WACSSO).

WACSSO is committed to a public education system available to all young people irrespective of their age, socio-economic status, culture, gender, level of ability or where they live.

The philosophy underlying WACSSO policy centres around the principles of equality, excellence, and participatory democracy and recognises that all human beings depend on each other and so the future well-being of individuals is dependent on the future well-being of all.

Equality is dependent on the recognition that all children have a capacity to learn; learning is the construction of meaning from experience; school practices must acknowledge and build on the culture and experiences children bring to school; children have a right to develop their skills, knowledge and aptitudes in challenging but personally successful and fulfilling ways.

The principle of excellence implies that the public school system must provide for all students the highest quality education, which will enable them to learn how to learn throughout their lives and to apply that knowledge for the benefit of both themselves and others. Public education must be geared to develop among all students, a sense of justice as well as respect and concern for others.

The principles of participatory democracy hold that the provision of an education system that addresses the needs of all is most likely to be achieved when those involved are empowered to be partners, through representation in all decision-making processes of the system.

WACSSO believes that the above tenets together form an essential statement of principles for guidance in its practical activities toward achieving an excellent, empowering, public education system for all.

Accordingly, WACSSO believes that all persons attending government schools have the right to an unrestricted and effective education of the highest quality to allow them to develop their full potential as individuals, so that they can take every advantage of social, political, and economic opportunity; obtain fulfilment of their reasonable aspirations within the range of their abilities; contribute their skills and knowledge for the betterment of Australia; and be able to participate harmoniously in all aspects of society.

### **EDUCATIONAL DISADVANTAGE OF BOYS.**

WACSSO agrees that there are three broad indicators that can be used to judge educational disadvantage.

1. Those denied access to educational opportunity.
2. Those who leave school early despite their satisfactory performance at school.
3. Those who are prevented from achieving as a result of social and environmental factors.<sup>1</sup>

It is clear that some groups of boys can be classed as disadvantaged using the indicators above. Whilst some of this disadvantage will quite obviously be a result of gender, there are also other factors that need to be taken into account when looking at particular disadvantage. The factors of class, race, sexual orientation and living location obviously also affect individual boys advantage or disadvantage.

Whilst recognising that there are numerous issues that can be attributed to boys as a group, WACSSO acknowledges that there are differences within this group that may result in individuals having very different educational experiences. Boys attending school at a wealthy inner-city private school will hardly face the same problems as working class boys in a regional school. Because of the significant differences in problems experienced by boys, and the multitude of factors that influence boys' experience, WACSSO does not believe there can be a single 'solution' to the educational problems facing boys.

WACSSO believes that a high quality education should enable all individuals to:

- become independent and self-directed learners;
- develop fully their own talents, values and interests;
- develop a sense of identity and respect for self, community and the environment;
- meet challenges; and
- participate in decision making at various levels.

WACSSO believes that any program aimed at improving boys' educational outcomes should be based on achieving the points listed above for all students.

It is concerning that there is increasing evidence that boys as a group are under performing in literacy<sup>2</sup>. It is vital that all students gain literacy skills as a result of their schooling as low levels of literacy seriously affect individuals' ability to achieve in the broader community. The fact that boys may be experiencing low literacy levels as a result of societal pressure not to

---

<sup>1</sup> Gilbert & Gilbert (1994), in Martino, 1995 p.125

<sup>2</sup> 1999 National Benchmarks indicate 84.9% of Year 3 boys as opposed to 89.7% of girls achieved literacy and numeracy benchmarks (MCEETYA 1999)

undertake subjects such as English and the Humanities that are seen as ‘feminine’<sup>3</sup>, is of particular concern.

WACSSO encourages all governments to adopt strategies to increase the literacy levels of boys, paying particular attention to strategies targeting indigenous students where literacy levels are well below the national average.

WACSSO is also concerned about the disruptive effect that some boys have within the classroom and the impact that this has on all students and their learning.

Reports that boys are more likely to be the cause of class room disruption, to be detained or punished as a result of class room behaviour indicate a problem that needs to be addressed for the benefit of all. Some people make the argument that “boys are just being boys” and the education system has to adapt to deal with this behaviour, however it seems clear that not all boys act in this manner. Many people argue that the overly aggressive masculine behaviour at school is a result of boys’ socialisation, where limited examples of masculinity are promoted.

It is argued that certain masculine ways of being limit boys’ emotional horizons and tilt them towards aggression, repression, conflict and violence, and towards damaging forms of competition and control. If it is accepted that this is the case, then it easier to understand the link between masculinity, subject ‘choice’, achievement, discipline, relationships and school violence.<sup>4</sup>

One of the many roles of school education is to prepare individuals with the relevant skills to participate in the workforce. The skills of communication, acceptance and co-operation are vital to the achievement of all people within the workplace and as such it is of concern to WACSSO that large numbers of boys do not acquire these skills. These skills need to be taught to boys within the school environment where boys must also learn that violence and harassment are not acceptable.

### **ATTACKING THE BASE CAUSE— CONSTRUCTIONS OF MASCULINITY**

WACSSO agrees with the definition of gender used by the *NSW Inquiry into Boys’ Education*:

Gender is something which is constructed by social practice, as distinct from biological sex, which we are born with. In almost all societies quite different values, behaviours and attributes are expected from the different genders. Thus males and females become “masculine” and ‘feminine’ through social construction, with all of the nuances and shades of meaning those words identify.<sup>5</sup>

In the same way that the education and employment prospects of girls have been restricted by gender constraints of Australian society, so have the boys suffered disadvantage. Society has encouraged limited concepts of masculinity and these have had the adverse result of effecting boys’ choices in education.

Societal expectations that promote violent and aggressive behavior as ‘masculine’ and the subject choices of English and the Humanities as ‘feminine’ play a large role in influencing boys behaviour and subject choices as school.

WACSSO encourages all states to adopt ‘Relationships’ Education as part of the curriculum from the Early Childhood stage where the values of acceptance, communication and co-operation are promoted. The role of the school in promoting numerous models of ‘masculinity’

---

<sup>3</sup> Moloney, 1999 p.4

<sup>4</sup> Kenway, 1997 p.1

<sup>5</sup> NSW Inquiry into Boys’ Education, 1994 p.21

can not be underestimated as a method of ensuring all boys have the confidence and capabilities to tackle an educational program most suited to their needs.

WACSSO believes that it is vital that models of masculine behaviour that do not link literacy, reading, communication, co-operation and academic achievement with the feminine and instead embrace these concepts as important attributes for both genders are needed within the school environment.

### **DON'T FORGET THE GIRLS.**

The question that has been raised in many public forums, including many parent ones, is "What about the Boys?" The raising of this question seems to be a reflection of legitimate concern about the education of boys, and in some circumstances a 'backlash' against the recent focus on girls' education.

These concerns about the educational problems being faced by boys are being raised at the same time as the following points are being noted in respect to girls' education:

- Girls are highly represented within the higher achievers in Year 12 examinations;
- Girls retention rates are increasing (12% higher than boys in 1999);
- Girls are being awarded an increasing number of academic prizes.

It is unfortunate that the problems facing boys within schools have been highlighted in contrast to the achievement of girls. There is considerable danger in seeing programs addressing boys specific needs as being necessary to address an 'imbalance' created by girls' education strategy. To blame girls for the problems that boys face is to completely misunderstand the problem.

- ❖ WACSSO rejects arguments that the problems facing boys within the school system are a result of an overemphasis on girls' education.
- ❖ WACSSO does not believe that the problems facing the education of boys should be looked at in opposition to the academic achievement of girls.
- ❖ WACSSO does not believe that current programs aimed at creating gender equity within schools and that address specific areas such as the involvement of girls in non-traditional subject areas and enhancing post-schooling careers should stop as a result of dealing with issues surrounding the education of boys.

Much of the current criticism about the 'feminisation' of the school curriculum and the deprived and neglected nature of boys in school fails to recognise that many of the current practices within schools still operate to disadvantage girls in ways that affect their post-school access to particular kinds of employment.<sup>6</sup>

Arguments that claim girls have achieved equal status in terms of educational attainment overlook the subsequent inequities that still exist within the workforce. Although women's earnings are growing in comparison to men, female full-time adult ordinary time earnings are still only 85% of the male earnings and female total earnings are only 65.9% of male total earnings (August 1999 quarter).<sup>7</sup>

WACSSO welcomes and agrees with the comments of the Inquiry Chair Dr Brendan Nelson when he states, "Programs for boys do not have to be, and should not be, at the expense of girls. In fact, boys' programs should ultimately benefit women, girls and society generally, as they should be developed in such a way that contributes to creating a value system that tolerates less harassment, less violence and much less intimidation by men."<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Martino, 1995 p.125

<sup>7</sup> Commonwealth Office of the Status of Women, 2000, p.2

<sup>8</sup> Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Workplace Relations, 2000, p.1

It is clear that there are many issues specific to the education of boys that need to be addressed by educators and parents to ensure that all students are able to gain equally from the educational experience.

WACSSO believes that there are many benefits to designing programs to deal with boys' problems in schools, and that without changes to the ways that the education of boys is addressed, much of what needs to be done for girls can not be fully realised.

## **GENDER EQUITY STRATEGIES WITHIN SCHOOLS**

WACSSO believes that schools should provide every student with an opportunity to develop creative, academic and physical abilities regardless of sex and that girls and boys should be valued equally in all aspects of schooling.

Many children struggle with learning, different approaches to teaching, quality of teaching, the curriculum content, competition and assessment, and various behavioural problems and their effects. Parents want a thoughtful and imaginative response to their concerns about girls and boys, and different groups of girls and boys, through programs that identify the gender dimension in children's struggles at school.<sup>9</sup> WACSSO recognises that providing for equality of outcomes in education for girls and boys may require different provision, at least for a period of time.

A gender equity strategy should address needs at both primary and secondary levels and assist schools to develop strategies:

- for teaching, learning and assessment suited to the different needs of girls and boys;
- to break down stereotypes in male as well as female roles;
- to address the separate areas of disadvantage particular to girls and boys.

WACSSO supports the development of gender equity strategies in all aspects of schooling, from early childhood through to post-compulsory, among teachers and the wider community by:

- promoting awareness that girls and boys have equal rights in all aspects of schooling;
- promoting awareness of the changing roles of men and women in society in terms of their economic, civic and domestic responsibilities;
- taking into consideration parents', carers' and students' real life experiences and promoting school-based research on their needs and concerns;
- understanding gender beyond biological definitions and sex role socialisation and recognising the interweaving of gender with culture, age, class race, ethnicity, sexuality and disability;
- acknowledging gender as a social construct where people are actively engaged in constructing their own femininity and masculinity;
- encouraging people to explore the continuum of behaviours which are labelled as 'masculine' or 'feminine' and gender in relation to social expectations, pressures, constraints, power and resistances;
- critically analysing gender construction in curriculum, teaching and learning strategies, and assessment and reporting, as well as the school's management;
- promoting equal and respectful relationships between boys and boys, girls and girls, boys and girls, and between men and men, women and women, and men and women.

Curriculum material on the family, child development and social relations should be made available to male and female students at both primary and secondary level and also to parents.

Education authorities should provide physical education programs, including sports, that develop a high level of physical fitness and participation in students of both sexes. Barriers should be removed that prevent girls or boys from participating in individual or team sports

---

<sup>9</sup> Beckett et al, 1995, p2

traditionally accessible only to opposite sex and to encourage the establishment of mixed sex teams.

Parents also want gender work to move beyond critique to provide hope and possibilities, so that girls and boys can learn about thoughtful ways of being and living in a society that is not characterised by domination and oppression.<sup>10</sup>

Primarily, WACSSO encourages parents and carers, teachers and others to have a commitment to both boys and girls in gender reform work.

### **PROMOTING POSITIVE ROLE MODELS OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM.**

It is not surprising that schools play a significant role in children's socialisation process, and that at school similar masculine values to these supported in broader society are promoted. Hence, schools are very much part of the system of creating gendered beings<sup>11</sup>.

However, parents, caregivers and others involved in shaping a child's future also play a significant role in socialising their children. For children to be able to understand and benefit from changes in traditional gender roles, the home environment must support the work being undertaken in the school.

WACSSO recognises that the responsibility of breaking down traditional notions of masculinity that work to re-inforce negative stereotypes is not primarily the role of the classroom teacher, nor necessarily the education system as a whole. WACSSO believes that parents need to be educated on the benefits of providing alternative models of masculinity to boys, of encouraging reading and broader curriculum choice as well as promoting the values of cooperation, communication and acceptance to all children.

### **FUNDING OUR VISION FOR A QUALITY EDUCATION SYSTEM.**

It would be impossible to talk of the programs required within schools to address gender equity without commenting on the need for schools to be adequately financed to implement these initiatives.

WACSSO believes that the interests of the Australian nation, its diverse communities, and the educational needs of Australian children, are best served through the maintenance of a fully publicly funded education system. It is believed that such a system should be able to adequately address the problems that children experience as a result of their gender.

WACSSO believes that schools should be organised and resourced to ensure that the capacities of girls and boys are fully and equally realised.

Sufficient public funds should be made available from both the state and federal governments to ensure that access to the highest quality education system should not be reliant on a parents' individual capacity to pay. WACSSO calls upon the governments of Australia to increase expenditure on public education to ensure that all children are able to realise their full potential.

### **CONCLUSION**

WACSSO believes that the Inquiry should strive for a set of outcomes where gender based stereotypes are eliminated as a cause of disadvantage for boys and girls in schools and where every child can have access to the opportunities that enable them to achieve their full potential.

The problems facing boys in education are complex and the answers do not lie in simple strategies. Looking at the individual to identify and overcome barriers to them achieving their

---

<sup>10</sup> Beckett et al, 1995, p2

<sup>11</sup> NSW Inquiry into Boys' Education, 1994 p.25

full potential must be the approach taken to finding answers. WACSSO understands that this may require the provision of different programs for specific groups, at least for the time being.

WACSSO believes that programs specific to boys have very little chance of making substantive change unless they are included as part of a package that addresses gender equity on a holistic basis. The best way to ensure that the strategies to deal with the educational problems of boys do not become part of a 'backlash' against women is to actively involve women and girls in the establishment of these programs.

WACSSO is hopeful that positive social change can be achieved through addressing the problems facing boys and aiming towards solutions that will benefit all students within the school environment. To that end, WACSSO submits the following recommendations for the perusal of the Inquiry.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

It is recommended:

1. That the governments of Australia increase expenditure on public education to ensure that all children are able to realise their full potential
2. That programs designed to improve boys' educational outcomes should focus on achieving outcomes that will enable all individuals to:
  - become independent and self-directed learners;
  - develop fully their own talents, values and interests;
  - develop a sense of identity and respect for self, community and the environment;
  - meet challenges; and
  - participate in decision making at various levels.
3. That gender equity strategies be adopted that address needs at both primary and secondary levels and assist schools to develop strategies:
  - for teaching, learning and assessment suited to the different needs of girls and boys;
  - to break down stereotypes in male as well as female roles;
  - to address the separate areas of disadvantage particular to girls and boys.
4. That all governments adopt strategies to increase the literacy levels of boys, paying particular attention to strategies targeting indigenous students where literacy levels are well below the national average.
5. That gender equity initiatives for both girls and boys be encouraged by promoting research into the different needs of girls and boys in the education system.
6. That all states adopt 'Relationships' Education as part of the curriculum from the Early Childhood stage where the values of acceptance, communication and co-operation are promoted.
7. That the federal government provide financial support for parent groups to supplement the work undertaken within schools that widen the educational opportunities available to boys.
8. That current programs aimed at creating gender equity within schools and that address specific areas such as the involvement of girls in non-traditional subject areas and enhancing post-schooling careers should not stop as a result of focussing on issues surrounding the education of boys.





## REFERENCES.

Beckett L., Bode M., Crewe K. (1995), *Sex and Gender: what parents want*. ACSSO paper presented to the AARE Conference, Hobart,.

Commonwealth Office of the Status of Women, *Labour Market Analysis*, [www.dpmc.gov.au/osw/content/policy/labour/market\\_analysis.html](http://www.dpmc.gov.au/osw/content/policy/labour/market_analysis.html) accessed 3 June 2000.

Kenway, J. (1997). *Boys' Education, Masculinity and Gender Reform: some introductory remarks*, from "Curriculum Perspectives – invited papers on Boys' Education and Gender Reform" Counterpoint Forum.

Martino W. (1995), *Gendered learning Practices: Exploring the Costs of Hegemonic Masculinity for Girls and Boys in Schools*, in "Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools", ed. Gender Equity Taskforce MCEETYA, 1997.

Middleton, P. (1992). *The Inward Gaze: Masculinity and subjectivity in modern culture*, Routledge, London.

Moloney, J (1999). *We Don't Read Because We Want to be Men*, in 'Magpies' Volume 14 No 1.

NSW Government Inquiry in to Boys' Education (1994), *Challenges and Opportunities; A Discussion Paper*.

Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Workplace Relations, *Media Release: Inquiry into the education of boys*, 19 June 2000.