SUBMISSION TO THE PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEE INQUIRY INTO THE EDUCATION OF BOYS

Concerns

Strategic planning

National goals

Coordinated approaches

Impact on juvenile delinquency/crime

Improved outcomes

Built upon existing school environments

Introduction

The BIF (Boys In Focus) consultancy team are a small group of experienced educators from areas as diverse as Education, Police and Juvenile Justice. Since 1992 we have specifically worked on issues that relate to difficult or troubled boys in schools.

We are motivated by the immeasurable positive potential gained from the development of proactive strategies for dealing with developmental and social problems at an early age and in a coordinated way through the school system..

That many people now recognise that a significant number of boys are underachieving in our school systems is an important step. Unfortunately such an awareness is coming from a desperate grassroots movement of necessity. We adapt our systems or we face a frighteningly depressing future with many of our boys.

Many of those with an interest in boys development see different aspects of boys health/development in different base environments. Through your inquiry you will have the opportunity to see many commonalities in boys issues across these base groups. There is now a reasonable amount of research indicating a distinct problem with boys and their overall educational outcomes. The extent of the problem is further revealed through nationally consistent observations made by teachers facing the problem each day in classrooms and playgrounds across Australia. It has become a source of great concern to communities and schools.

There will be those who will highlight the many inadequacies in the way our society has offered boys options in a society that has reinvented itself and its multiplicity of roles throughout the 20th century. From this we can develop an analysis of what boys actually need in a developmental sense. However the process becomes much less clear from this point on. The next step involves the recognition and aggregation of those strategies or systems that actually work. This is the least understood and most under developed area of the whole debate. The responses we see from schools indicates it to be the area of most need.

Through working with boys who exhibit serious disengagement from education systems we have developed a specialisation in systems, programs and strategies that work with boys at risk of serious disengagement from school and society. We have recently completed work on a documentary on 'at risk' boys development issues. Our recommendation to schools advises the introduction of a range of strategies through a coordinated system set up within schools present structures. The school based platform has been run as a test case with years seven and eight over 2 years at a New South Wales high school. With minimal funding the school has been able to achieve excellent improvement rates in all areas of school engagement.

Disengaged boys in Education

For many boys there is a tendency to disengage from learning and in many cases they are actually reacting to a system that progressively minimises their self concept. For some learners it is a hostile environment. Schools have noticed that this problem is particularly severe amongst boys. Is this especially noticeable amongst boys because they have a propensity for problem externalisation? In other words, boys tend to externalise their problems (through conduct disorders and aggression) and this brings them into more direct conflict with the system - whether school or the wider society. With this in mind it is worth considering the steps we have taken over the years to ameliorate problems we have in educating boys.

We would suggest that there has been very little movement in this area of educational development. Yet at the same time our society has changed rapidly in its reinforcement of other less wholesome masculinities. We would suggest that our societies presently projected view (via modern media as the main culprit) of masculinity actually accentuates the very weaknesses boys exhibit in areas of behaviour and learning. Their exposure to the type of male images available through film, television, magazines and popular sport are not being compensated for by the role of real life male figures in their lives. As they get older they will gravitate towards those negative male mentors, peers and behaviours who are best able to duplicate the unrealistic images they associate with a strong male identity. Unfortunately for society these directions are quite destructive. We should take this as a warning about the way in which we have approached our education of boys.

For many boys this basic conflict will begin a cycle of destruction or flawed survival. Their attitudes to issues relating to women, violence, drug use, risk taking, sexuality and so on are learned from distorted media images or from those who are already lost to the negative cycle. We seem to have a system that has failed to adjust their learning difficulties to changing societal influences.

Many argue that such a cycle begins with literacy difficulties in the early years and as time goes by deficits and disadvantages will pile up faster with resulting negative consequences in later development. This process of cumulative disadvantage restricts future options in society that would provide opportunities for stable social growth.

In the confusion of their place in the world increasing numbers of boys are turning to suicide. Thousands more participate in dangerous risk taking activities that often offer similar consequences.
For those boys who will cling to survival by identifying with negative groups or subcultures that can offer them acceptance there is further cost to society. These subcultures can hold disastrous results for the wider community. Maladapted behaviour is reinforced in such environments. It returns power to the 'failure' by allowing them to reject those who they feel most rejected by. Unfortunately such groups will present them with a pattern of life that is destructive for themselves and others.

Many such negative behaviours will receive minimal proactive and integrated modification throughout the community life of each student. Over time, the ranks of

those boys disengaged from school will continue to develop into such destructive directions . Many of these boys will continue to exhibit such behaviours into adult life.

Boys, families and schools

The first and prime key for balance in a child's life comes from family. Schools will come in with a supporting role. Some schools can count themselves with parents as crucial partners in this need development process. However, what happens if students experience failure in one of these two important areas? An even worse scenario can barely be imagined if there is failure within both families and school experience. Such students can be found in their thousands.

The concern here is for the role of education with those boys most at risk of educational disinvestment.
It must be recognised as a core source of disadvantage and delinquency. There are many classic theories of delinquency causation. Many of them are connected to problems in school. The relationship between schooling and delinquency is intimate and long standing and should be taken into serious consideration when considering any education strategy.

If schools fail to provide the conditions for the nurturing of the three need requirements (learning needs, self esteem needs, community acceptance/ belonging needs) then we are ensuring that many students will cause conflict and sometimes feel intense hostility towards their school/society. Yet it is schools who are exceptionally well placed to achieve a substantial improvement for 'at risk' students.

If we turn our attention to the role of the school system in Education we can classify all boys into three basic groups.

1. There are those who are well connected to the mission of the school system.
2. There are those who show signs of alienation.
3. There are those who behave poorly and show signs of excessive anti social behaviour

Clearly all boys are not disadvantaged by the present system and these can be identified in group one. Unfortunately this group seems substantially static as those who could be described as belonging to the second and third group have grown in numbers and influence.

Unfortunately our most available tool in dealing with the third type of student usually involves exclusion from school. Clearly this does not assist in the development of the student. If consistently applied it is an admission of failure that will echo through society in the life of that student for decades to come. Unfortunately this approach ensures the reinforcement of failure in all three need areas. Ultimately this puts boys at most risk. From the earliest days of schooling those students who are most rewarded are those best able to independently sustain attention (both mentally and

physically). This puts at risk those who are less able to focus and sustain attention and those children who are more active. Both of these conditions are more typical of young boys. A study in Britain in 1996 found that only 7% of primary school pupils excluded from school were girls. The most common reasons cited for such exclusion were:

1. refusal to comply with school rules
2. verbal abuse of teacher
3. physical aggression to others
4. disruption and criminal offences such as theft and substance abuse.

Is this cycle a part of an inevitable evolution of learning? Is it the best we can do as an education system? Should we accept this cycle because our system has always been set up like that? It returns us to our societies automatic assumption that it is natural for men to occupy more than 90% of criminal incarcerations. Why should so much energy be diverted into a debate about gender equality in the upper end of the social scale? What about the graphic imbalance at the other end of the scale? I have rarely heard any level of debate about the glaring inequality that exists between genders on the end of the justice system. Perhaps it is time to reassess our approach. Would the conflict be less inevitable in a more flexible system? To do so is to ensure more carefully than ever that all students are given opportunities and skills that will reinforce their sense of value. It must be emphasised that the two juggernauts of school systems, sport and academic achievement, cannot offer social enhancement/success for all students in their present form. Society must offer a more specific filter to gather up those who may be missing out on vital developmental needs.

Gender Issues

It is perhaps time to mention the gender division that will inevitably be pushed into consideration. It is not an issue of gender politics. It is a consideration of the balance between the needs of girls and boys in their development. There are educational structures that need to be in place for girls just as much as we need educational structures for boys. However, most of our focus has been on girls development as we have been preoccupied with the gender imbalance in the upper end of the social achievement scale. It is an imbalance that has been well documented and may I suggest also well funded over many years. It is interesting that an unrivalled imbalance at the other end of the comparative gender scale barely draws a consideration. Our concern is that our society sees the delinquency rate amongst males as a normal and natural state of affairs. Why do boys suicide at a rate five times above what is 'normal' for girls? How is it that we so readily accept a sub culture of violence and alcohol abuse with boys and men as a part of their manliness. (The way we offer boys images of masculinity through unrealistic media images of 'heroes' in film and television.. This is acerbated by the absence of fathers and with many boys having no other male role model in their lives.)

Such lopsided statistics are endemic to males at the low end of the social construction. There are many more such statistics available in a whole range of areas. The real issue however, is our lack of action on such an imbalance. There is an awareness amongst those working with boys of a worsening problem. There is nothing on the horizon that seems to indicate that such endemic problems will right themselves naturally. All evidence is pointing towards a deepening crisis.

Schools are still the key in this unsatisfactory situation. Schools are equipped with the education specialists but they lack the strategic leadership required to coordinate an integrated approach. There is no definitive leadership or direction on these issues.

There are many people who can recognise the problem and cite reasons for its existence. But there are few who can offer any tangible means for encouraging substantial improvement. There is a proliferation of programs that address specific areas of concern (such as literacy) but whilst sometimes effective in their specifics they seem poorly endowed with an ability to reinforce the crumbling edifice. This is where systems of change are required. They coordinate all such initiatives and programs into a cohesive structure. Nine years of experimentation and two years of a testing a pilot system in a school has brought us a great deal of experience and one irrefutable result. ***Disengaged boys can be helped with a mix of strategies that occupy a platform within an average school.*** Our work has shown that there is a need for change in systemic approaches but this change need not be out of reach of the normal school structures we have available today. The platform is the key.

What can be done

Governments and schools need to be concerned with supporting a national strategy that recognises the three need requirements as a national goal. They are:
* Learning needs.
* Self esteem needs.
* Community acceptance/belonging needs.

For profound change with disengaged boys within the school there must be:

* Long term integrated strategies.
* Whole school coordination (platforms)
* Proactive methods.
* Strong group identities.
* Mentoring (including male teachers).
* Social learning.
* Real and unique sense of achievement.
* Appointed boy supervisors.
* Peer involvement.
* Literacy encouragement.
* Early identification and targeting.

These strategies offer within them the most formidable array of programs available. They may vary from place to place and in details adapted for community values but when used in a coordinated way they can become exceptionally powerful agents of improvement. At present most work with boys is disconnected and limited. There are limitations on the available resources and expertise. The 'wheel' is being reinvented time and again in isolation from any cohesive national strategy. Such a situation must be addressed by governments in a very serious way. It is within the power of governments to establish such approaches as a mainstream method rather than leave it to piecemeal application and the work of a few isolated teachers and schools. However, any government movement on this issue must involve schools as the critical factor.

Our research has shown that the most effective individual programs have come as forms of the following:

- leadership training
- positive group identity - to be seen as 'cool'
- peer mentoring
- role model mentoring
- motivational leading
- small team units
- daily responsibilities reinforcement
- issue workshops
- adventure sports/expeditions
- school admin/welfare changes that enable the school to offer systemic improvements for boys with difficulties.

BIF recommendations offer a platform that allows a system of multiple programs to target issues relating to a specific groups of boys. It is a platform that can equip itself with any number of new or changing programs. It operates as a web tying together various powerful influences into a single student oriented cohesive approach. It is highly adaptable to multicultural inputs as cultural background remains an important part of each students development. It is a system structured in a way that offers exceptional coordination for indigenous communities. Our concern has been to develop platforms that can offer proactive, coordinated and specifically targeted approaches within any normal school with a minimum of disruption and expense.

The intended outcomes from a school perspective should be to see:

1. Significant reduction in student discipline problems referred to the office.
2. Significant reduction in the number of student suspensions and expulsion.
3. Increased levels of positive reinforcement for students who are demonstrating appropriate behaviours and making pro social choices.
4. Increased levels of students academic engagement.
5. Increased levels of consistency across teachers and staff in class and throughout the school in dealing with students behaviour and behaviour problems.
6. A more positive and supportive school climate.

7. More cohesive approach between community development programs involving students at risk.

It is time to agitate for change in systems. It is not enough to leave change in the hands of the odd school or committed individual. Isolated programs need strategic coordination. With a focus on the strategic guidance governments can help schools achieve these goals.

Governments have a leading role to play in any important change. At present, there are poorly focused and lumbering multi departmental areas of responsibility. These include the various departments of Education, Police and Juvenile Justice. They all carry one off non integrated strategies that achieve limited and isolated successes at best without drawing on the inherent skills pertaining to each. Therein lies the tragedy of our poor economy of resources. So much more can be achieved through a coordinated approach.

A recommended starting point

1. The first step involves strategic planning. What resources are presently being consumed by the problem? What resources can be made available to address the problem proactively and in a. coordinated way? A detailed look at the present situation would be necessary.

2. Development of training systems that educate those exposed to boys in education.

3. Development of a greater range of learning systems/platforms in schools.

4. Supporting coordination between those in school and external communities with an interest in   outcomes.

5. Implementation and analysis of ongoing accountability systems.

Change begins with recognising the problems boys face. Boys education and boys health are inextricably linked at this level. Success with 'disengaged' boys requires a careful mix of approaches. It must be stressed however, that it is particularly important to coordinate all of these strategies for long term successful change to occur.

We look forward to assisting you further on these issues.

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John is part of a Boys In Focus consultancy team. The team includes specialisations with disengaged boys in areas of Education, Policing, Juvenile Justice and Mentoring. Its members have worked internationally on issues relating to at risk male youth. They have recently completed work on the production of a documentary dealing with at risk male issues. The team combines 40 years of experience in working with disengaged at risk boys.

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