

Tasmanian Department of Education submission to the:

*House of Representatives Standing Committee on
Employment, Education, and Workplace Relations Inquiry
into the Education of Boys*

1. Background

Over recent years controversy about boys and schooling has emerged as a significant national issue. Issues related to boys' education have been raised by education systems, schools and their communities, as well as having commanded much media attention, which has tended to place issues in the education of boys in opposition to and competition with issues in the education of girls.

Government schools in Tasmania continue to use the national and state documents - *Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools* (produced by MCEETYA), and *Gender Equity: Tasmanian Support Materials Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools 1997* (produced by the Tasmanian Department of Education) which outline a number of strategic directions to support schools and systems in their efforts to achieve equitable educational experiences and outcomes for boys and girls.

This submission will emphasise the need to recognise the importance of responding to the different needs of different groups of boys and girls and not necessarily devote limited resources just to one group.

In all schools it is vital that educators and parents alike work from an informed basis which:

- avoids making girls and boys competing victims;
- acknowledges that gender identities are constructed rather than fixed, and are therefore amenable to change;
- teaches boys and girls, through the valued curriculum, about the impact of gender on their lives, and promotes positive and respectful relationships; and
- responds to the different needs of different groups of girls and boys; and supports the school community to challenge those practices and structures which endorse narrow expressions of masculinity and femininity, and traditional gender roles.

2. Relevant documents and supporting materials

The Department of Education (DoE) addresses this issue through the documents, *Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools*, and *Gender Equity: Tasmanian Support Materials* which are available to schools in printed format and on the Department of Education's web site. (<http://www.doe.tas.edu.au/>)

These documents recommend against a separate education strategy for boys and girls, and instead propose that gender equity programs should focus on broadening and challenging the constructions of gender that limit either sex.

Both documents note that limited and stereotypical views of masculinity may affect boys' engagement with the subject of English and other tasks associated with literacy. Another printed resource entitled "No Quick Fix" (a Tasmanian developed resource) provides a whole school approach to issues of boys and literacy. Together these resources provide information on how the theory of gender as a construction influences teaching and how it can impact on the learning of both boys and girls.

The Department has also recently released a package of support materials for all teachers on the Anti-Discrimination/Anti-Harassment policy. This policy and associated support materials will provide a framework for teachers to examine gender relations, homophobia and other issues of discrimination. While these materials have been developed by the Department there is still a need for further research into the effects of harassment and discrimination on students learning outcomes.

3. Monitoring and Assessment

The Department, through the Tasmanian Secondary Assessment Board and the Office for Educational Review, undertakes significant testing and data collection regime and is therefore well placed to understand the impact of current programs both on boys and girls.

The Department believes that data which compares whole groups of students, without analysing differences within groups, has been inappropriately used to argue that boys are the "new disadvantaged". The use of dis-aggregated data indicates that a range of other factors (poverty, locality, Indigenous background, and cultural and language diversity) impact on literacy achievement in combination with gender. The Department considers it misleading to make judgments on the basis of a single set of data and views it as important to consider a range of data, which places all issues in broader contexts.

During the Assisted School Self-Review (ASSR) process undertaken by all Tasmanian schools, which involves schools in surveying and reviewing the scope of their operation, schools dis-aggregate data by gender, and use the information to inform their own school-based policies and practices. The ASSR process culminates in the signing of an agreement between the school and its local community to achieve specific outcomes. Partnership Agreements already completed demonstrate that many Tasmanian schools are addressing the issue of gender in their outcome targets.

The Department of Education has also undertaken a number of recent reviews into existing policies and programs (for example, early childhood education, inclusion, and Year 9/10 programs) and the results of these reviews are also being used to inform other projects that are addressing the educational outcomes of both boys and girls.

The Department believes that statistical analysis should also be informed by qualitative data, that demonstrates the ways different groups of boys develop their masculine identities, and the different outcomes from schooling achieved by different groups.

The types of data collected by the Department includes retention rates, pre-tertiary enrolment figures, suspension/expulsion and attendance data, and statewide literacy results. This data is all disaggregated for gender and is available on request.

4. Departmental Issues and resulting Initiatives

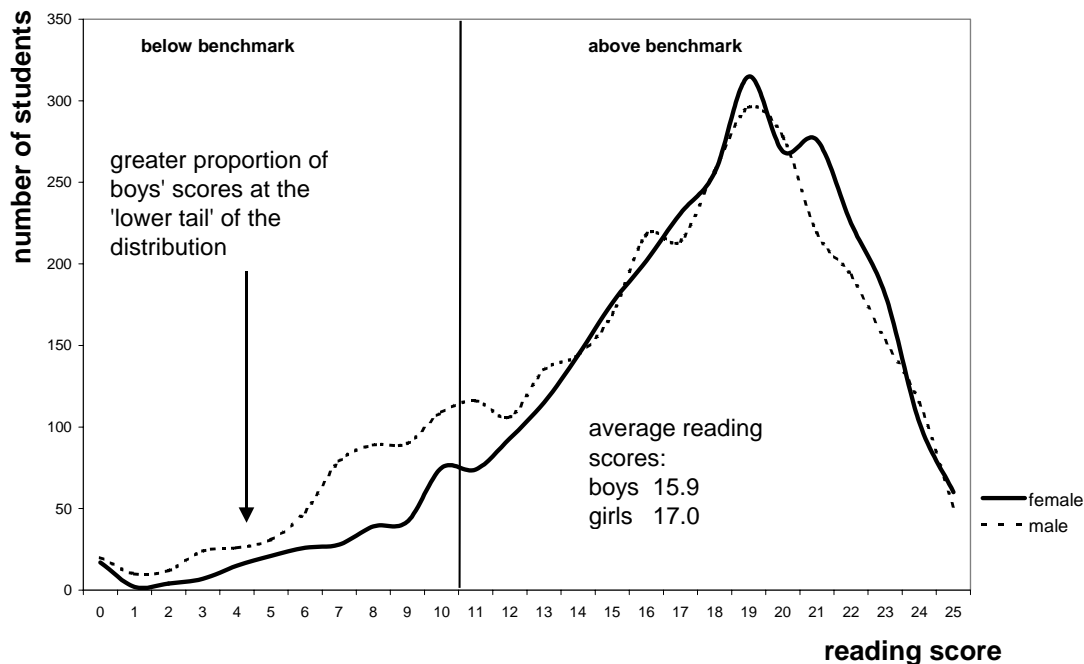
Initiatives and programs already operating in government schools in Tasmania can be classified into the following four broad categories.

4.1 Literacy/Numeracy

Schools and their communities are concerned about the issue of the performance of all students.

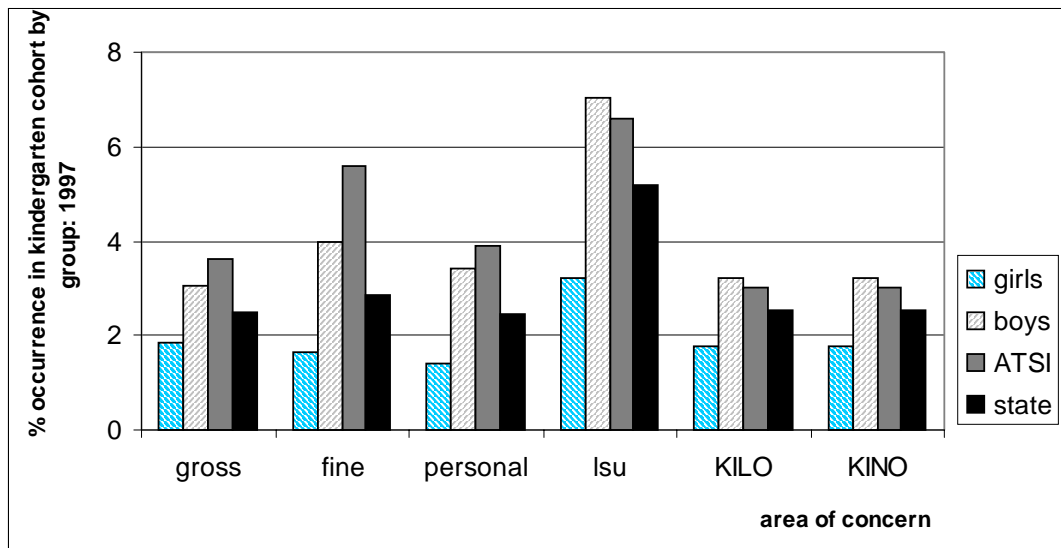
The following graph illustrates that while there has been improved outcomes for both boys and girls, there is still a gap between the general performance of girls and boys.

Distribution of Reading Scores, by Sex: Year 3, 1999 (DoE and Catholic Education Office students)



Differences between the performances of boys and girls occur as early as Kindergarten.

For instance data from the Department's Kindergarten Check Database in 1997 shows that the performances of proportionally more boys than girls were identified as being of concern in 1997 (see graph below). One area in which a large difference in the performances of boys and girls was noted was listening, speaking and understanding.



Note: gross = gross motor skills; fine = fine motor skills; personal = skills; lsu = listening, speaking and understanding; KILO = Key Intended Literacy Outcomes; KINO = Key Intended Numeracy Outcomes

The Department of Education has introduced several ongoing initiatives to address this problem.

- (a) The *Flying Start* program focuses on school experiences in literacy, numeracy and social skills for all Kindergarten, Preparatory, Year 1 and Year 2 children, and encompasses prior to school experiences, transition to school, and children's development from ages four to eight. *Flying Start* program was built on the outstanding achievements of the *Early Literacy Support Program*. The *Flying Start* program provides a continuum of learning, has a cross curricular focus and is inclusive of all students those who have not made significant progress as well as those capable of higher achievement will benefit from the program.
- (b) *COUNT ME IN TOO* is a numeracy focussed program for the early childhood area which was trialled in 21 Tasmanian primary schools in a similar manner to *Flying Start*. This program provides an addition 0.5FTE numeracy officer in each district and intensive professional development for early childhood teachers in numeracy.
- (c) The Program of Additional Structure and Support (PASS) operating within the *Flying Start* program has also made significant improvements to the literacy outcomes for students in the upper primary sector.
- (d) The Spalding method, which has been trialled in a number of Tasmanian schools, provides a focussed intervention program for literacy development. Some of the schools that were part of the trial have since incorporated the findings into further programs to provide additional support to students. Herdsmans Cove Primary School was one of those schools and has developed a national reputation for their work with students who require additional literacy and numeracy support.

However, despite considerable individual improvements in Tasmania, statewide literacy testing in Year 5, plus an evaluation of outcomes through the *Flying Start* program, has indicated that literacy outcomes for boys are still below those for girls.

4.2 Behaviour

Misbehaviour in terms of disruption, aggression, suspension, exclusion and peer relationships all have an impact on individual students' results and ultimately, their classroom peers. Schools have identified these issues together with alienation from, and negative attitudes to schooling, as significant factors in the lack of achievement in outcomes again for boys and for a lesser extent, girls. Negative attitudes to working and achieving, authority figures and structures, teachers (especially women teachers) and other students in terms of discrimination i.e. sexism, racism and homophobia all need to be addressed.

Introducing students to an understanding of the impact of gender on their lives and the need to promote positive and respectful relationships by responding to the different needs of different groups of girls and boys is critical. The Department believes there is a responsibility to provide training and support for teachers to help them to achieve these goals for all children, and the DoE is currently examining the issue and deciding how the provision of training can best be achieved.

4.2.1 Centrally Based/Across agency behaviour programs

All government schools are required to have a Supportive School Environment Policy. Such a policy addresses the safety, and personal and social development of students, including the management of misbehaviour within a coordinated whole school approach.

Behaviour of serious concern is a constant issue for schools and in the last ten years social and economic changes have impacted on schools' capacity to manage this issue. The Department has begun a project to provide an updated approach to the Supportive School Environment policy which re-focuses to target all students at risk and to provide support for students whose needs are not being met.

The Department's MARSSS (Managing and Retaining Secondary School Students) program helps schools to manage students (both girls and boys) whose behaviour is of serious concern and who need to be encouraged to stay at school because they are at risk of not completing their secondary education.

In Tasmania there are two single sex government schools – Ogilvie High School for girls and New Town High School for boys. These two schools provide an alternative for parents and students who wish to attend a single sex school for personal or educational reasons.

4.2.2 Individual School Programs

Individual schools and educational districts within Tasmania operate their own behaviour management programs. These programs include:

- Awareness raising workshops and targetted professional development;
- Peer counselling and supporting networks;
- Mentoring programs with incresed community involvement;
- Pro social skilling; and
- Leadership programs for students and teachers.

Other schools have a 'whole school focus' on encouraging boys to be more involved in their own education. Some schools offer single sex classes in particular subject

areas to encourage a particular gender of students to enrol in and remain enrolled in particular courses. For example, goal setting and communication skills classes have been set up for groups of girls who were at risk of not completing school. Guidance officers have been used to run group sessions on personal development and appropriate social communication skills. Schools are also incorporating activities that meet each of the multiple intelligences and varied learning skills to allow children to learn in their preferred learning style. Other schools have also adopted a “middle-school” approach to easing the transition from the primary sector to the secondary sector.

4.3 Post-school options

Tasmania’s retention rates have improved significantly over the last three years. For example, from 1997 to 1999 retention rates of government secondary students to Year 12 increased from 56.2% to 65.7% (above the national average in 1999 of 66.4%).

Notwithstanding this improvement, the general community is concerned that the educational sector continues to provide sufficient support and assistance to ensure that students are appropriately prepared for the change from school to employment and can cope with changes to the labour market. Due to Tasmania’s unique geographical dispersity, some students (both boys and girls) in rural and remote locations may be isolated from the range of post-compulsory options.

The issue of rurality impacts differently on boys and girls. This issue has been addressed in a number of ways including provision of State and Commonwealth funds for a number of programs and initiatives.

There is a lack of Years 11 and 12 options in some rural and remote communities meaning that students have to travel out of their community to attend classes. Tasmania is addressing this issue and does provide an educational service for Year 11 and 12 students through the College Open Learning Network. Approximately half the rural schools in Tasmania also offer Year 11 and 12 classes in some subject areas.

Regional Skill Centres for School Students is an initiative that funds the establishment of enterprise and industry based skill centres through the Australian National Training Authority Infrastructure Program, to support VET in schools. Tasmania has two at present - the first is the North East Education and Training Centre (St Helens, St Marys and Winnaleah schools) and the other is at the Tasman District High School, with more under discussion. The three schools in the the North East Education and Training Centre have developed a cooperative approach to the delivery of VET programs to students who choose to remain in their region to continue their post-compulsory education.

The appointment of 3 Regional Development Officers to work with district high schools (K-12) and rural high schools (7-12) is also perceived as a very positive move. Their main focus has been to help schools which did not previously offer Year 11 and 12 programs develop viable programs with a VET focus.

However, school retention rates for students in rural and remote areas are lower, on average, than for their urban counterparts. The inadequacies of the distance education mode for some students and, in particular for students with special needs and for Indigenous students is recognised, and needs to be addressed.

The Office of Vocational Education and Training (OVET) has also been developing a concept proposal for virtual Skills Centres for Industry and School Students

(SCISS). This proposal is to introduce a diverse range of VET opportunities for school students and their local communities.

4.4 Curriculum Issues

The Tasmanian Secondary Assessment Board which is the assessment accreditation authority in Tasmania reports that subject enrolment data for Year 11 and 12 indicate a gender bias in English and Biology, with girls significantly over-enrolling compared with boys. By comparison, boys are over-enrolled in computing and, to a lesser extent, the physical sciences. Year 10 English enrolments show a marked gender imbalance, with more boys taking lower level courses and more girls taking higher level courses.

The Department of Education has recently initiated a major review of Tasmanian curriculum. The Curriculum Consultation, a major investigation into curriculum content and relevance in Tasmanian schools, aims to 'check and ensure curriculum policy matches the current and future needs' of Tasmanian students, and to 'affirm the purposes of the education' being provided. The Consultation aims to determine what students should know, understand, value and be able to do as a result of the education they receive as it is accepted that lack of engagement is a critical issue in the achievement of outcomes for both boys and girls.

Most schools, as part of the general management of students and educational programs, address concepts which identify the needs of adolescents, place a focus on increasing teaching strategies, promote interpersonal skills and raise the importance of community involvement.

There is community concern that students who are not provided with appropriate social support by the school system are more inclined to develop risk-taking behaviours (which can lead to criminal activity and detention), poor health outcomes and higher death rates (including suicide).

While this State Government is committed to developing and maintaining programs that support the educational outcomes of all students (school and post-compulsory) there is still a strong need for broad based research into the relationships between the issue of gender in combination with rural and remote, indigenous, and socio-economic factors.

5. Conclusion

Notwithstanding the initiatives already underway within government schools in Tasmania there is an on-going need for the State and Commonwealth Governments to look at more pro-active ways of ensuring all students achieve their necessary outcomes. The issues which have been identified by the Department of Education as requiring additional attention, and ultimately more resources are ongoing issues that affect both boys and girls but need immediate and effective solutions to be put into place.

The strategic directions outlined in the MCEETYA Gender Equity Framework provide a solid basis for Tasmania to respond to the different needs of both boys and girls. However, the Department believes there must be further exploration and research to ensure all students, regardless of gender and social status, receive equal educational opportunities.

The Committee Secretary
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Education, and Workplace Relations
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Inquiry into the Education of Boys

Please find enclosed a submission from the Tasmanian Department of Education to the above Inquiry.

As requested, an electronic version of the submission will be forwarded to the Committee Secretariat.

Yours sincerely

Dr Martyn Forrest
Secretary

Date:

Encl.