

# NEW TOWN HIGH SCHOOL

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## Submission to the Senate Inquiry on Boys' Education

### Principal and Staff, New Town High School

#### Philosophy:

Boys are not a homogeneous group. They have different learning styles, personalities, needs and educational outcomes, as do all members of society. The catch cry that all boys are failing needs to be refuted. The examinations of all factors in educational underachievement need to be identified to address the problems. The role of poverty, curriculum offerings, alternative programs, professional development of teachers, appropriate resources and links between the world of work and education all need to be addressed.

#### Context:

New Town High is the only government boys' high school in Tasmania. It has 750 students drawn largely from the middle and working class suburbs of central and northern Hobart. It has grown rapidly over the past three years from approximately 500 students to its current size. The intake for 2001 has been capped at 200. This is inline with the Partnership Agreement established with the parent community in 1999. As a result there is a waiting list of approximately 40 students for places in year 7 in 2001.

The School has a 75 year history. The present site was opened in 1949 as a technical high school, with the aim of training students to take up apprenticeships. The nature of schooling and the context within which it takes place has changed dramatically over the past half-century. In 2000 New Town High School more closely reflects the emerging research on the needs of boys. As such the programs developed and the blend of offerings do in fact meet the needs of boys very well. In addition the educational outcomes provide sufficient evidence to philosophically and educationally justify single sex education as a viable alternative for the education of boys.

Despite the evidence that the School was intuitively meeting the needs of boys, some significant gaps are found when a coherent philosophy for the education of boys is articulated. These include aspects of the curriculum offerings, the organisational structure and alternative programs for students severely at risk.

#### The Needs of Boys:

Six major themes in the education of boys emerge as needs. They are not distinct and discrete but rather are linked and interdependent. Also these needs are not the exclusive domain of boys. The themes are:

- *a notion of masculinity which is empowering*
- *an understanding of how gender is constructed*
- *educational experiences which are stimulating and challenging, yet which value all learners and learning areas*
- *positive senior and peer role models*
- *the capacity to balance all areas of life*
- *a respect for physical and mental well being*

**A notion of masculinity which is empowering** is achieved through a positive environment where leadership, success, acceptance of praise, acceptance of authority and respect for tradition are permissible within the peer culture. This is achieved at New Town High School through providing opportunities for leadership by having a Prefect Board, Peer Support Leaders, camps, monitors, cross age tutors, Sports Captains and Anti Harassment Forums. The latter is an example of the use of "cool" students to modify student culture.

New Town High School recognises all forms of success including improvement, excellence and consistency, done through ONYA awards, sporting, academic and cultural certificates, assemblies and recognition through newsletters and presentation nights.

The behaviour management plans for both the classroom and beyond the classroom are explicit and the nature of authority within the school is fair, humanitarian and constructive rather than punitive. It aims to teach boys the consequences of their actions. The anti harassment policy provides a reasonable grievance procedure for staff and students.

Boys are taught to value empathy, sharing, nurturing and a sense of community as well as the traditional values of strength, loyalty, leadership and the ability to operate independently. This is done through service programs like Aussie Sports for Primary Students, Peer Support, Health Interactions and caring for the environment through Landcare as well as through the classroom focusing upon getting boys to write, think and talk about broader senses of masculinity through the choices of novels and poetry in English and the sense of community in SOSE.

New Town High School sponsors wholesome values particularly those relating to respect for person and property. This is done through a discipline policy which stresses consequences - ie making boys responsible for their actions, recognising student behaviours which demonstrate wholesome values and a policy of 'you damage, you pay'. Students are sanctioned for failing to report thefts, acts of violence, racism, sexism, harassment and damage to property. These all teach responsibility to community.

At new Town High School we believe each boy needs some responsibility of some kind. Competition is a necessary personal and social element that should be encouraged where appropriate, but boys must learn not to rely solely on any single aspect of success for their self worth. Competition is an essential element of survival in society and is a highly motivating factor in education. However there are ways of avoiding the negative aspects of competition, notably by reducing peer referenced success and substituting personal standards. At New Town High School this is promoted through students competing against their personal best in sport and having winners as people who improve and develop. Coaches and teachers encourage boys to measure realistic goals as a measure of success.

It is psychologically dangerous for boys to only have one area of success in their lives. To respond to this our school is always endeavouring to broaden the curriculum, have a timetable that doesn't preclude males from non-traditional areas and to counsel boys into a range of optional subjects that ensure that more than a boy's favoured area or intended vocation is covered. An expanded sense of masculinity values social and emotional aspects of a boy's life. To achieve this, cooperative and social skill programs are developed and all boys experience the humanities areas. Finally boys need conflict resolution skills. Violence is explicitly rejected at New Town High School. Conflict resolution is directly taught in Speech and Drama, English, Home Group, SOSE, Health and Physical Recreation. There is no place in our school for boys *will be boys, let them sort it out (violently) themselves, it was either he or I!* Boys must learn to be accountable for their actions. This is done through the school discipline plan and school policies having strong elements of accountability built into them. Also boys must learn to use their sexuality in a positive and appropriate way. Boys are explicitly taught and sanctions reinforce that the negative and inappropriate use of sexuality will not be tolerated. This is done through having sexual harassment procedures in place and through providing social opportunities for boys and girls to meet and mix in situations where peer pressure for sexual performance is minimised.

**An understanding of the construction of gender** is crucial in meeting the needs of boys. Boys must understand the changing roles of females if they are to develop harmonious male-female relationships. Role models provide an important element of developing this. The staffing policy at New Town High school provides a balance of males and females in learning areas. Boys also require opportunities to work with women and girls in platonic and power neutral situations. To achieve this women are in positions of power. The grade supervisors' roles include both a male and female. Females run assemblies and chair significant committees. A significant issue is understanding how the media, family, school and other societal forces construct gender. This is tackled through the curriculum. Boys must also see males and females working cooperatively together. This is provided through a culture of teamwork amongst staff. Finally the School takes a positive attitude towards boys learning to accept authority and power when exercised by women.

**Educational experiences which are stimulating and challenging, yet which value all learners and learning areas** requires a broad curriculum covering a range of learning areas. In particular there should be an increase in the participation rates of boys in subjects involving care of self and others. New Town High School has done this through Food Technology and Health and through raising the profile of non-technology subjects. An education system that ranks students results in alienation and marginalisation. To address this the School has looked at special education assistance, gifted and talented programs, equity programs, greater recognition of individual needs and work placements. New Town High School also aims to harness the energy and vigour of boys and provide learning situations that take this into account. This is approached through cooperative learning, negotiated learning, problem solving and group work. To actively provide stimulating and challenging experiences for boys NTHS aims to provide a variety of learning styles. The making and doing is approached through model making, field trips, excursions and surveying. However to fully exploit the variety of learning styles needed, professional development needs to be an on-going concern for our School. Finally our School aims to employ methods of ensuring that students are being extended to their limits, by providing extension and expansion opportunities. The intensive nature of specialist camps such as Writers Workshop, Music Camp and Adventure Camps are ways of motivating students at NTHS.

**New Town High School aims to provide senior and peer role models.** New Town High School promotes the use amongst staff of effective conflict resolution skills and the ethical use of power. Opportunities are also offered for boys to learn and demonstrate nurturing and caring as well as be given opportunities to control the school culture. New Town High School very effectively teaches boys to respect tradition and elders. The age and background of the School provides an excellent backdrop for this. The concepts of respect and tradition give the boys a sense of belonging. NTHS allows for boys to learn accountability and see it in action around them in both the actions of staff and fellow students as well as with themselves. Harnessing a loyalty to sub cultures in a positive way is based around an effective house system.

**The capacity to balance all areas of life** can be well illustrated at our school. At New Town High School the formal measures of success such as the house system draws points from a variety of measures, such as sport, the arts and academic behaviour. Our School does not avoid narrow measures of success such as celebrating a hockey victory, but it takes great care to ensure the great range of success is celebrated. In addition subject counselling should insist on boys including some non-technology courses within their study program. Finally it is crucial that the school culture is one where all are involved to the best of their ability.

**A respect for the physical and mental well being** emanates from an expanded sense of masculinity, which leads to both personal and communal physical, and emotional fulfilment based on wholesome values. Teachers take seriously approaches by boys to discuss personal problems. The role of the guidance counsellor is pivotal in providing programs for anger management, conflict resolution skills and anti-harassment procedures. This is further supported within the curriculum particularly in Health and Speech and Drama. To minimise the effect of risk taking behaviour the School has in place appropriate policies to dissuade students from such behaviours. This is channeled into sports programs which can provide extreme or adrenalin activities within a controlled environment.

**Conclusion:** New Town High School has identified and responded to these issues. However there are still aspects of these themes that need addressing. A review of the progress the School has made is now required. Also the embracing of new themes as the school enters the new millennium is required. The consideration of values, civics, new technologies, critical literacy and vocational education within a changing work environment pose significant challenges for the education of boys at the secondary level. The health of our society depends upon it. To this end the following recommendations are made.

**Recommendations:**

To meet the educational outcomes of boys and address the needs of boys within the educational context several important steps need to be made.

- *resources must be targeted to programs with outcomes that meet the specific needs of boys as outlined by school based research*
- *a network of best practice models needs to be established throughout Australia*

- *extra resources need to be made available to schools to improve educational environments for boys*
- *an expanded curriculum at the adolescent stage needs to be introduced, This curriculum needs to have a focus upon combining technology with the caring and creative syllabus areas. For example the expansion of Food Technology, Clothing Design, Multi-media courses and Drama through video production offerings. This requires the provision of teachers (teacher training) as well as physical resources.*
- *the expansion of vocational twining into the lower secondary years. The link between the world of work and education is far too tenuous*
- *the provision of alternative educational programs and settings. Mainstream schools are not the answer to all problems that face education Imaginative alternatives that lead to young people being valued members of society are desperately needed*
- *the development of literacy and numeracy programs that engage boys, 77ke use of technology, the recognition of different learning styles and the provision of testing materials that recognise and value alternative learning styles need to be developed*
- *the provision of across the curriculum programs in literacy, numeracy and health.*