

**Submission to the Standing Committee for  
Employment, Education and Workplace Relations**

**“The Education Of Boys”**

**- A South Australian Perspective -**

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## **Introduction**

This report on the education of boys, is based on my research and experience with boys on a daily basis and on discussions with colleagues who work with boys in the early and middle schooling years.

The problems in the education of boys are complex and are intricately woven through everything that young boys are exposed to in their lives. There are no easy solutions to these problems and I have seen several short-lived programs for boys which only scratch the surface when it comes to addressing the problems for boys in a continuous and effective manner.

## **Background of the author**

My name is Roger Button. I am a 40 year old teacher and I am married with a son, aged twelve, and a daughter aged ten. I have been a teacher in both area (R - 12 ) schools and secondary (8-12) schools in S.A. for the past 13 years. I am also a coach and coordinator of a local, primary school basketball club for the last 6 years. I have worked predominately with boys in both Adelaide and S.A. country schools, teaching Technical studies and, also, more recently, managing year 8 students. I have taught in a remote school, in a small country / farming community, in a central urban school, and currently in a lower socio-economic area in Adelaide's northern suburbs. The background of students in these schools has, naturally, been quite varied, but a clear and consistent pattern is obvious amongst the boys from all of these environments, as I will outline in the pages which follow.

In recent years, my interest in boys education has led me to become involved in the formation of the S.A. Boys in Education Network originating from Norwood-Morialta High School in Adelaide. This group sought expert advice and did their own research as well as sharing ideas and strategies relating to boys education. Conference presentations by boys education experts such as Dr. Rex Stoessinger and Richard Fletcher and reading the literature of Stephen Biddulph and attending the well established "Boys Talk" workshops by Brook Friedman, have all enabled me to see the widespread problems associated with boys education and many of the possible solutions. I have also become involved in S.A.'s "Operation Flinders", a week long outdoor program for youth at risk, organised by the S.A. Police Dept. and The Australian Army, which has included training sessions from a police department psychologist on the psyche of students at risk, especially boys. I am currently a year 8, year level manager at Craigmore High School, dealing with the discipline / counseling of 12 - 13 year old students (approx. 250 students). (Boys constitute over 90% of my referrals.) I feel that with my background and current knowledge of boys issues that I am well qualified to make a submission of this type to be considered by your committee.

## Outline of current strategies currently being implemented in some S.A. High schools.

The following programs exist in many schools in S.A.:

**Negotiated Curriculum packages-** students are classified as NCP'S, and generally speaking, the academic expectations placed on them are less rigorous. Does little to improve literacy or social skills of boys, but simply accepts a student's slower development and attempts to make assessment allowances for these students while remaining in mainstream, mixed ability classes.

**L.A.P. Programs-** usually parent or school support staff volunteers work with individuals or small groups in a certain area of need for the student(s). This is often no more than 1 hour per week.

**Literacy Support** - involves small group work with a teacher parent volunteer or special Education teacher.

**Boys Talk Program** - small groups of boys work on a range of activities aimed at encouraging them to speak their feelings, views on a topic and to discuss notions of how to be a successful male.

**Students at risk programs** - aimed at targeting students at risk of failing, leaving school early, breaking the law, becoming involved in drugs etc.. These vary from school to school and depend largely on school resources and teacher expertise.

**Operation Flinders** - a 1 week, outdoor adventure program dealing with youth at risk. This is conducted 4 times each year and the waiting list of schools wishing to send their students at risk has increased in recent years. The high demand for this type of corrective program is indicative of the deficiencies that many boys (and girls) have had in their family upbringing and education.

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As students are removed from their usual class, this can reinforce the notion of their learning deficiency, especially in the eyes of their peers. It also causes the child's self esteem / identity to be altered as they are old enough to realise that they have been classified as different to other students and the consequent drop in self esteem can often be more damaging for some individuals than letting them struggle in mainstream classes.

**It should be pointed out that the above programs are merely "add-on" programs not a compulsory part of a school's curriculum and rely totally on the resources of the school and the enthusiasm and expertise of individual teachers in schools. These programs also remove selected students from their usual classes, rather than dealing with issues that affect all boys. It is likely that many schools have no special programs whatsoever, for their boys.**

## **Boys Needs in Regards to Socialisation and Literacy Skills.**

As learning is a cooperative process it is of little value to a boy to be put into a program where his attitude to learning is going to be a barrier to any progress, therefore boy's attitudes should be the major focus of any programs for boys. The development of an appropriate attitude starts at a very early age at home and then in junior primary school. From my experience as a year 8 level coordinator/counselor, boys develop an attitude from the ages of approx. kindergarten age through until about age 8-14.

*A number of factors will mould these attitudes along the way:*

1. Has the boy had a father who is a positive male role model during these years? ( A powerful influence when young.)
2. Have the parents split up, leaving a young boy to be taught how to be a young man by a woman, his mother?
3. Has the boy had appropriate male teachers in junior/ primary school who teach/model literacy skills, oral communication skills and other life skills and attitudes needed by young men?
4. Do the mother and father re-enforce the importance of education to their son and the importance of following the teacher's instructions at school?
5. Does the boy live in a family situation where his mother and father have a stable, loving relationship based on mutual respect?

When investigating the background of boys referred to me for disciplinary reasons, I have found that the vast majority come from single parent homes. Of these single parent homes, almost always it is the mother who is raising the son single-handedly. Children who do not live with their biological father constitute almost 50% of students in my current school. We are approaching a time when children from a "normal" family with both parents at home are actually going to be a minority group in many schools. It is obvious to me, and teachers I work with, that boys are much more profoundly affected by their parents splitting up than are girls, as it is usually the boy who no longer has a role model to teach him how to be a young man. Boys are also much less likely / able to communicate their feelings about their missing father. These boys will unknowingly change their behaviour in order to seek out the attention of males in a desperate plea for guidance. Usually it is the male teacher they choose for this purpose. I have witnessed this personally from the same type of boys with the same background for over a decade. The same affect is also evident from boys whose fathers have little input in their upbringing. ie the "workaholic" father, "the interstate truckie", "the shift worker", "the general manager" or the chauvinistic father who considers child rearing to be the mother's role. It seems that indeed the very culture of the Australian male is to be effectively separated from your children and have no real input with their upbringing. Many, much older cultures have their boys spend substantial amounts of time with their

fathers in order to learn how to make the transition into adulthood. It is clear to many teachers that I work with that some sort of community education program is needed to stress the importance of a father's influence in raising their children, (not just their boys.) Many astute mothers who have researched boys issues and have come to identify aspects missing in their son's upbringing, have told me that they are constantly trying to arrange appropriate male role models for their sons. Some do this through sport, seeking a strong (discipline-wise) male coach for their son. Others, through such things as Army Cadets or some other activity which is organised and supervised by an adult male and will teach their son the concepts of (self) discipline that they are missing due to an absent father.

**It would seem that it is simply a matter of male discipline in a firm, consistent and non aggressive manner which is the key to changing the attitudes of boys about the importance of a good education and sound literacy skills.**

Boys who do not have their attitudes changed when they are young will grow up with their inappropriate, anti-social attitudes and teach them to their own children, thus perpetuating this stereotype male throughout subsequent generations. I see evidence of this, as do all teachers when making contact with parents of students. It is clear that children adopt the attitudes and aspirations of their parents and in many cases will mimic the sentiments of their parents. A young boy without a father will search for an appropriate role model, often settling for the school yard peer leader, (often a bully) or the movie or sporting hero.

**Obviously there needs to be drastic changes to the content of schooling for these students. (The larger social issue of the absent father seems beyond the scope and beyond the power of schools.) Or is it.....?**

### **Teaching Morals and Values in Schools.**

The increase in the number of parents seeking private schooling for their children, often quote the teaching of morals and values as a reason for choosing private schools over the public school system. If **all** boys (and girls) were to be given lessons on **morals, values** and **personal relationships** in a non-religious manner, then perhaps family relations could be improved and in the generations to come we could gradually see a decrease in the number of broken families.

Whether or not a young boy will grow up to be a happy and content man will depend largely on whether or not he is able to have a successful relationship with a young woman. By current community attitudes you would be assessed as being successful if you were married, employed and have children. Not only is this the dominant community attitude, but the very continuation of society as we know it, relies on children being born and raised in balanced and loving families.

## **A Shift in Power and Status for Education Professionals**

Another major issue in schools since the early 1980's is the change in status and power / control for education professionals. Most teachers and, indeed parents I have spoken to regarding the attitudes and behaviour of school children all indicate a sense of frustration at the lack of power and control that teachers are able to exert over their students. This is much more overt in classrooms when dealing with boys. Female teachers who must exert control over young males from the age of 10 and over have an infinitely more difficult task, especially when dealing with boys from single parent families.

A growing number of young children from the age of 10 and over spend every weekday afternoon from approximately 3.00pm until 5.30 - 6.00pm unsupervised. For many boys this is a time when they will wander local neighbourhoods and become a noticeable problem for many communities. The implications for police and the legal system are obvious as it is in the school years that youth learn that they are able to break the law largely undetected and that teachers and schools are currently powerless to respond.

Many high schools in Sth. Australia and other states have student populations exceeding the population of most country towns, yet the power that a school can exert is far less than the legal system in a community. When teachers and schools are seen to wield the same power as the police then we will have control of young males in schools and only then is the creation of an effective teaching environment a possibility.

The current problems of youth crime are closely linked with boys attitudes and the general lack of male discipline they are receiving in our society. Perhaps a shift in power for teachers will also start to prevent much of the problems of youth crime in our communities. It is the Education Act that states that while teachers are in charge of students, they must act in place of the parent - "in loco parentis", yet it is often the parent who seeks to over-rule the authority of the teacher in a school situation, when dealing with discipline matters.

Another strong indicator of status and respect for education professionals in a community is by how they are remunerated. This is not only a situation detected by school children but also an attitude reflected by many parents in schools in which I have worked. Many parents see teachers as state govt. public servants who work for them and must justify their actions to them. Governments in Western societies such as England, U.S.A. and Australia would do well to foster the community attitudes seen in European and Eastern countries, where educators are highly respected members of their communities.

In Australian society the media has had a profound effect on the status of teachers, doctors, clergy men and other community leaders - the "tall poppy syndrome" at work. The legislative process is also judging in favour of children more than any other time in history. It is often that some children will say that they are going to "sue" teachers or schools or even their own parents! They live with the perception that they have more rights and power than the adults who are in charge of them. This is a perception that is reported and perpetuated by the media. In a recent Sth. Australian newspaper it was reported that the teaching staff of Columbine High (U.S.A.) may be prosecuted for allowing the subculture of violence to exist in their school, thus allowing the student deaths to occur!

## Summary - Possible Solutions

### What Governments/Education Departments Can Do:

#### Policy Changes

\* Vigorously recruit males into teaching. Legislate for special positions for suitable male junior primary teachers. Applicants for these positions would need to fit the necessary criteria. As such persons are rare, financial incentives would probably be needed to attract quality applicants. This would be a type of affirmative action legislation for male teachers, but not for career reasons, but with the interests of boys at heart.

\* A change in Education guidelines and legislation, delegating more power and consequently, respect for education professionals.

- Offer financial incentives to attract quality people to the teaching profession.
- Screen all applicants for teaching degrees more vigorously. Expect character

references from community leaders such as ministers, councilors, JP's etc to prove that applicants are of a suitable character to be a teacher. (Being a good teacher is more about being of a suitable character rather than having high academic achievements.)

#### Curriculum Changes

\* A compulsory separation of boys and girls for a "boys program" which would teach:

- \* Values and morals in a non-religious manner.
- \* Reinforce written and oral literacy skills.
- \* Male - female relationships.
- \* Families and the role of the father & mother.

\* Redesign antiquated curriculums to be more physical, energetic, concrete and challenging. Create a compulsory practical component in all subject areas which will teach students to apply knowledge and skills, not just to remember facts. This will better suit boys learning styles and create a more relevant curriculum in their eyes. This will be appreciated by both boys and girls.

\* Build good personal relationships with boys, through smaller groupings and less teacher changes in schools.

#### Community Education Programs

\* Develop a national community education program which can develop an awareness of the importance of a father / positive male role model for children.



## **What Schools and Teachers can do.**

- \* Boys Leadership programs to be a part of all school curriculums. Appropriate senior boys would act as role models for junior students.
- \* Organise Father and son type activities in schools. (harder to organise with the current expectations placed on men in the work force)
- \* Target boys weak areas, especially literacy at a young age and conduct boy-specific intensive language programs. Continue to separate boys for these programs in high school.
- \* Get fathers more involved in their son's schooling. Report academic progress and discipline matters of boys to their fathers whenever possible.
- \* The formation of school - based youth groups such as cadets, sporting competitions and other community activities for young men.

Many of these suggestions must be integrated into the objectives of compulsory curriculum areas so that all teachers are obliged to be trained and teach these new areas to all boys.

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I hope that these suggestions are of some help in your inquiry into boys education. It is clear to many education employees working in schools, the needs of boys, when many boys are suffering from a childhood which is missing the necessary influence of a loving father.