

**A Submission to the :**

**Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Workplace  
Relations Inquiry Into The Education of Boys**

**“Canaries in the Mine -  
Boys and Education in Victoria”  
11 July 2000**

**Report Provider**

Andrew S Humphreys B.Soc.Sci. B.S.W. Dip. Ed.

Address 34 Leithead St. East Brunswick Melbourne 3057

**Relevant professional experience**

- 1999-present Consultant youth counsellor Victorian Department of Human Services : Southern Region Educational Support Unit. This consultancy involves service provision to young people who have been aggressive to or unwilling to engage with other therapists
- 1998-present Consultant Suicide Prevention Counsellor : Here for Life Inc,
- 1996-present Private Practice specialising in the psycho-social difficulties of young men
- 1995-98 Youth Crisis Counsellor Chelsea Community Information and Support Service
- 1992 VSTA Teacher Representative on the Advanced Skills Teacher Promotion Panel
- 1989-92 VCE Implementation Committee member ( Australian Studies & Environmental Studies)
- 1988-91 Geography Dept. Head Teacher.
- 1987-95 Supervisor of high risk young offenders ( Youth Attendance Order Program) Victorian Department of Juvenile Justice
- 1986 Victorian Secondary Teachers Association Branch President, Donald H.S.
- 1985-94 State Secondary teacher: Donald H.S. & Frankston H.S.

## **Academic Research**

I am currently completing a Master's Degree (research) in Social work at La Trobe University. This research concerns the educational causation for the dramatically altered rate and distribution of suicide among young men in Victoria 1990-97.

## **SUBMISSION**

### **Foreword**

The federal government is to be commended for creating a forum to discuss the disastrous decline in the educational well-being of young Australian men. This process is long overdue. Tragically, the problems produced by the conscious educational discrimination which Australian boys experience are now so entrenched that massive detrimental social change has already occurred. The long term impact of increased educational disadvantage for boys is shown in Birrell and Rapson's report *A Not So Perfect Match*. This report shows conclusively that the declining earning potential of young working class men has disastrously reduced the number of low income women able to remain in long term relationships with the fathers of their children.

In this submission I shall primarily be referring to and drawing examples from Victoria for two reasons. Firstly, the situation existing in Victoria regarding boys education now represents both a national and international worst case scenario and thus provides concrete examples of the issues the Federal Government must address. Secondly, I have been involved intimately in all the relevant educational reforms since 1985 and have observed their social consequences at first hand.

### **Introduction**

In regards to the Terms of Reference, the Inquiry should be made aware that the deterioration of literacy standards amongst young men in Victoria is directly linked to educational policies which villify boys, inappropriate teaching methods and poor quality staff in Victorian primary schools. The lack of rigorous state supported follow up to the LAP testing process has negated the effectiveness of this program. Teacher union opposition to greater teacher accountability should be seen as politically motivated and destructive.

The impact that low literacy levels have upon young men was demonstrated to me often during the eight years I worked with high risk young offenders (1987-95). During this time I personally supervised 27 young males on Youth Attendance Orders. Twenty five of these young men had massive gaps in literacy skills yet all had completed at least eight years of state education. Low literacy levels combined with educational alienation, in particular for low income young men, were the most important and most easily treated precipitants for their very serious offending behaviour.

As a state secondary school teacher I observed that at least two boys in every class I taught had massive deficits in literacy for which I was never able to access remedial education. These boys were often in trouble at school, many were labelled as hyper-active or deviant. All had impaired self-esteem. Many became involved in criminal

behaviour and drug abuse. These young men go on to be at greatly increased risk of suicide.

Literacy levels amongst boys were lowered by the adoption of teaching methods such as the whole language method, reviews of which openly acknowledged that use of this strategy would mean a certain percentage of boys would fail to learn to read. This problem was compounded by the declining representation of high quality male primary teachers. This decline of non home-based male role models was most damaging for working class boys. Declining numbers of high quality male primary teachers also meant that school staff who could positively and sympathetically address challenging young male behaviour became increasingly rare at a time when young men had never faced greater challenges.

There are no effective school based programs which address the declining educational achievements of Victorian boys in the Victorian state primary and secondary school system. Unfortunately, the present State government is pleased to see the continuation of educational processes designed by their political forebears in the 1980's. These reforms were designed to enable young women to dominate university entry in Victoria as well as post-graduate studies.

I have found this year that amongst post-graduate students at La Trobe University women comprise 74% of the student body and yet my fees and Federal Government funds are used to employ a Women's Officer whose role is to further increase the representation of women in post-graduate studies. This approach reflects the strong radical feminist control of both the present State Cabinet and of health and education policy in Victoria since 1981. Feminist writers acknowledge the exceptional influence they have had on all tiers of government;

Possibly more than in any other developed country, Australian feminists have developed working relationships with politicians, parties and bureaucrats...

Caine, B et al (eds) *Australian Feminism - a companion*, OUP 1998, p.303

The declining educational achievement rates of boys in Victoria were precipitated by a series of educational reports and reform agendas initiated by the Cain/Kirner governments of the 1980's. These reform agendas built on the illusion of educational disadvantage first espoused by the Whitlam Government's inquiry into inequality in schools in 1975. In reality;

...the pattern of girls' participation had not worsened in the 1960's and 1970's; rather it had significantly improved before the inquiries were initiated (Yates 1993a).

ibid., p79

In fact female students in schools have always enjoyed significant advantages when compared to same age boys. This artificial educational bias stems from the very nature of the educational process. It is well known that girls perform better in the traditional classroom setting, have more advanced fine motor skills, will usually be less prepared to challenge authority figures and will cope better than boys in less structured learning environments.

These significant educational advantages for girls were of lesser importance pre-1970 when girls were not competing so comprehensively for the limited training and employment options available to young Australians. Compounding this inherent educational discrimination against boys are biological factors related to age and development. Girls are typically 18 months or more in advance of boys in terms of physical and emotional development. This means that with no change to curriculum, educational setting or assessment girls have long enjoyed an unfair advantage when assessed against same age boys.

Radical Feminist educators had long desired assessment changes to redress what they perceived to be inequities in post-compulsory schooling.

Given the changing nature of labour demand, it may well be more important from the point of view of employment options to further increase girls participation in upper secondary schooling as compensation for boys virtual monopoly of industrial training.

Broom D. *Unfinished Business : Social Justice for Women in Australia*, George Allen & Unwin 1984, p.7

In Victoria the Blackburn Report Into Post Compulsory Schooling 1984 provided justification for the adoption of assessment and curriculum tools such as the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) and the Frameworks Approach to Middle School Curriculum which blatantly favoured female learning styles. The closure of Victoria's secondary technical schools was also advocated at this time. Nonsensical arguments related to class, social justice and the supposed labeling of technical school students as failures were forced upon an unwilling electorate. This policy direction contravened the mandate granted to the Cain/Kirner government at the time. I am presently reading the Ministerial correspondence concerning technical school closures by that duplicitous government and can provide documentary evidence of my assertions

The recommendations of the Blackburn Report were implemented by the Cain/Kirner governments with technical school closures being implemented through the Victorian Schools Provision Policy. The ramifications of the closure of Victorian technical schools were catastrophic, particularly upon low income young men. I supervised a number of young men on juvenile justice orders at this time. All were still attending local technical schools. None of them successfully made the transition to the VCE. Some of their peers died. It was this dynamic which forced me to resign as a secondary teacher and undertake social work training which has led to my current employment.

## **Research**

The research I am currently completing provides compelling evidence that the closure of the Victorian technical school system ended an example of international best-practice in vocational education and training. My hypothesis is that the ending of an early secondary school state supported pathway to employment for low income young men has exacerbated social problems. This is reflected by increases in the suicide rate amongst young men. I further believe that the closure of the technical schools and the introduction of the VCE has led to declining school retention rates for boys in

Victoria. The impact of these changes has been greatest in rural and larger urban local government areas. Typically these areas have lower than average income and a higher proportion of young men from Anglo-Saxon backgrounds.

The data I have collected to date shows that the incidence of suicide in the following areas is highly supportive of my hypothesis.

### **Suicide 1990-95 25 years and under**

#### Urban Local Government Area - Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS)

	Male	Female
Greater. Dandenong	23	3
Mornington Peninsula	21	2
Yarra Ranges	18	2
Greater Geelong	16	0
Total ( for areas of best fit)	78	7

#### Rural Statistical Area (ABS)

	Male	Female
Loddon	41	7
Goulburn	32	0
Central Highlands	18	2
East Gippsland	15	1
Mallee	11	1
Ovens Murray	11	1
Barwon	10	0
Wimmera	8	1
Total ( for areas of best fit)	146	13

(Source: Victorian Coroner's Reports Into Unnatural Deaths 1990-95)

These disturbing statistics relate to a time when Victoria's young male suicide data was diverging from the other states. Importantly, in the next year, 1996/1997, Victoria suffered a 50% increase in young male suicide according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). This single statistic was responsible for over 90% of the total national increase in suicide for 1996/1997.

Victoria has experienced a large and prolonged increase in young male suicide which places it alongside Norway, Canada and New Zealand as worst cases for young male psycho-social health in the OECD. No affluent nation recorded this phenomenon of extremely high young male suicide rates prior to 1980. It would seem that the similarities among the above countries are caused by the adoption of similar policies in their respective educational systems.

The cartoon at Appendix 'A' reflects the situation in a Canadian 'tech-school' or post-compulsory school. The compelling message shows boys' lesser ability to manipulate assessment tools such as the VCE.

## Conclusion

The social health of young Australian men is in 'free fall'. Drug abuse problems now effect young men disproportionately nationwide. Our male suicide rates are amongst the highest in the world and in the most feminist dominated state (Victoria), male suicide is still increasing. School retention rates for boys in the areas with the highest suicide rates are often 50% or less. This dynamic is most destructive in relation to low income young men but these policies also effect young men from higher income families. However, these families, in particular the mothers, have often been able to respond more effectively to the psycho-social distress of their sons.

I have raised these issues many times with representatives of the current Victorian government. I am sad to say that my concerns have been derided or diminished by the very people who claim to represent the interests of working class Australians. The outcome of the malign educational reforms of the past two decades in Victoria can now be seen as the greatest avoidable social catastrophe in Australia's history. This dynamic will prove to be a terrible legacy for our children and is already destroying the health, productivity and happiness of Australian society.

It should be noted that a study headed by Professor Richard Taylor discovered that males of Middle Eastern, Asian and Southern European ethnicity have markedly lower rates of male suicide than the rest of the population. I believe that this reflects the more supportive attitude these groups have towards young men within their communities .

## Reference List

Broom, Dorothy H, (ed) 1984, *Unfinished Business - Social Justice for Women in Australia*, George Allen & Unwin, Sydney

Caine, Barbara et al (eds) 1998, *Australian Feminism - a companion*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne.

Centre for Population and Urban Research Monash University 1998, *A not so perfect match - The growing male/female divide 1986-1996* , by Bob Birrell, & Virginia Rapson

Department of Public Health and Community Medicine University of Sydney and University of Western Sydney 1998, *Suicide in Urban New South Wales, Australia 1985-1994: Socio-Economic and Migrant Interactions*, (Abstract) by Professor Richard Taylor et al, Social Science Medicine Vol.00 No.0 pp1-9, Pergamon Press, Great Britain

## Bibliography

Buckingham, Jennifer 1999, *The Puzzle of Boys' Educational Decline - A Review of the Evidence*, Issue Analysis, No.9, 18 November 1999, pp 1-12, The Centre for Independent Studies, Sydney

Department of Education, Victoria 1998, *Framework for Student Support Services in Victorian Government Schools (Government Response to the Suicide Prevention Task Force Report)*, Community Information Service, Dept. of Ed, Melbourne

Istance, David 1997, *Education and Social Exclusion*, The OECD OBSERVER No.208 October/November 1997, pp 27-33

Jesuit Social Services August 1999, *Unequal in Life - the distribution of social disadvantage in Victoria and New South Wales*, by Tony Vinson, The Ignatius Centre for Social Policy and Research, Melbourne

National Mental Health Strategy January 1999, *Mental Health Promotion and Prevention - National Action Plan under the Second National Mental Health Plan: 1998-2003*, Publications Production Unit (Public Affairs, Parliamentary Access Branch) Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, Canberra

NSW Department of School Education Gender Equity Strategy 1996- 2001, *Girls and Boys at School*, Dept of School Education NSW

NSW Government Advisory Committee on Education Training and Tourism, A Report to the Minister for Education, Training and Youth Affairs on the Inquiry into Boys' Education 1994, *Challenges and Opportunities - A Discussion Paper*, Chair - Mr Stephen O'Doherty, MP

Prime Ministerial Youth Homeless Taskforce Report November 1998, *Putting Families in the Picture*, Dept of Family and Community Services, Canberra

Simms, Marian 1987, *Militant Public Servants - Politicisation, Feminisation and Selected Public Service Unions*, Macmillan Co of Australia P/L, Melbourne

University of Melbourne & Australian Rotary Health Research March 1997, *A Prospective Study of Completed and Attempted Youth Suicides in Victoria - A Report from the Coroner's Working Party on Suicide*, by John Tiller et al, University of Melbourne

Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals August 1997, *Improving the School Performance of Boys*, by Jeremy Ludowyke, VASSP, Melbourne

Victorian Government Department of Human Services June 1998, *Youth and Family Services Redevelopment - Service Integration and Purchasing*, Dept of Human Services, Melb.

Victorian Task Force Report July 1997, *Suicide Prevention: Executive Summary*, Impact Printing, Melbourne