

**Submission**

to

**Standing Committee on Employment, Education and  
Workplace Relations**

on

**The Education of Boys**

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## **INQUIRY INTO THE EDUCATION OF BOYS**

The Catholic Education Office, Diocese of Parramatta is pleased to make submission to the Inquiry into the Education of Boys, as the agenda is seen as a most significant one for our system of some 70 Catholic schools in Western Sydney.

This report has been compiled after extensive consultation with experienced educators in the Diocese of Parramatta in regards to the education of boys. The Terms of Reference were outlined to a focus group who were invited to discuss the key issues that relate to:

- The social, cultural and educational factors affecting the education of boys, particularly in relation to their literacy needs and socialization skills in the early and middle years of schooling
- The strategies which schools have adopted to help address these factors, those strategies that have been successful and scope for their broader implementation or increased effectiveness.

The following discussion outlines a number of points that are the key issues for the education of boys that specifically relate to the experience of the focus group members in the Parramatta Diocese.

### **Lack of male role modeling**

The absence of a male role model through death, separation, divorce, work arrangements or lack of involvement with siblings has resulted in limitations in the development of masculine identity and positive relationship building. The loss of quality time engaged with fathers and significant males has resulted in a weakening of a personal sense of identity and fewer opportunities to develop socialisation skills.

There has also been a growing trend towards fewer males entering the teaching profession. This trend is reflected in our Diocese where of 102 new teachers who were commencing in the Diocese in the year 2000 only 12 were male. This trend is apparent in both primary and secondary schools, however the situation is more pronounced in the primary sector where females have dominated teaching practice and staff sizes are generally smaller. Greater gender balance is needed in order to provide boys of all

ages and stages of development with opportunities to interact with men both in formal learning environments and informal extra curricula activities.

### **Structure and organisation**

It was found that boys in particular need clarity of organizational structures in school settings in order to feel happy, secure and comfortable in a learning environment. They are able to cope better with the demands of school life and the associated complexities that it presents, when they have a clear understanding of the expectations and the consequences that relate to these.

### **Learning preferences**

There is a growing awareness and appreciation of the difference that exists in the manner in which boys and girls think, learn and act. Consideration should be given to gender equity in the classroom and beyond that encourages positive learning about male and female identity, relating to and understanding gender similarities and differences and team building opportunities that build communication, problem solving and decision making skills.

It was also found that the learning styles of boys and girls differ greatly. There was consensus that boys tended to learn pragmatically and transfer their learning to abstract levels. They also need to be more physically active in primary school due to their hormonal levels and other physiological differences.

### **Emotional and behavioural issues**

Boys are involved in behavioral and learning problems at school at a higher incidence than girls also. This is evidenced by referrals to the Diocesan Marist Education Centre which offer counseling and family support to students experiencing difficulties in this regard. The following statistics for the two years 1998-1999 demonstrate this trend:

Primary school

- 380 students in total were referred- 283 boys and 97 girls.

Secondary school

- 282 students in total were referred - 184 boys and 98 girls.

## Curriculum

A distinct weakness in the literacy skills of boys in comparison to girls is noted across the K-12 continuum. Some data to support this is tabled below

### *Primary years*

Basic Skills Testing that has involved Year 3 and Year 5 for students in the Diocese over the last five years has signalled gender based differences in performance. The following table illustrates the results from 1999:

	Boys		Girls	
	Literacy Mean(sd)	Numeracy Mean(sd)	Literacy Mean(sd)	Numeracy Mean(sd)
<b>Year 3</b>	51.0(5.9)	53.9(8.4)	52.5(5.6)	53.3(7.7)
<b>Year 5</b>	56.7(5.8)	61.1(8.2)	58.3(5.6)	61.2(7.8)

While the differences between boys and girls are not large when the mean is examined, the distribution of boys' results is negatively skewed, while that for girls is positive.

### *Junior Secondary Years*

The English Language and Literacy Assessment (ELLA) testing which has occurred in this Diocese since 1997 also shows that boys' performance levels are lower than girls'. ELLA endeavours to measure the achievements of Year 7 students in a range of literacy skills across the areas of Writing, Reading and Language. These skills are important for students in terms of their ability to successfully complete NSW Board of Studies Stage 4 curriculum.

The following table shows the breakdown of mean scores for boys and girls in each of the three areas for 2000.

	<b>Writing</b>	<b>Reading</b>	<b>Language</b>
	Mean(sd)	Mean(sd)	Mean(sd)
<b>Boys</b>	86.8 (6.0)	86.7 (6.2)	86.9 (6.5)
<b>Girls</b>	89.3(6.6)	88.7 (6.4)	90.0 (7.0)

These figures reflect the same trends in the test populations for the state. Test population scores for 1997-1999 show the same mean score differences between boys' and girls' achievements

### *Senior Secondary*

A comparison of recent Higher School Certificate results clearly demonstrates gender differences in final year exam results. In the 1998 and 1999 HSC for example, the following results emerged:

- Girls outnumbered boys in order of merit by approximately 13%. Recognition for first in a course in all subjects showed that girls outnumbered boys by 45%.
- In Parramatta Diocesan schools, the distribution of girls' results had positive skews, while boys' distributions had negative skews in **all English** courses except 3 Unit English where girls outnumbered boys in a ratio of 7 to 1.
- In Parramatta Diocesan schools, girls' skews were significantly better than the boys' skews in **all Mathematics** results.

### **Special Education referrals**

There is a significant gender difference which exists for Special Education referrals in the Diocese. Boys are referred for learning difficulties at approximately six times the rate for girls, and for overall special education referrals the ratio is approximately 2:1 boys:girls.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Addressing the issues underlying the current situation in boys' education is a complex undertaking. The following recommendations are made as a contribution to the national dialogue which this inquiry will foster.

1. There need to be appropriate and effective measures to improve the status of teaching as a quality career choice for both men and women e.g. increased funding in tertiary sector directed towards education in order to specifically target and attract men to this profession.
2. Pre Service teacher training should address boys' educational needs as a core part of Degree course content to be completed by all teachers in training.
3. Schools should be aware of the need to provide and communicate clear structures, organisation, explicit explanation of expectations and consequences of action for all students.
4. Schools need to consider gender balance in selecting staff in both primary and secondary schools. This applies to staff working at all levels within the structure of the school.
5. Attention should be given to the need for boys to learn through practical modes of learning.
6. We advocate coordinated approaches to enhancing mental health and personal development across all sectors of education that focus on:
  - a whole school approach that integrates curriculum and school ethos and promotes links among school, home and community;
  - relationship programs that enable boys to reach a better understanding of self identity, effective communication, resilience skills and expressing emotions;
  - special boys programs that will provide a secure, safe and well adjusted environment for boys to explore issues relating to their gender and identity;

- building connectedness with family, friends and school.
7. National strategies should be developed that will endeavour to improve the educational outcomes of boys at all stages of education. The current national literacy and numeracy focus will assist in identifying the disparity that exists. Strategies across the curriculum are needed from K-12 that will provide effective learning environments for boys, as well as provide stimulation and rigour in the learning process. However, an over emphasis on outcomes measurement will result in the allocation of increasing resources to testing agendas which will actually reduce the resources available for the broader teaching and learning process.
  8. Professional development will be necessary for teachers working at all levels in schools to learn about the nature of boys educational issues, as well as effective strategies to deal with these in the year 2000 and beyond
  9. Good practice could be identified by the provision of funding to encourage school based pilot initiatives that address boys educational needs on a school specific needs basis.

The educators in our system wish the committee well in its deliberations, and hope that the outcome of its work will be the identification of strategies that will redress the current imbalance and the provision of the resources necessary to follow up on the recommendations.

*Questions about this report should be addressed to:*

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