

SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY INTO THE EDUCATION OF BOYS

FEDERATION OF PARENTS AND FRIENDS ASSOCIATIONS QLD

INTRODUCTION

It is a time of great uncertainty, change and challenge in our world, our nation and in our personal lives. The Catholic school system centres its existence on those Christian values and traditions which give hope for a more just and peaceful society. It focuses on the total development of each student – spiritual, moral, social, emotional, intellectual and physical.

The need for an inquiry into the performance of boys in education demonstrates that our education system is not catering for all students' needs but the remedy may not only be found within the school boundaries. The Federation of Parents and Friends Associations seeks to participate as authentic partners in the education process so that all students can achieve to their potential. Hence, the school should be an active community with parents, religious, students and staff participating in a constructive partnership which enhances the dignity of the individual and provides a context for the students' natural creativity to emerge.

SOCIETAL, CULTURAL AND EDUCATIONAL FACTORS

The role of schools in contemporary society has moved from the purely academic to one which involves the student's total development and is seen by many as a cure-all for society's ills. This diffusion of focus will naturally have a detrimental affect on student academic performance as educators stretch their personal resources in order to cope with many difficult, and some intractable, student problems. If students face dysfunctional situations in their personal lives, then their chances of achieving to their potential will be minimal.

Boys, particularly in the middle years of schooling, tend to underachieve and there have been many reasons advanced to explain this situation. It would appear that peer pressure at this time is very significant and the view that academic success or attempting something 'out of the ordinary' is not 'cool' is widespread. Learning for many boys becomes a chore or something that has to be endured to secure employment. Once that view becomes entrenched it is very difficult to change. Few who do not achieve see the advantages of lifelong learning.

The ready acceptance of technology by boys can have some positive effects on their performance as research would suggest that they outperform girls in the more difficult computer based tasks. Recent advances such as e-mail and chat rooms suggest that boys would be improving both their oral and written skills. However, with this new found enthusiasm has come a reduction in reading time by boys and less use being made of

library resources. We need to look at ways of channelling enthusiasm for the technology to improving boys' motivation and learning.

Much has been made of the 'feminisation' of the teaching force, resulting in the presentation of a feminine view of the world to students. Giving boys a more balanced view of the world is to be applauded in our still macho-oriented society, but we must also take into account that families and, in particular, fathers have a responsibility to provide an effective model of balanced opinion. Unfortunately, research will show that there is a distinct lack of effective communication between many fathers and sons in the critical years of adolescence.

Attracting males to a teaching career is becoming increasingly more difficult as many do not see the profession having great respect within society. In fact, there is an unhealthy suspicion of males who wish to pursue a career in primary or pre school teaching. Also, the increased fear of litigation in recent times has changed the relationship between male teachers and students. At a time when many students are having difficulty with their self image, it is important that they are able to develop appropriate relationships with their teachers.

The role of the school Principal is of critical importance in setting the standards for boys' achievement. Regrettably, in some schools, sporting success is still considered the benchmark for manhood and those who are not involved in sport are considered outcasts within the system. School policies and procedures should show that it affirms the personal worth of each student and it recognises, shares and celebrates success in all forms of life and learning.

STRATEGIES

There is an urgent need to provide stability in young people's lives so that they can take advantage of opportunities offered through education. Though they are continually confronted with change and adapt to it easily, boys need to know the acceptable boundaries of their behaviour and to be ready to take responsibility for their learning, their discipline and their interaction with staff and other students. Such development requires close collaboration and cooperation between schools and family.

We need to accentuate the positive things that are happening in our children's lives. When adolescents are given trust and are treated openly and honestly, they will be prepared to accept responsibilities far beyond our expectations. They need to feel 'at home' in school. Examples would be having a particular area for which they would be responsible, being consulted when the administration is making policies on discipline, accepting responsibility for new students in the school through a buddy system, organising activities which are peculiar to their age level, being able to select teachers for their home room class group and having some ownership of the room. In primary school, students are able to relate to a particular teacher but when they change into secondary they are confronted by continual change in classes, rooms and teachers.

Student councils vary widely in their success but truly representative groups can give an opportunity to those who consider themselves to be on the fringes to make a positive contribution to their own welfare. Accepting responsibility for the success of these activities can assist in improving the motivation and attitude of many boys who are becoming alienated and disenchanted with the system.

Schools administrations attempt to improve the learning environment but if the curriculum is seen as being irrelevant and teachers are not prepared to adapt to a changing teaching and learning environment, problems will escalate. The future of schooling must involve innovation in our pedagogy, technology, timetabling and integration particularly when dealing with those who are not coping with present arrangements.

We have to attempt to restore the important link between the family and what is happening in schools. Research consistently shows that when parents are involved in the students' education, results improve – even in the middle years. In particular, fathers need to participate more fully in planned activities. Traditionally, it has been the mother who has attended information nights, parent teacher interviews and career nights. It is the father who can offer much in the way of experience and leadership when issues such as approaches to life and learning need to be discussed with their sons. In previous years, schools conducted father and son camps where time was given to communicate on developmental issues in a relaxed environment. The need is so much greater now when boys are relating less to their father and more to their peers. Such experiences also allow reflection on the spiritual which can open hearts and minds.

Many parents are seeking assistance with adolescent development and performance and find discussion groups effective in confirming their views and being comforted by the realisation that they are doing as well as any one else. The Parent Effectiveness Training programmes are of great assistance in this area but parents must be prepared to spend the time to develop effective strategies for helping their sons..

CONCLUSION

Our education system must give our students valid reasons for living and hoping. They will move into a world in need of renewal and regeneration. The school is an important agent in setting young people free to answer the call. It will be through effective partnerships within the school community that students will move out with a spirit of optimism to be agents of positive change in their world.

Paul Dickie
Executive Officer
Federation of Parents and Friends Associations of Catholic Schools QLD
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