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# ASQUITH BOYS HIGH SCHOOL

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40 YEARS OF SERVICE IN THE HORNSBY COMMUNITY 1960 - 2000

Submission to the  
Federal Standing Committee on Employment, Education  
and Workplace Relations

## **Inquiry into the Education of Boys.**

The focus of this submission is on strategies which schools have adopted to help address the education of boys.

### **ASQUITH BOYS HIGH SCHOOL DIVERSITY WITHIN A BOYS' SECONDARY SCHOOL**

Some schools adopt a whole school approach invariably aimed at changing the school culture. In some of these schools it is difficult to identify specific programs which alone make a difference but the significance of whole school cultural change should not be ignored.

Asquith Boys High School is a single-sex school near Hornsby in Northern Sydney. It is probably an example of a school which has created significant whole school cultural change in the promotion of balanced opportunities for boys. The changes are more contextual than educational and have been focussed on organisation, welfare and curriculum structures and practices. These contextual changes, however, have been significant and have encouraged the development of diversity within a boys' secondary school. They include the following:

**Learning and teaching:** An initial emphasis on diversity in teaching and learning has probably helped to break down many assumptions about boys being all left brained learners who need structure, competition and ranking. A change to one hour periods most likely encouraged diversity in learning/teaching. There is a current need to re-new belief in and understanding of the diversity of learning styles.

**Welfare:** Issues of violence and consequences has always had a high priority. Students and parents are told that the school actively intervenes to protect the safety of Paul McDonnell students. Peer Support has successfully evolved over the years and there are many opportunities for older boys to relate to younger boys in a supporting manner.

**Curriculum:** The most substantial structural change was the limited introduction of a flexible (vertical) curriculum which in effect created a balanced curriculum, retaining music, expanding visual arts, introducing drama, cooking and horticulture. The sports curriculum has diversified. Recent mandating of history and geography in NSW will reduce options for boys.

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**School organisation:** There have been many changes which have tended to de-institutionalise the school, eliminating many non-functional rules and hierarchies. Structural changes have tended to create behavioural changes: e.g. the longer lessons reduce movement (and hence the potential for conflict) in the school.

**School environment/resources:** A range of changes have created civilised and quiet areas, new areas for students to "retreat", additional seating, tree planting, enhancement of learning spaces etc. The aim is to create diversity and ample opportunity for students to avoid the "rough and tumble" of the playground.

The context of a single sex school can be an advantage in gender equity strategies. The uptake amongst boys of subjects such as visual arts, drama and music is quite high at Asquith BHS. This is probably due to the lack of the gender binary factor which in coeducational schools readily (and unofficially) labels subjects as "boys" or "girls" subjects. Similarly, the successful operation of peer support, charity work and leadership programs also reflects the fact that boys in the single sex setting regard such activities as being normal for boys. These do not constitute an argument for establishing single sex schools, just a way in which such schools can realise an advantage.

**Academic performance:** The school does not claim to have made a difference to academic achievement as a consequence of the programs above. The performance of students at Asquith BHS reflects the gender and socio-economic composition of its population. There are areas of significant achievement within the school and the whole range of student output indicators are very healthy (see [www.skyboom.com/asquithbhs](http://www.skyboom.com/asquithbhs) for more details). An area of concern in the school and for boys everywhere is underperformance (relative to girls) in English and a discernible drift of boys with academic ability away from the humanities.

**Behaviour:** Perceptions today are of a school where boys feel safe and to a large degree can be allowed to be different. The feeling in the playground seems free of threats and angst. "Ritualised" playground fights are non-existent. Bullying in the traditional sense of older students against younger students is very rare although the school is frequently (and quite successfully) mediating between students on one issue or another.

The best measure of the success of all this lies in the community response to the school which has experienced a reversal of its previous decline (albeit for a range of reasons). The significance of this is that in a conservative anglo community parents have responded favourably to programs and activities which have had the effect of diversifying masculinity and in the process creating a better balance of opportunities for boys. It is a powerful argument for schools to be proactive in gender issues and not be afraid of community resistance on the one hand and not wait around for a community lead on the other.

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