



Photograph by Brendan Esposito, NewsPix.

Boys will be...

Why would a House of Representatives Committee undertake an inquiry into the education of boys?

"No one seems to know exactly what the problems are with boys and why they are experiencing difficulties in schools," says Richard Fletcher, Manager of the Men and Boys Program at the University of Newcastle. "More importantly, it has not been fashionable to discuss the problems that boys are facing."

Richard Fletcher welcomes the new inquiry into boys' education by the House of Representatives Education Committee. He has heard a range of concerns about the social issues facing boys through his work in paediatrics, his teaching in secondary schools in Australia, Kenya and the United States, and his coordination of seminars and conferences on boys' education. Two recent conferences attracted more than 600 professionals.

"It is very courageous that the House Education Committee is undertaking this inquiry into the education of boys," Mr Fletcher

explained. "It will not be popular and many people will argue that it shouldn't even be talked about. This is probably why it is a novel inquiry and hasn't been done anywhere else in the world. The terms of reference reinforce that we are leading in this field."

The House Education Committee's inquiry, announced in June, will consider the social, cultural and educational factors affecting the education of boys in Australian schools, focusing on:

- boys' literacy needs and their socialisation skills in the early and middle years of schooling;
- the strategies which schools have adopted to improve boys' learning and behaviour in school; and
- how the successful strategies developed by schools may be made more effective or more broadly implemented.

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House Education Committee Chair, Dr Brendan Nelson (Member for Bradfield, New South Wales) said that the Committee, along with the Minister for Education and Youth Affairs, Dr David Kemp, called for the inquiry because it was especially concerned with the social and educational outcomes for boys and the significant personal and social consequences.

'The literacy gap between boys and girls is widening.'

"Academically boys' performance is slipping behind girls as early as Grade 3 and there are big difficulties once they have fallen behind. It is really difficult for them to catch up. The literacy gap between boys and girls is widening," Dr Nelson said. "This then impacts on boys' self-esteem, their behaviour and how they communicate. This can have far reaching consequences, including a detrimental impact on career opportunities and the danger of alcohol abuse, drug use and dysfunctional personal and family relationships.

"The Committee, through this inquiry, wants to understand the problems and look at what may be done in early to middle schooling that can help and benefit boys. Programs for boys do not have to be, and should not be, at the expense of girls. In fact, boys' programs should ultimately benefit women, girls and society generally, as they should be developed in such a way that they contribute to creating a value system that tolerates less harassment, less violence and much less intimidation by men."

Dr Nelson said that the issues surrounding the education of boys need to be brought out into the open and discussed as frankly as possible. "The Committee's inquiry is a great opportunity for people who have an interest in boys' education to tell their elected representatives what their experiences are and how any concerns may be addressed."

"We are kidding ourselves if we think all the answers will be found in this inquiry," Richard Fletcher commented. "But at least it will get people talking about the problems boys are facing and how this impacts into their adult lives. The inquiry provides a great vehicle where issues can be discussed, information can be shared, and it legitimises the real concerns that many people have about boys' behaviour."

'The issues aren't localised, they are occurring throughout society.'

Richard Fletcher added that, from his discussions with parents, teachers and students, the greatest concerns are boys' anger or how they release this anger, and how they reject opportunities that the school offers. "Many are disengaged, they don't even want to try," he says.

"Unlike the situation with girls, where it is okay to discuss their development and what is holding them back, it isn't the same with boys. It's a confusing subject because we, as a community, are not sure what we want from men, what we value about men. So many boys and men don't know what their place is in society any more, and they are too afraid to ask.

"It would be really easy to say that the behavioural and educational problems only impact on boys from low socio-economic areas, but this just isn't the case. The issues aren't localised, they are occurring throughout society – in wealthy to poorer families, in coeducational and single sex schools, as well as in private and public schools.

"A few years ago these problems seemed to mainly affect teenage boys, now the lack of morale and self-esteem is really evident in boys of primary school age. Parents are struggling with eight year olds who believe they have no hope."

Richard Fletcher believes that the discussion of boys' futures is long overdue. He is currently organising another conference, *Teaching Boys – Developing Fine Men*, to be held in Brisbane on 21 and 22 August. The conference, which is attracting speakers from around the world, will focus on three key areas:

- teaching boys well;
- building resilience and purpose; and
- supporting Indigenous boys.

"We need to stop giving boys negative messages, like: we don't want you to become a criminal or violent," Mr Fletcher explained. "To be more positive, we need to ask important questions such as: 'What's good about being a man? What do we value about men?' We are still a long way off finding the answers, but at least this parliamentary inquiry is a start."

Have your say

The House of Representatives Committee on Employment, Education and Workplace Relations invites you to have your say on the education of boys in Australian schools. Write or send an email to:

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Employment, Education and Workplace Relations
Parliament House
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Email: ewr.reps@aph.gov.au

For more information on
 the inquiry into the Education of Boys
 Visit: www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/ewr/eofb
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