

Boys: getting it right

The House of Representatives Education Committee has released the report of its two-year investigation into issues surrounding the education of boys. The unanimous report found various aspects of the education system failing many boys, and makes 24 recommendations to remedy the situation.

On almost any 'outcome' indicator, boys are not doing as well at schools as girls.

Be it literacy rates, retention rates, tertiary entrance scores or university commencements, boys are now lagging behind.

And, in many cases, the gaps are accelerating.

On literacy, for instance, year 2000 figures show 3.4 per cent fewer boys achieving national benchmarks than girls at year 3 level; by year 5, it's 4.4 per cent fewer boys than girls. In the 20-year period between 1975 and 1995, the number of 14-year-old boys achieving a satisfactory literacy rate has gone from three per cent behind girls to eight per cent.

While there are variations across states, in 80 to 90 per cent of higher school certificate results girls are now outstripping boys. Looking at NSW, in 1981 boys and girls scored roughly the same tertiary entrance score. By 1996 there was a 19.4 per cent differential between the achievements of boys and girls. Today, 56 per cent of new university enrolments are girls.

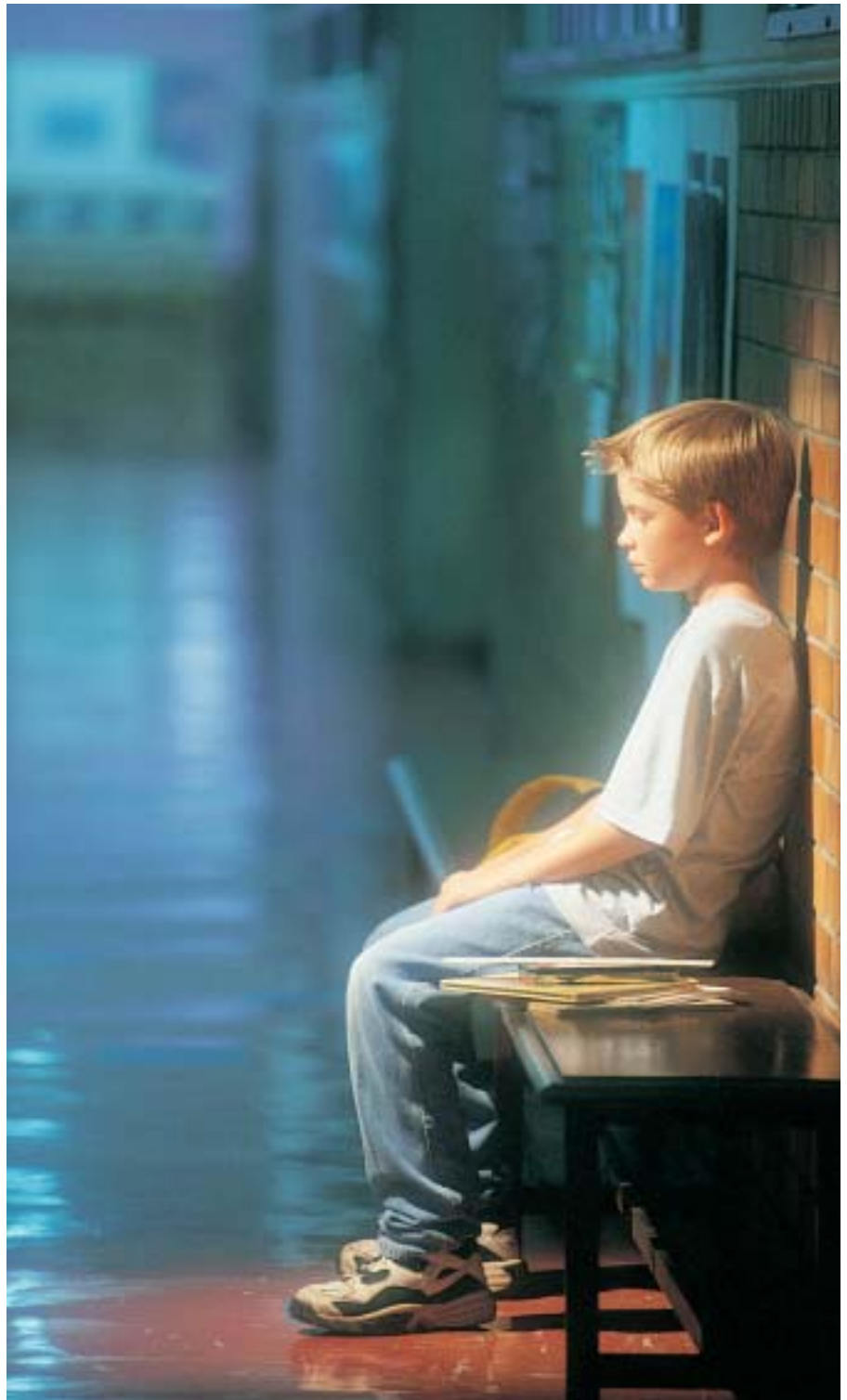
These are just some of the startling findings of the House of Representatives Education Committee's two-year investigation into boys' education.

"The big question is why are there these changes?" Committee Chair, Kerry Bartlett (Member for Macquarie, NSW), asked the parliament when releasing the report. "Why is it that boys are underachieving?"

"Given that boys and girls intrinsically have similar intellectual capacities, how can these discrepancies be acceptable in Australian education?" asked Committee Deputy Chair, Rod Sawford (Member for Port Adelaide, SA).

"There was a time when girls were very clearly disadvantaged at school in comparison to boys," said committee member Kay Elson (Member for Forde, Qld). "Today, however, we have seen a remarkable reversal of fortunes."

Continued on page 22





Teachers from Griffith Public School speaking with the House Education Committee during the inquiry. Photo: AUSPIC

Mrs Elson stressed, however, it was not a matter of 'boys versus girls'.

"This is an issue that has not received the attention it deserves—mainly because some sections of the community fear that addressing this imbalance will mean a diminishing of the gains girls have made. This is not the case at all," she said. "The one thing I want to stress above all else is that raising the educational achievements of boys can be done without threatening the gains made by girls."

The problems found by the committee were systemic and complex. Clearly, many things are wrong with what is happening with boys.

"Just as there is no single cause, there is no single, simple solution," Kerry Bartlett said. "We need a multifaceted policy approach to deal with these issues."

Such a multifaceted approach was outlined in the 24 recommendations for change made by the committee.

A key factor is formal recognition that boys and girls learn differently.

"It is unacceptable that current policies do not recognise that fact," Rod Sawford said. "It is what successful practitioners have told committee members over and over again."

Boys and girls have different strengths, and respond differently to different teaching styles and strategies. The differences are chronicled in the committee's report, and were explained to the House by Mr Sawford.

"Boys need explicit teaching. They need to be challenged. They need hands on and active means of instruction within structured educational programs. Some girls are also

comfortable with this approach but generally girls respond better to content and group and individual work in unstructured activities, with plenty of self-directed learning.

"Boys respond more to relationships with teachers and teacher directed learning and need a consistent application and spelling out of the rules. Girls are more likely to just get on with it.

"In literacy, girls are more likely to respond to the personal, boys to the physical. In activities, girls are more likely to respond to the verbal, boys to the visual.

"Boys respond positively to structured challenges and direction; girls respond to encouragement. On average, boys' capacity to process what they hear is considerably slower than girls'; on average, boys' capacity to analyse what they see is considerably faster than girls'. Girls prefer continuous assessment schemes and examination that consists of essay type responses; boys prefer multiple-choice testing tasks and examinations that get to the point.

"As anyone can deduce, it is relatively easy to skew education in favour of either boys or girls.

"There is nothing remarkable in all of this. What is remarkable is that so much of the balance that makes up a good education system has gone missing. How could anyone suggest that policies that work for girls will work for boys? Yet that is exactly what has occurred in too many schools in the last 12 years."

The committee recommends that teacher education and training (for new teachers and current teachers) specifically recognise

the differences and commonalities in learning styles of boys and girls, and equip teachers with effective, practical teaching strategies taking this into account. It also recommends an increased emphasis on equipping teachers with behaviour management skills and strategies.

Another key recommendation of the report is on class sizes. It wants class sizes from Years K to 3 reduced to a maximum of 20 students by 2005.

The report also says government should urgently address the remuneration of teachers, with the payment of substantial additional allowances for skilled and experienced teachers as an inducement to remain in teaching, and to attract new teachers.

Along with more money, tests should be introduced measuring aptitudes-for-teaching for prospective teaching students, prior to their admission to courses.

Another means of attracting quality teachers is the offering of a substantial number of merit-based HECS-free scholarships—for equal numbers of males and females—to undertake teacher training.

"The importance of quality teachers cannot be underestimated," Mr Bartlett said. "It does not matter how many resources go into schools and it does not matter what our educational curricula are; if we do not have quality, committed teachers then we badly let down our children—boys and girls. We need to do more.

"We have recommended that states and territories consider substantially raising



Boys and girls respond differently to different teaching styles says the House Education Committee. Photo: AUSPIC



House Education Committee members visiting Yenda Public School (NSW) during the inquiry. Photo: AUSPIC

salaries for experienced and skilled practitioners to keep them in the classroom.

“We have recommended that the Commonwealth government do its part by providing a substantial number of teaching scholarships in equal numbers to men and women, to encourage quality candidates into the classroom. These scholarships should be allocated on the basis of merit and in conjunction with a range of other personal attributes that we recommend be considered in encouraging people to enter into teacher training.”

The attraction of more males into the teaching profession, especially at primary levels, is considered important. Currently around 80 per cent of primary teachers are female.

While the committee believes females can teach boys just as well as males, it is important for boys to be exposed to male role models in school settings. The committee also advocates strategies to involve fathers and other men as positive male role models in schools.

In summary, the committee’s vision is for better-paid and better-trained teachers (substantially more of whom are male), armed with strategies which recognise the different learning styles of boys and girls, teaching smaller classes.

There should also be a greater emphasis on literacy, including early diagnosis and intervention. The committee says there

should be funding for a Literacy Coordinator and an early intervention intensive literacy teacher in every Australian primary school (proportionate to the size of the school).

It also calls for a change to the way literacy programs are run, with programs to be required to adopt an integrated approach which includes a strong element of explicit, intensive phonics instruction.

The committee also recommends that all kindergarten-aged children be fully tested for hearing and sight problems, and that professional development be provided to primary teachers in the area of auditory processing.

In a conceptual and formal sense, the committee says governments should address the new ‘institutional bias’ against boys by making changes to the current Gender Equity Framework in schools. It says the framework should “provide an overarching policy structure for joint and distinctive boys’ and girls’ education strategies” which ensure the social and educational needs of both sexes are being met.

The committee also calls for further Commonwealth-funded research into the impact of several areas studied during the inquiry. These include the impact of:

- different assessment methods;
- different school structures;
- different curricula;
- availability of alternatives to senior school (such as TAFE);

- different approaches and strategies to maximise engagement and motivation of boys and girls in middle school years; and
- various existing programs assisting the most disadvantaged and disengaged.

Twenty-one of the parliament’s 150 MPs were involved as committee members at various stages in the inquiry, including the current Minister for Education, Brendan Nelson, who was chair of the committee when it began its investigation. Dr Nelson has promised quick action.

“We want all boys and girls to reach their full potential in education,” Dr Nelson said. “[The report] should be a priority for Commonwealth and state governments.”

Dr Nelson said he would soon hold an informal meeting with experts and practitioners to discuss the recommendations of the inquiry and formulate a response.

The committee’s final recommendation was that where Commonwealth funding increases had been recommended, care should be taken to make sure states and territories did not reduce their own contributions to programs by similar amounts. ■

The entire report, *Boys: getting it right*, is available on the committee’s website at www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/edt/eofb/report.htm

Contacts

Phone: (02) 6277 4573

Email: edt.reps@aph.gov.au