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INQUIRY INTO THE FACTORS DRIVING EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

The Top Blokes Foundation (Top Blokes) is a youth mental health charity supporting young males aged 10-24 years old. Top Blokes welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education Inquiry into the Factors Driving Educational Attainment in Australia. Our submission focuses on the social, emotional, relational and developmental drivers of male educational engagement and attainment.

Our submission is informed by Top Blokes' 20+ years of practice working with young males, the lived experience of program graduates, insights from educators in partner schools and five focus groups with male students and teachers. We highlight four key findings for the Committee to consider:

Boys want to learn: Boys are not disengaged because they do not value education. They disengage when developmental, social, emotional or learning needs are unmet.

Belonging drives engagement: When boys feel connected to school, peers and future possibilities, they are more likely to participate and persist. Identity, sense of belonging and peer influence are central to understanding how male students experience school.

Relationships are educational infrastructure: trusted adults and positive peer cultures shape whether boys seek help, learn and stay connected.

No single path to success, no single definition of 'achievement': broader definitions of success can strengthen boys' engagement with learning and future pathways.

OUR SUBMISSION MAKES THREE RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Invest in early identification and support for boys at risk of disengagement.

Develop and fund a national early intervention framework that supports schools to identify and respond to the underlying drivers of educational disengagement among male students, including developmental vulnerability, neurodivergence, speech and language needs, emotional regulation, mental health challenges, family circumstances and school connectedness. This should include improved access to specialist supports, particularly in primary school and in regional, rural and remote communities.

2. Fund preventative wellbeing and mentoring programs that strengthen belonging, identity and help-seeking among boys.

Increase investment in evidence-based, relationship-based mentoring and preventative wellbeing programs that support male students to build emotional regulation, social connection, positive peer relationships, help-seeking skills, confidence, identity development and a sense of belonging within and beyond school.

3. Strengthen relationship-based approaches between students, schools, families and community partners.

Support schools to build meaningful, consistent and trusting relationships with male students by investing in dedicated roles, such as Supervisor of Boys positions, that strengthen student engagement, parent/carer involvement, early intervention and coordinated support. This should include connecting boys with trusted adults and enabling partnerships with community organisations, particularly during key educational transition periods.

We hope that sharing these insights and recommendations gives the Committee a deeper insight into the experiences and thoughts of the factors that drive educational attainment among male students.

We welcome any opportunity to speak to the Committee about our submission.

Kind regards,



Melissa Abu-Gazaleh
Founder and Managing Director

ABOUT TOP BLOKES FOUNDATION

Top Blokes provides safe and supportive spaces for young males to meaningfully connect, explore their identities outside of socially dominant forms and patterns of masculinity, develop critical thinking skills and build their knowledge and resilience.

Currently we support 5,000 young males across Australia, through programs delivered in 210 primary and high schools. Since 2006 we have supported over 30,000 young males.

Top Blokes' mission is to challenge and nurture males to be their best selves.

Top Blokes' vision is that more young males lead healthy and safe lives.

Top Blokes has three programs that we deliver in schools and with community partners such as workplaces and community organisations:

10-13 program: run in primary schools over one school term

14-17 program: run in high schools over two school terms

18-24 program: run with community partners and workplaces over 10-20 weeks

Program graduates can join **Grad Club**, which provides ongoing connection, social and emotional education, and leadership opportunities.

Top Blokes' Youth Ambassador Council, made up of 11 program graduates, provides lived experience advice on programming, operations, strategy and advocacy.

BOYS WANT TO LEARN

"When things feel in my hands and tangible and genuinely aligned to what I'm actually interested in instead of whatever the curriculum is targeting or requiring from us, those are always the times I'm going to feel engaged in school." - Male student

Research shows that boys are about twice as likely as girls to show developmental concerns in academic and self-help skills by age 5 (Yin et al. 2025). They are overrepresented among the lowest performing students in NAPLAN and are disproportionately represented in school suspension and exclusion data. A NSW population cohort study found male gender was one of the strongest predictors of primary school suspension, even after accounting for a range of other risk factors (Laurens, 2020). Recent analysis also found boys are approximately twice as likely as girls to be suspended or expelled once and significantly more likely to experience repeated suspensions (Piltz et al. 2025).

These outcomes cannot be understood solely through academic performance or classroom behaviour. A broader set of developmental, social and environmental influences affects how male students experience school, learning and future educational pathways (Lamb et al., 2020; Productivity Commission, 2025).

Educational disengagement develops gradually through a weakened connection to learning, school, and future aspirations, before becoming visible through attendance concerns, behavioural incidents, or declining academic performance (Lamb et al., 2020).

Teachers described attendance, behaviour and academic outcomes as visible indicators of disengagement. Several observed that some of the most disengaged male students were not necessarily disruptive and could remain largely unnoticed in the classroom.

> Some of our most disengaged kids won't disrupt the lesson at all. They'll basically just sit there and stare at the wall. Or not even be in the room."
>
> Our kids come in and they're fairly compliant, but are they actively engaged in the learning? That's another question as well."

Educational experiences that clearly connect current learning to future aspirations are more likely to feel meaningful and valuable. **Male students** told us they were eager to learn, but struggled to stay engaged when they could not see the practical relevance of school or its connection to their goals, interests and future aspirations.

> ..where there isn't much flexibility or it doesn't feel particularly useful or applicable, that's always when I'm going to check out."
>
> It's when school's allowing me and helping me to work towards something that I really care about. Things like resume writing, life skills and music. It's helping me work towards something much bigger than just the grades at school."

For some **male students**, academic outcomes were insufficient motivation in isolation, particularly when they could not see how those outcomes might support them in the future.

> The difference between a C and an A [grade], there's no consequence. We can't see a direct impact in our lives. If you want us to be more engaged in school and the only reward you can offer is a different letter that means more to somebody else, it doesn't mean enough to motivate us to be engaged."
>
> When school's helping me work towards something I actually care about, that's when I want to be there."

Teachers also observed stronger engagement when students understood why learning mattered, but described limited space for practical, inquiry-based or project-based learning within current curriculum and assessment demands.

> We know those pedagogies work [for male students]. We know project-based learning works. We know inquiry-based learning works. We know all these things work. There's less scope for that under the explicit teaching model that we are in at the moment."
>
> If we had time in our crowded curriculum to apply those skills through inquiry-based learning or projects, students could demonstrate their learning in highly engaging ways."
>
> The students who are most engaged are often the ones who can see where this is taking them."

Teachers and male students told us that disengagement often reflected unmet needs rather than a lack of capability or aspiration. These included developmental vulnerability, neurodivergence, family circumstances, mental health challenges, or difficulties navigating the school environment, which influenced a student's ability to participate in learning.

Schools are expected to support a broader range of learning styles, developmental pathways and support needs than ever before. While progress has been made in recognising neurodiversity and inclusive education, many of the male students and teachers questioned whether current school structures - including class size, classroom expectations and limited access to allied health supports - enable genuinely inclusive learning environments.

This finding is consistent with broader Australian research that associates developmental vulnerability, disability, adverse childhood experiences, socioeconomic disadvantage and gender with increased risk of educational disengagement and school exclusion (Laurens, 2020; OECD, 2023).

Research also demonstrates a link between student engagement, student behaviour and academic achievement. A survey of NSW school students conducted by the NSW Department of Education in 2015 found that, overall, boys reported more disruptive behaviour at school than girls and that girls are more likely to comply with school expectations (Griffiths & Webber 2017: 5, 10).

Research on classroom behaviour by Beaman, Wheldall and Kemp (2007) found that teachers consistently identify male students as being more troublesome than female students and that this can relate to the difference between the way boys and girls present patterns of disruptive behaviour. Teachers we spoke to suspected that many of the boys that are constantly 'in trouble' are neurodivergent and less able to mask 'disruptive behaviours' than neurodivergent female students.

Several male students described feeling that boys are sometimes judged differently when behavioural issues arise at school. While teachers are often balancing complex circumstances in real time, perceived fairness matters because it can shape a student's trust, belonging and engagement with learning.

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RECOMMENDATION

Invest in early identification and support for boys at risk of disengagement.

Fund preventative wellbeing and mentoring programs that strengthen belonging, identity and help-seeking among boys.

WHEN BOYS FEEL LIKE THEY BELONG, THEY ARE MORE ENGAGED AT SCHOOL

"Sometimes you just need someone to hear you" - Male student

Improving educational attainment among male students requires a broad understanding of what supports educational success. A strong sense of belonging at school is associated with regular attendance, participation in learning, academic achievement and positive wellbeing (Allen et al., 2018; OECD, 2023). Belonging is built within and beyond the classroom, through relationships, peer connection and opportunities to participate in school life.

Teachers described engagement as more than classroom participation. It includes a student's broader connection to peers, school life and opportunities beyond the classroom.

> The relationship and the wellbeing side of things comes first. If students don't feel safe, connected and supported, learning becomes much harder."
>
> Social and emotional learning is the curriculum."
>
> For us, it is participating in the classroom actively, but also participating in other things beyond the classroom. That might be opportunities that come up of a sporting nature or even an academic nature beyond the classroom. It might be student leadership, public speaking or interest groups. For us, engagement would be involvement in those kinds of things."
>
> If a child has a sense of belonging, if they are socialising in the playground, if they are engaging in group tasks, if they're completing their work, that's what engagement is going to look like."

Male students described being most engaged when they had opportunities to contribute to school life beyond the classroom.

> Most of the best experiences I've had at school were helping plan, run or set up events. Opportunities that are connected to school but kind of outside the classroom. Things where you're working towards something and you can actually see the outcome. Those are the moments where I've felt most engaged."
>
> Male students consistently described the importance of schools supporting broader developmental outcomes including confidence, emotional literacy, social connection, resilience and preparedness for life beyond school."
>
> Some of the biggest lessons I've learned at school weren't necessarily in the classroom. They were the things that helped me become a better person."
>
> A lot of the skills that actually matter later in life aren't always the things that end up being measured."

Teachers similarly described success in broader terms than academic achievement.

> For some students, the achievement is actually getting here every day, staying connected and finishing school."
>
> Some of them won't get outstanding academic results, but they'll leave with pathways, employment and the skills they need to contribute positively to society."

RECOMMENDATION

Fund preventative wellbeing and mentoring programs that strengthen belonging, identity and help-seeking among boys.

Strengthen relationship-based approaches between students, schools, families and community partners.

PEER RELATIONSHIPS AND SOCIALLY DOMINANT FORMS OF MASCULINITY

Adolescence is a critical period of identity development during which young people establish a sense of self, develop greater autonomy and increasingly look to peers for validation, belonging and social acceptance (Sanci, Webb & Hocking, 2018).

Research consistently identifies peer connections as a protective factor associated with improved wellbeing, educational engagement and resilience during adolescence (Allen et al., 2018). Male students who feel accepted, supported and connected to positive peer groups are more likely to participate in learning, seek support and remain engaged with school.

Several **male students** described experiences where positive peer relationships created a stronger sense of accountability, motivation and connection to school.

> The people around you make a huge difference. If you've got good people around you who care about school and care about what they're doing, it rubs off."
>
> A lot of the reason I kept showing up was because of the people there. You knew people were expecting you to be there."

Teachers also described the importance of school environments where positive peer cultures reinforce engagement rather than make it socially risky.

> When students feel connected and part of something bigger than themselves, they're much more willing to participate and take risks in their learning."

Male students described a tension between who they are individually and who they felt expected to be around their peers. **Teachers** also observed boys making decisions that appeared inconsistent with their values, interests or aspirations when in the presence of peers.

> The idea of a social identity versus an individual identity, it's very difficult for [boys] to shake that social identity and be who they want to be in the moment where it counts"
>
> [Social] pressures intertwine into school, into family, into sport...[The boys] have gone to primary school together, they play sport together, they see each other on weekends. There's no real cut-off from those expectations."

Top Blokes programs support young males to explore identity, understand their values and practise communicating their needs. This work requires safe environments and trusted mentor relationships.

Top Blokes recognises the key role socially dominant forms of masculinity play in shaping the experience of young males in educational settings and beyond. While there is no single male experience, socially dominant forms of masculinity that emphasise independence, emotional control and toughness can influence peer relationships and how young men respond to challenges both inside and outside the classroom.

Socially dominant forms of masculinity impact help-seeking behaviours, emotional expression and engagement with support services among young males (The Men's Project & Flood, 2024; Australian Government Department of Health, 2019). Male students who are reluctant to seek support, disclose challenges or ask for assistance may be less likely to access the help required to remain connected to learning.

Male students similarly acknowledged the influence of social expectations in shaping how they respond to challenges.

> I think a lot of boys don't want to look like they're struggling."
>
> Sometimes asking for help feels harder than just pretending everything is fine."

Several teachers reflected on the challenges male students face in expressing vulnerability or seeking support when they are struggling.

> You often see a very different young person one-on-one compared to what you see when they're around their peers."
>
> There are things boys will tell you individually that they would never say in front of their mates."

A 2026 Social Return on Investment analysis conducted by EY found that Top Blokes participants reported improvements in emotional regulation, social connection, help-seeking, confidence, relationships, communication and decision-making. While these are often categorised as wellbeing outcomes, they also strengthen the social and emotional foundations that support learning, participation and persistence. The report found that the Top Blokes High School Program created $9.9 million in social value, including $3 million associated with improved school engagement.

RECOMMENDATION

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RELATIONSHIPS ARE EDUCATIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE

"Real teachers, they care about you. If they don't want to be there, why should we be there?" - Male student

The quality of relationships between students and teachers has consistently been identified as one of the strongest school-based predictors of educational engagement, belonging and academic success (Hattie, 2023; Allen et al., 2018).

Male students told us they wanted teachers who knew them, cared about them and made school feel safe. For some young men, a teacher may be one of the first trusted adults in their lives.

> They pay attention to me personally. They treat me like I'm actually important... I feel like they personally want me to be there. I think that makes a big difference."

Teachers similarly recognised the importance of relationships, including their relationship with a students' parents or carers, in shaping educational engagement.

> Happy kids learn. Kids who feel connected learn. If a student doesn't feel known or valued, it's very difficult to expect them to fully engage in learning."

Several **male students** described individual teachers as the difference between participating in learning or switching off. For some students, a trusted teacher represents a source of encouragement, accountability and support that extends beyond academic instruction.

> I know for a fact that between year seven and sort of late year nine or year 10, the teacher basically made the difference between whether I was paying attention and enjoying the class or whether I was being a little ****. Genuinely having a teacher who was engaged, who seemed to care about the students in the class and also the topic they were teaching, that made all the difference."
>
> The teachers that had the biggest impact weren't necessarily the easiest teachers. They were the ones that genuinely seemed interested in helping us."

Teachers similarly described the role relationships play in supporting students through periods of challenge and uncertainty.

> Often the relationship is the intervention. Before any support plan or strategy works, there has to be trust."
>
> You see a completely different young person when they know they can trust you."

Despite both male students and teachers wanting quality relationships, the reality of classroom sizes and time constraints can make this difficult to achieve. Schools invest in Top Blokes when they need structured, relationship-based support that helps male students connect with trusted mentors and peers outside the usual classroom and playground dynamics. When boys feel known, supported and connected, they are more likely to attend, participate, persist through difficulty and remain engaged in pathways that support long-term educational attainment.

RECOMMENDATION

Fund preventative wellbeing and mentoring programs that strengthen belonging, identity and help-seeking among boys.

Strengthen relationship-based approaches between students, schools, families and community partners.

NO SINGLE PATH TO SUCCESS, NO SINGLE DEFINITION OF 'ACHIEVEMENT'

"Not everyone wants the same thing after school and I think that's okay." - Male student

Focus group participants consistently described the importance of recognising diverse pathways, interests and definitions of achievement. This aligns with broader evidence showing educational and employment outcomes are not determined by a single pathway and that successful transitions into employment, vocational education, apprenticeships and higher education all contribute to positive life outcomes.

Male students described feeling more engaged when school helped them explore different futures, including practical learning, employment pathways and real-world applications of knowledge.

> Some people learn best by doing things rather than sitting in a classroom all day."

Teachers similarly highlighted the importance of creating multiple opportunities for success.

> Students need to be able to see different versions of what success looks like."

School-based programs such as Top Blokes offer young men the opportunity to explore what success means to them and feel a sense of accomplishment. At the conclusion of every program, teachers, parents/carers, siblings and community members are invited to celebrate and honour graduates for the effort, growth, achievements and personal values they have demonstrated throughout the program. This provides an opportunity for young men to be recognised for strengths and personal qualities that extend beyond traditional measures of success and masculinity and reinforces that there is no single pathway to achievement.

RECOMMENDATION

Invest in early identification and support for boys at risk of disengagement.

Fund preventative wellbeing and mentoring programs that strengthen belonging, identity and help-seeking among boys.

CONCLUSION

Educational attainment among male students cannot be understood solely through attendance , behaviour or academic achievement. While these indicators remain important, the findings presented throughout this submission suggest they are often the visible outcome of deeper factors that shape a young man's relationship with learning.

The male students and teachers we spoke to consistently described educational engagement as being influenced by belonging, wellbeing, relationships, identity and future purpose. Educational disengagement was rarely described as a lack of motivation. More commonly, it reflected unmet developmental and emotional needs, limited connections to learning, a sense of not belonging, and uncertainty about future pathways.

To improve attendance, retention and educational attainment among male students, we must look beyond academic interventions. Greater attention is needed to the conditions that enable engagement in the first place, including positive relationships, strong peer connections, wellbeing, belonging and meaningful pathways into adulthood.

For twenty years, Top Blokes Foundation has worked alongside young males during critical developmental periods. The experiences shared in this submission reinforce what we have consistently observed in practice: when young males feel connected, valued, supported and able to see purpose in their future, they are far more likely to engage in learning and achieve positive educational outcomes.

Improving educational attainment among male students will require coordinated action across schools, communities, and government to build environments and create conditions in which more young males can participate, belong, and thrive.

We urge the Committee to recognise belonging, wellbeing, identity development and trusted relationships as core drivers of educational attainment for boys, and to recommend sustained investment in early, preventative and relationship-based supports within and alongside schools.

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