

**Submission  
No 4**

# **PREVENTION OF YOUTH SUICIDE IN NEW SOUTH WALES**

**Name:** Mr Paul Robertson

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Submission to Enquiry into Youth Suicide Prevention.

Dear Members of Parliament,

My name is Paul Robertson. I am a 49 year old artist and musician who worked as a teacher in Australian schools for many years. During that time, I was employed in a broad range of educational settings, which included special schools and special educational units (for students with emotional and behavioural difficulties.) as well as several Aboriginal communities. I also worked regularly across ethnically diverse, and economically disadvantaged suburbs of Brisbane and its surrounding areas.

In addition to learning and behavioural support roles, I also taught Music and Art as subjects. As you may appreciate, I had a lot of contact during that time with young people – and often those who were vulnerable and prone to depression or suicide. Many of those same young people were (and still are, in schools) also among the most potentially gifted people in modern Australia. Students with a creative and artistic bent.

My concerns will be addressed briefly here. An observation I made on social media recently was that youth suicide, (as well as the closely related issues of self-harm and substance abuse) is more prevalent now than at any time in recorded history. For this reason alone, I would like to commend you for recognising its seriousness by initiating an enquiry

It barely needs to be said that the culture of family, and of the extended family has been in a state of decline in our country for several decades. First of all, I believe it is vital that our leaders are seen to be actively encouraging mothers and fathers to take an interest in their children – in their education and development, and there have been some recent efforts and initiatives in this direction.

I am not, at this point in time, a parent myself, and I would like to point out that my observations are from the experience and perspective of a mentor and teacher, and that those observations pertain mostly, though not exclusively to the emotional and social development of boys and young men.

Schools, and the culture of schools have changed dramatically in recent decades, certainly since the time I was, myself, a schoolboy, and significantly in the twenty or so years since I began teaching. Sadly, many of these changes have not been positive. From the educational perspective, I believe that the single biggest factor impacting upon mental health of young people, is the conspicuous lack of male teachers and mentors within our education system. It was not uncommon, for example, when I worked as a supply teacher, to spend a day at one school and not see another adult male for the entire day. It is critical, in my view, that at some time in the near future, governments at all levels in Australia are seen to provide incentives for men to enter or re-enter the teaching profession.

Many people have noted, (sometimes with very specific political agendas) that much youth suicide occurs due to issues of gender identity and sexual orientation. Whilst this may be true in one sense, I would suggest that instances of this kind arise due to several factors. Certainly religious persecution is not one of the primary causes, as some have cynically suggested, especially in our increasingly secular society. (If this were the case, there would be far more youth suicides, per capita, in places like Saudi Arabia.)

From my experience, the absence of role models within schools and in the wider community is by far the biggest and most significant factor impacting the mental health of young people. For boys, in particular, (aside from the absence of fathers in the home environment) there are next to no male teachers, for example, in far too many schools. Sensitive and creative boys, in particular, find themselves bullied both at school and now online - mostly by their peers who are, themselves, 'out of control' and undisciplined. All boys (from all cultures and creeds) need guidance and direction from older males. Not only are there too few male teachers, there are even fewer male teachers and mentors with the skills to engage creative and sensitive students, and the 'disaffected' young people in

creative pursuits - in an aesthetic education. Learning to appreciate and love beauty, to create something of beauty, once central to a young persons' development has all-but disappeared from the ethos and practice of teaching . This absence of what was once central to a boys' education is an alarming development in recent times.

I recall seeing some footage recently of Robert Menzies, for example, who, when attending the opening of a boys school in New South Wales in the early 70's remarked on the need for boys to experience beauty as part of their education.

Now, several decades later, it seems we are left with the stereotype of 'camp' as the only enduring aesthetic pursuit.

The development of character within a child or teenager – once of primary importance to a boys' education is in danger of being lost in the modern educational environment. Not only that, but young people are being exposed to false and dangerous ideologies which lead them to believe that their sexual orientation (even though it may not be permanent or fixed at a young age) should be central to their identity. Perhaps even more extreme is the idea, now being pushed in some schools and by some of the media, that a child or adolescent can 'choose' the gender that they want to be. Young, sensitive and creative individuals, in particular, not infrequently leave schools (and the home environment) without a sense of direction, without having developed any real strength of character. They thus enter the 'real world' without the skills to deal with real life challenges, and (for sensitive young people i.e. artists) without an outlet to express themselves through creative endeavour. I, like many others are deeply concerned about the aggressively secular, materialist, and non-spiritual environment that young people increasingly find themselves in.

It is often for similar reasons that youth resort to suicide that they become drawn to extremism, because they sense a vacuum in the modern world, where they are not respected or valued, where they can't express themselves, and they sense the moral ambiguity and uncertainty around them. Youth need certainty and

direction, and many will intuitively seek it out where it is lacking. Others choose to 'give up' - turning to substance abuse, and suicide. These serious issues will certainly not be addressed or remedied by attacking our church leaders, (as has been the popular 'trend' in recent years) but first, by reforming a broken education system.

A reformation of schools involves looking carefully at what schools were in the past, what they have become now, and what they can potentially be in the future. The primary cause of our tragic youth suicide is the degraded and broken culture which young people find themselves lost in, something which schools, knowingly or not, have often been complicit in creating.

I am concerned to the extent to which it has become fashionable, in recent years, for some politicians to align themselves with identity politics, and, most notably of late, with the ill-conceived programs such as 'safe schools' – questionable at best, with their ideological roots in the 'free love' era of the 1960's. This kind of indoctrination not only has no historical precedent but it has no scientific basis. Additionally, it is at odds with Judeo-Christian thought, as well as with the most basic spiritual and moral principles of all people of faiths, including those within our Muslim community. What could be a greater incentive to radicalisation, for example, than a disenfranchised young man from a conservative Muslim family who is forced to participate in a workshop on 'gender fluidity' and transgender theory? Our Chinese/Australian community, for example, has, to their credit, also spoken out about this alarming development. We are allowing ourselves to become weak, and intellectually lazy, and the consequences for young people are severe.

One thing that impressed me greatly while living and working in indigenous communities, was the phenomena that people refer to as 'men's business' and 'women's business'. Whilst I won't claim to be an expert on indigenous culture, there is a universal principal underlying these concepts which have been lost in the frenetic postmodern narrative of equality and inclusiveness. What many of our indigenous people understand, and what the rest of us seem to be forgetting, is that there is an aspect of a boys' education which is exclusive to boys and

essential to their moral and spiritual development. Just as there is to the education of girls. If and when we lose sight of these fundamentals, our culture is in danger of decline.

Education becomes degraded and impoverished when it is reduced to little more than something utilitarian; as preparation for entry into the workforce, so that our youth can leave school and 'make as much money as possible'. Many parents are complicit in this, with the undue pressure that they exert on their children to 'succeed at all costs'. Writers throughout history, from Socrates and Plato onwards, have defined education as a fundamentally spiritual enterprise; learning has an inherent value for the human spirit and for its 'completeness'. I believe our teaching and academic culture needs to rediscover this understanding.

The dearth of male teachers within the profession, and in particular of skilled male teachers with life experience, requires our urgent attention. Many experienced and dedicated teachers in recent years (both men and women) have moved overseas, (to teach in countries where they are not hamstrung by political correctness and red tape) Others have either retired early or left the teaching profession and reentered the workforce elsewhere. This is a worrying trend – and I would go so far as to call it a national crisis. It is only likely to worsen if we don't act soon to restore and reinvigorate our centres of learning. One way to address this in the short to medium term would be through the implementation of artists-in-residence programs, especially in areas of the country where there is concentrated economic and social disadvantage. Additionally, considering the dire shortage of male teachers, I believe we can start by providing incentives for people (both men and women, but with a particular focus on men) of diverse backgrounds to take up study and enter the teaching profession. That is, people with life experience outside of the world of teaching and academia. It is time that we recast the 'narrative' of schools; and arrived at a new understanding of what a school is and what it might be again, with our collective effort. It shouldn't need to be stated (although I will state it!) that the quality of young people's education, and their prospects for a happy transition into adulthood, are greatly impacted by the kinds of adults who they can make contact with in their formative years.

Education and culture are intimately related, our schools can reinforce and uphold the values and traditions which we cherish and hold sacred, or they can turn their back on tradition, and without guidance, have the power to bring about the demise of our culture and society. I look forward to a time when a schools' effectiveness is not measured primarily by the extent to which young people enter the workforce, (though this is important) but by their success in having nurtured healthy, happy and well-rounded young men and women; young people with a sense purpose, of dignity and belonging. I hope that this enquiry can be a wake-up-call to those of you in positions of leadership; Australia needs inspired leadership, in all of our institutions, to initiate the kind of change that will begin to heal our nation and stave off its decline and demise. And one of the symptoms of this decline is the tragedy of youth suicide.

Sincerely,

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