

## What boys want from schools and teachers

Massey University, August 2007

Boys say having friends at school and having a lot of physical activity are very important for their happiness and success.

These were priorities for most of the more than 350 secondary schoolboys interviewed by University researcher Michael Irwin in a study of what boys believe enhances and inhibits academic success.

Auckland-based Mr Irwin, from the College of Education, initiated New Zealand's first national conferences on the under-achievement of boys (when, two years ago? Three?) and has been at the forefront of research exploring the reasons why boys lag behind girls at school and feature in many of the negative statistics relating to accidents, learning difficulties, and educational achievement.

\ Asking boys themselves what makes school a good place for them to be is, he says, an important part of providing successful education for them.

He found that having a group of friends, supporting them socially and assisting and motivating them educationally, was a huge factor in boys' lives.

"Almost without exception the boys I interviewed said being with their mates at school was very important to them. I have found that throughout their schooling these close groups of, say three to five boys, are very important to each boy individually in significant ways. They develop their own identity through these groupings, they share ideas, they will often discuss learning issues in these groups and it is often these ties that have a very positive influence in keeping them at school."

Physical exercise was also a high priority and Mr Irwin says schools need to look seriously at how they meet this need.

"Schools need to provide much more opportunity than they currently do for boys to be physically active. We know from existing research that physical activity and sport brings many benefits from bonding to stress release, mental stimulation and providing an outlet for competitive spirits."

He also found boys wanted learning to be challenging and for school to be fun.

"They don't want learning to be too hard or too easy. They want to be challenged and they feel the best way of meeting those challenges is to work together in groups with a problem-solving, hands-on approach.

"Most showed a high dislike of what they felt to be too much copying and writing things down at school.

"Almost all wanted to have fun, to have a laugh and for their environment to be one that they enjoy. This is the same thing that motivation researchers are also telling us.

"Schools need to take note of what matters most for boys at school – the importance of mates, the need for physical activity and for challenge in learning and the desire for school to be fun."

Mr Irwin's research highlighted some common attributes boys expected of their teachers. They wanted their teachers to focus on learning not content, to use humour, to collaborate and listen, to explain, to set clear expectations, to help them individually, to give specific feedback, to use activity based learning and co-operative learning, to be fair in managing behaviour.

Mr Irwin will present his research, Boys' perceptions of what enhances and inhibits their academic success, in London next month to the British Education Research Association.

[http://masseynews.massey.ac.nz/2007/Press\\_Releases/08-15-07.html](http://masseynews.massey.ac.nz/2007/Press_Releases/08-15-07.html)

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