

# What do schools need to do to have a good culture and healthy approach to gender?

March 6 2024, by Kellie Burns and Jessica Kean

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Cranbrook in Sydney's east is one of the most elite boys schools in Australia. On Monday night, the ABC's Four Corners program [aired claims](#) some female teachers had been bullied by male staff and sexually harassed by students.

Amid the school's decision to go [fully co-ed](#) by 2028, there are concerns about whether Cranbrook will be a safe space for girls.

In a [statement to the ABC](#), Cranbrook said its "current staff, including female staff, overwhelmingly support the School, its values and its culture". It also said it has appointed teacher Daisy Turnbull to prepare for coeducation and "support the furtherance of gender equality" at the school.

What do schools need to do in order to be genuinely gender inclusive?

## **Sexist school cultures**

In the last few years, a number of boys' [private schools](#) have faced allegations of unacceptable gendered cultures. This includes [sexual assault perpetrated by students](#), [offensive behavior online](#) and [in public](#) and woefully inadequate [responses to sexual assault and violence](#) between students.

Previous [Australian research](#) has also found elite boys schools can be hostile places for women and girls, trans and gender diverse students, as well as boys who don't conform to traditional norms of masculinity.

## It's not enough to simply go co-ed

Simply enrolling girls will not automatically make a boys school more inclusive, less sexist or safer.

Schools aiming to truly welcome a wider range of students will need to significantly reshape the structures and culture of the school itself, both within and beyond the classroom.

The World Health Organization has [developed a framework](#) to ensure schools are healthy and safe. It addresses three overlapping areas:

1. teaching and learning
2. the broader school environment
3. partnerships with parents and the community.

This approach can be applied to gender equity and inclusivity.

## Teaching and learning

The first component of a healthy school involves what students learn and the approaches and strategies used to teach it.

Schools that are gender equitable provide diverse curricula and equally diverse extra-curricular opportunities accessible to all students, regardless of gender.

There are all kinds of boys and all kinds of girls. So even single sex schools should be catering to students with a wide range of skills, interests, preferences and experiences. Likewise, there are students who are trans and non-binary, who may be excluded from [school activities](#) divided along narrow gender lines.

Some co-ed schools still segregate boys and girls for certain subjects. This approach upholds the idea that boys and girls learn differently and that some topics (such as menstruation) are too awkward to discuss in mixed-gendered groups.

Some schools choose to segregate classrooms to improve girls' opportunities in areas they have been traditionally underrepresented in. While this can spring from feminist recognition of gender inequalities, it reaffirms the very divides it is attempting to challenge.

## Gender equity across the curriculum

The current [Australian Curriculum](#) provides opportunities to engage young people in discussions about gender stereotypes and power in age-appropriate ways, in both primary and [high school](#).

In English, students should [meet diverse characters](#) that challenge traditional gender roles and inequality.

Science, technology, engineering and math subjects can [foster enthusiasm for STEM-related](#) content and careers, through hands-on classroom activities that encourage critical thinking and build confidence.

In health and [physical education](#), comprehensive [sexualities and relationships education](#) should be a priority and include discussions of gender, power, violence, consent and healthy relationships.

Teachers' values and attitudes about gender will also be reflected in their [everyday teaching routines and practices](#). This includes whether or not they address students through gendered language, divide students into gendered groups for activities or discipline boys and girls differently.

So teachers also need support and quality professional development to keep pace with evolving understandings of gender and [gender diversity](#).

## **The broader school environment**

The second component of a healthy school is the school culture. School leaders should use respectful and inclusive language and there should be strong policies to deal with child-protection concerns, gender-based discrimination and violence at school.

Research indicates that, unlike other forms of bullying, [gender-based violence is often overlooked](#) or ignored by staff. Sexist language and behaviors can be dismissed as "just a normal part of growing up" and so become a routine part of young people's schooling experiences.

School staff should also feel valued, respected and safe in their workplace regardless of their sex, gender or sexuality. Unfortunately, evidence indicates this is not always the case. A 2018 survey found [43% of NSW LGBTIQA teachers](#) reported experiences of discrimination in the workplace. Australian research published in 2020 found women teachers were experiencing unacceptably high rates of [sexual harassment in elite boys schools](#).

School leaders have a duty to ensure their schools have robust policies and processes for responding to disclosures of harassment and discrimination from staff. They also need to pursue [evidence-informed](#) cultural change to ensure a safe work environment.

## **Involve students**

Students can be active partners in developing an inclusive school community and can even help [co-design curricula](#) relating to gender,

overcoming biases and developing healthy relationships.

Student diversity should also be reflected through gender-balanced representation in student leadership roles. Student initiatives around gender equality and LGBTQIA+ visibility, such as [gender and sexuality alliances](#), should also be supported.

School uniforms should provide options so all young people feel safe and comfortable in what they wear at school.

## **Partnerships and services**

The third and final part of a healthy school looks beyond the school gates. Schools should see parents as partners and celebrate diversity in the community.

Parents should be invited to ask questions about curriculum and school culture and to raise concerns or lend expertise. School policies should be publicly available and regularly reviewed with student and parent input.

Schools can also work with organizations that promote gender equity, diversity and promote healthy relationships such as [Our Watch](#), [Family Planning](#) and [Twenty10](#).

These organizations can support schools' counseling and pastoral care services and provide resources and training for teachers.

## **All schools can adopt this model**

While boys schools have been the focus of recent media attention all schools should be called upon to evaluate and reflect on their gendered culture.

Co-ed and girls schools are not immune to [gender](#)-based violence, sexism, homophobia and transphobia.

A whole-of-school review of curricula, school culture and partnerships can help schools ensure they are creating inclusive and respectful environments. This work is urgent if we aspire to a society where all students and teachers are safe in our schools.

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