



Dear Editors,

After two decades of Women's Lib, it is distressing to find that Ontario schools are still teaching girls, both directly and indirectly, that their real place is in the home. There seems little chance that women will have equal opportunity in the working world until they see themselves equally as capable as boys.

With this in mind, a small group of us in Waterloo decided to try to influence the Waterloo County Board of Education to allow girls and boys in Grades 7 and 8 to have an equal chance to take Industrial Arts and Family Studies. After all, the girls often learn to cook and sew at home. Why should they have to learn these all over again? Why should boys not learn to look after their own daily needs? And why should not all children have a chance to make metal boxes and wooden candle holders?

Our first effort (Sept. 1976) was to write to our local paper urging that the Board not practise sexism in the public schools. Our letter was published, but it brought no response.

Our second approach was to ask the two women on the School Board to help us in our project. Neither was interested. One claimed concern about sexism, but said she would work to have more female principals appointed, rather than for the students. (At present there are four women principals of over 110 school principals, down from six in early 1977). The other woman said women themselves were at fault for not pushing themselves forward as prospective principals.

Our next effort was to circulate a petition asking 90 taxpayers if they wanted boys and girls to have equal access in school to the courses in Family Studies and Industrial Arts. All but one indicated they did by signing the petition; this one woman wanted to sign too, but was a teacher who needed a job and was afraid that by doing so she would jeopardize her chances of finding one in the area.

In the spring of 1977, spurred on by endorsement of our project by the Ontario Status of Women Council (letter Feb. 1977), we presented our petition in May to the Board's Sexist Problems in Education Committee, a desultory group which meets infrequently. This group, when it finally understood what we wanted, agreed to consider the question for six months and perhaps recommend our proposal to the Board. It did not do so in the Dec. 1977 meeting when sexism was discussed. Rather it recommended that the Board 'examine the extent to which [these courses] are equally available to males and females,' something which could have been determined with a few phone calls. In a letter of Jan. 1978 we were told that some schools did allow an exchange of boys and girls between Industrial Arts and Family Studies, but these only occur if a girl can persuade a boy to change places with her. The children are left in no doubt that cooking and sewing are really a female's work. We were also told that in one school there actually was a compulsory exchange of boys and girls.

Since the Board indicated no further interest in the issue, we wrote it again in May 1978. This time an official wrote (June 2, 1978) 'We do not feel that the majority of the parents wish us to dictate a 50/50 split at the present time.' We wrote back asking why the Board felt this way; had it carried out a survey whose results were directly contrary to those in our survey? The Board had apparently carried out no survey, but the same official felt that the present system was working all right and was non-threatening. He could not claim, of course, that it helped eliminate sexism which is supposedly the aim for Ontario schools. On July 12th he wrote that making Industrial Arts and Family Studies courses 'equally available to males and females is a stated objective of the Board.' But again he indicated that it would not be implemented. So again in September 1978 sexual stereotyping continued in virtually all Waterloo Senior Elementary Schools.

In November 1978 we asked the people who were running for the new School Board what their stand was on this issue. Most hedged nervously, mentioning how conservative the area was. Not a single one of the eight candidates spoke out clearly against sexual stereotyping in our schools. Not only do women in Ontario have a long way to go; the problem is, will they ever get there?

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