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OPINION

Expelling problem students sounds impressive. But all it does is pass the buck



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The strong message sent by Yarra Valley Grammar when it chose to expel two male Year 11 students who were part of a group that ranked female classmates was greeted with applause and gratitude by most people. By me? Not so much.

Seeing this decision in context is important, and there are two contextual features here that matter.



Yarra Valley Grammar School principal, Mark Merry. NINE NEWS

The first is the response from the school. Principal Mark Merry's handling of the situation was outstanding and rare. In recent times, as more and more of this kind of aggressive, misogynistic behaviour from male students at exclusive private schools has drawn attention, Merry's words were a lesson for others who have erred on the side of protecting brand above people.

Merry was visibly moved by his students' behaviour and spoke frankly of the impact these boys' behaviour had on people at the school, rightly directing most of his messaging to the perceived harm cause to the Year 11 female students.


These girls had been callously and publicly outed with derogatory terms that ranged from "wifey" and "cutie", all the way through to "get out" and "unrapable". For those students and their parents, I'm sure Merry's words were appreciated. But from here, it appears pressure was applied to the point where authentic, meaningful action was usurped by a need for those far removed from the school to have their anger and outrage soothed.

Talkback radio was flooded with callers demanding that [the initial suspension of the students](#) be upped to an expulsion, and a public shaming of the perpetrators. Even federal Education Minister Jason Clare was insistent that the school's funding was under threat and directly dependent on the school's reaction.

After just a few days of this vitriolic pressure, Yarra Valley Grammar cracked, and expelled two of the boys involved in the list.

There's no coming back from expulsion. And because of it, a lot of things won't be happening as a result of this card being played.

The first is that Yarra Valley Grammar is now absolved from its responsibility to turn the young men around who have, on its watch, showed uncaring, cruel, sexist and bullying behaviour. That will now become the responsibility of another school.



Boys from Yarra Valley Grammar have been expelled for ranking girls in categories on a chat group. EDDIE IJM

Merry also insisted that the ghastly conduct of this group of students was not in the DNA of the school as a whole, but on this point, he is wrong.

The second important context of the decision to expel these two boys is the national crisis we are facing in men who abuse and murder their female partners. This is a problem that [exists in the psyche of young men in Australia](#). More informed by Andrew Tate's social media platforms than by dinner table conversations with distracted parents, Australia's boys and young men are increasingly growing up with warped, selfish and possessive mindsets towards girls and women.

Further, given the accelerating frequency of incidents such as that at Yarra Valley Grammar and other hyper-privileged schools, it's clear that attaching a healthy diet of wealth-driven entitlement to these twisted values is feeding an environment where tomorrow's women will continue to pay the price.

I have little doubt that Merry knows full well that excising these two students from his enrolment list has not removed the potential for another group of boys to simply take their place.

But in expelling two of the group, Merry can claim to have acted strongly, and appease Clare and enraged talkback callers in the process. They can trot out the "few bad apples" excuse, put this whole sordid mess behind them, and get back to restoring the school's good name.

A stronger path would have been to admit that the way schools, families and communities are raising young men is failing our girls and women.

Stronger would have been a lengthy suspension, spent in mandatory counselling sessions and planning to take school-supported personal responsibility with every single person, especially the female students and their families, harmed by their actions.

Stronger would have been to ensure these boys have done the work that ensures the girls they've slandered don't feel they need to leave when they eye the boys in a supermarket or at a footy match in the future.

Stronger would have been to concede that the plethora of "respectful relationships" lessons that teachers are compelled to spend hours preparing as well as anti-bullying school days and murals about showing each other kindness and respect are no match for a culture that rescues the rich from personally making amends when they screw up.

Stronger would have been the school revealing the steps that they, and all of our schools, are taking to start building those cultures.

Kicking the responsibility can to someone else may make us feel or look strong, but it's really little more than convenient distraction from the real reason that almost three dozen Australian women have died this year – the way we're constructing our men is broken.

Adam Voigt is a former principal and founder and CEO of Real Schools.

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