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The Boys Have Fallen Behind

By NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF

Around the globe, it's mostly girls who lack educational opportunities. Even in the United States, many people still associate the educational "gender gap" with girls left behind in math.

Yet these days, the opposite problem has sneaked up on us: In the United States and other Western countries alike, it is mostly boys who are faltering in school. The latest surveys show that American girls on average have roughly achieved parity with boys in math. Meanwhile, girls are well ahead of boys in verbal skills, and they just seem to try harder.

The National Honor Society says that 64 percent of its members — outstanding high school students — are girls. Some colleges give special help to male applicants — yes, that's affirmative action for white males — to avoid skewed sex ratios.

A [new report](#) just issued by the Center on Education Policy, an independent research organization, confirms that boys have fallen behind in reading in every single state. It found, for example, that in elementary schools, about 79 percent of girls could read at a level deemed "proficient," compared with 72 percent of boys. Similar gaps were found in middle school and high school.

In every state, in each of the three school levels, girls did better on average than boys.

"The most pressing issue related to gender gaps is the lagging performance of boys in reading," the report said.

A sobering new book, "[Why Boys Fail](#)," by Richard Whitmire, cites mountains of evidence to make the point:

- The average high school grade point average is 3.09 for girls and 2.86 for boys. Boys are almost twice as likely as girls to repeat a grade.
- Boys are twice as likely to get suspended as girls, and three times as likely to be expelled. Estimates of dropouts vary, but it seems that about one-quarter more boys drop out than girls.
- Among whites, women earn 57 percent of bachelor's degrees and 62 percent of master's degrees. Among blacks, the figures are 66 percent and 72 percent.
- In federal writing tests, 32 percent of girls are considered "proficient" or better. For boys, the figure is 16 percent.

There is one important exception: Boys still beat out girls at the very top of the curve, especially in math.

In the high school class of 2009, a total of 297 students scored a perfect triple-800 on the S.A.T., 62 percent of them boys, according to Kathleen Steinberg of the College Board. And of the 10,052 who scored an 800 in the math section, 69 percent were boys.

Some say that the “boy problem” is just a problem for members of minorities. But “Why Boys Fail” says that at the end of high school, among white boys who have at least one parent who attended college, 23 percent score “below basic” in reading. Only 7 percent of their female counterparts score that low.

Likewise, boys are also lagging in Scandinavia, Canada, Britain and throughout the industrialized world.

What is going on?

Many theories have been proposed. Some people think that boys are hard-wired so that they learn more slowly, perhaps because they evolved to fight off wolves more than to raise their hands in classrooms. But that doesn’t explain why boys have been sinking in recent decades.

Mr. Whitmire argues that the basic problem is an increased emphasis on verbal skills, often taught in sedate ways that bore boys. “The world has gotten more verbal,” he writes. “Boys haven’t.”

The upshot, he writes, is that boys get frustrated, act out, and learn to dislike school. “Poor reading skills snowball through the grades,” he writes. “By fifth grade, a child at the bottom of the class reads only about 60,000 words a year in and out of school, compared to a child in the middle of the class who reads about 800,000 words a year.”

Some educators say that one remedy may be to encourage lowbrow, adventure or even gross-out books that disproportionately appeal to boys. (I confess that I was a huge fan of the Hardy Boys, and then used them to entice my own kids into becoming avid readers as well.)

Indeed, the more books make parents flinch, the more they seem to suck boys in. A Web site, guysread.com, offers useful lists of books to coax boys into reading, and they are helpfully sorted into categories like “ghosts,” “boxers, wrestlers, ultimate fighters,” and “at least one explosion.”

At a time when men are still hugely overrepresented in Congress, on executive boards, and in the corridors of power, does it matter that boys are struggling in schools? Of course it does: our future depends on making the best use of human capital we can, whether it belongs to girls or boys. If that means nurturing boys with explosions, that’s a price worth paying.