



Get Schooled



Lots of news on boys and school. None of it good.

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A new report comparing math and reading skills by gender offers “good news for girls but bad news for boys,” says Jack Jennings, president of the Center on Education Policy. The study shows a gender gap in reading with girls taking a decided lead.

Released Wednesday, the center’s report on the achievement levels of boys and girls on state reading and math assessments found that boys lag girls in reading in all states across elementary, middle and high schools. “Something is going on in our schools that is holding boys back,” says Jennings. ‘Let me emphasize, we do not want a war of the sexes in education...but we need a broad conversation on how boys can do better in schools.’”

The study confirms the concerns of many educators who have been sounding an alarm for year over the flagging academic performance of boys and the worrisome male dropout rate.

While educators worried 20 years ago about the gap between girls and boys in math performance, girls have achieved parity with boys in math, says Jennings.

Historically, boys trailed girls in reading in the very early grades, but caught up and exceeded girls by fourth grade. This study shows that is no longer the case. Boys are not making up for lost ground in reading at any point in their k-12 careers.

And a reason may be that the hands-on play that helped young boys develop intellectually and learn to problem solve is increasingly curtailed by inflexible academic approaches that better suit how little girls learn. Without that developmental foundation, boys are not progressing in reading or becoming interested in books.

Education researcher Susan B. Neuman, an expert in early literacy, was part of a conference call Tuesday to talk to the press about the Center on Education Policy findings. She said the study

mirrored what she is seeing in special education where boys, especially minority males, dominate. Neuman is a University of Michigan professor and former U.S. Assistant Secretary of Elementary and Secondary Education.

Calling the study “a rallying cry,” Neuman said it suggests that schools are not meeting the needs of young boys because of a curriculum that does not reflect their interests and classroom management that does not tolerate their learning styles.

The problem is as basic as the content that we put in front of young children, says Newman, noting that while girls prefer storybooks, boys like books that are informational, that tell them about dinosaurs or outer space.

“Girls tend to read what people give them,” says Neuman. “They’re intrigued with learning to read. With boys, we have to motivate them to read.”

In the past, young children had more choices in school, says Neuman, but the focus on testing and academic learning has left less time for choice and more demand for conformity. The strong emphasis on teaching reading skills, sounds and letters succeeds with girls, but not with boys, she says.

(We did not discuss the impact of video games on boys and reading, but a new study suggests that school performance suffers because of the time boys spend playing video games.)

One of the experts expressing concerns about boys has been Anthony Rao, co-author of the new book “The Way of Boys: Raising Healthy Boys in a Challenging and Complex World,” My interview with him is here.

From the vantage point of working with families for 20 years, Rao says that he has seen less and less tolerance in schools of little boys who can’t sit still or who are overly aggressive. Boys, for example, are expelled 4.5 times more often than girls in preschools — a rate that exceeds even high school expulsions.

Today’s classroom is better suited for the ways girls learn, says Rao. “When you promote all this assessment and increasing standardization, you narrow the way you are going to teach kids, eclipsing the ways that boys learn better. You go to much less hands-on and manipulation of objects and to more sit down and lectures.”

Also on Tuesday, the MetLife Survey of the American Teacher series issued its own gender gap report. Among its findings:

Girls are more likely than boys to:

Strongly agree that it is important they go to school or college after high school (71% vs. 65%)

Plan to attend a two- or four-year college (85% vs. 73%)

Be very confident they will achieve their goals for the future (59% vs. 50%)

Girls are less likely than boys to:

Agree that they only do enough work to do as well as they need to get by in school (31% vs. 41%)

Speak one-one-one with teacher about their interests and things that are important to them at least once a month (43% vs. 52%)

There is a lot here – and it's midnight so I am closing before this turns into the first chapter of a long book. Let's discuss in the morning.

