

An Educator's Primer to the Gender War

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Several recent books, a series of seemingly endless television and radio talk shows, and a number of newspaper columns paint a disturbing picture of schools mired in a surreptitious war on boys. In books with titles like, *The War Against Boys: How Misguided Feminism is Harming Our Young Men* (Sommers, 2001) and *Ceasefire!* (Young, 1999) readers are introduced to education using war metaphors, and informed that boys are daily casualties of zealous efforts to help girls. These “school-at-war” authors also call for more “boy friendly education,” including increased testing, frequent classroom competitions, and inclusion of war poetry in the curriculum, all intended to counter feminist influences. They also argue that sections of Title IX, the law that prohibits sex discrimination in education, be rescinded. Teachers are informed that extra attention given to boys in class and school libraries dominated by books about male characters are useful strategies to improve boys’ academic performance. As one book warns: “It’s a bad time to be a boy in America

After over a quarter of a century of researching life in schools, I must admit that at first I thought this “gender war” was a satire, a creative way to alert people to the difficulties of producing fair schools that work for all children. Certainly boys (like girls) confront gender stereotypes and challenges, and teachers and parents must work hard every day to make schools work for all children. But these recent books and media talk shows were not intended as satire; they presented a serious picture where girls ruled schools, and boys were their victims.

The irony of girls waging a war on boys reminded me of a Seinfeld episode that featured *Bizarro* world. For those of

you not versed in the *Bizarro* world culture, it is a Superman comics theme where everything is opposite: up is down, in is out, and good is bad. When the Seinfeld television show featured an episode on *Bizarro* world, Kramer became polite and discovered that doors were to be knocked on, not stormed through. George went from nerd to cool, from dysfunctional to popular, and was rewarded with two well-adjusted parents. Elaine’s self absorption was transformed into compassion, a move that would likely lead to a hitch in the Peace Corps, and stardom in her own Seinfeld spin-off, “Elaine in Africa.” In this topsy-turvy transformation, Seinfeld’s entire gang became well adjusted, with their ethical compasses recalibrated to do the right thing. What would schools be like, I thought, if the Seinfeld and Superman’s *Bizarro* world came to pass? What would school look like if “misguided feminists” were actually engaging in a “war against boys”? And then I thought, what if girls really did rule?

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(Camera Fade In) The statue of the great woman dominates the front lawn of suburban Alice Paul High School. (Alice Paul, of course, led the courageous fight for women to be recognized as citizens, and her efforts contributed to passage of the 19th Amendment). By 2001, Alice Paul, along with Susan B. Anthony and Hillary Rodham Clinton, had become the most common names for America’s schools. The statue of Alice Paul, at the entrance of the school, had become a student *talis-woman*. Students rubbed Alice’s big toe before taking the SATs or on the eve of a critical soccer match with cross-town rivals the Stanton Suffragettes. Although Alice Paul died in 1977, she remains a real presence on campus.

Once inside Alice Paul High School, images of famous women are everywhere. Pictures of Jeannette Rankin, Mary MacLeod Bethune, Margaret Sanger, Carry Nation, and Mia Hamm gaze down on students as they go to their classes, constant reminders of the power and accomplishments of women. There are few if any pictures of men, confirming that old adage: "It's a woman's world." School trophy cases overflow with artifacts trumpeting women's role in ending child labor, reforming schools, eliminating domestic violence, confronting alcoholism, and battling for health care reform. It is the same story in the technology and math wing of Alice Paul High, where the influence of computer pioneers like Ada Loveless and Grace Hopper are everywhere. Few images of males can be found anywhere in the school hallways, or in textbooks. The typical history text devotes less than five percent of its content to the contributions of men, a percentage that actually shrinks in math and science texts. Other than the one or two "unusual men" who find their way into the curriculum, students learn that their world was constructed almost exclusively by and for women.

Not everyone is happy with female dominated bulletin boards and textbooks, as school principal Anna Feminie knows all too well. From time to time, a few vociferous parents of boys complain about the lack of male images. But Anna Feminie has been in her job for five years now, and she knows just how to handle angry parents. (Anna Feminie is not atypical: Most school principals are, of course, female, since they seem better equipped to manage demanding parents and a predominantly male faculty.) So Anna Feminie makes a big show of *Men's History Month*. Almost magically, every March, a new crop of male figures materializes. Anna understands that *Men's History Month* is a nod to political correctness, little more than a curricular side step. Luckily, most parents and faculty agree with Anna, and feel more comfortable with the well-known female names and images from their own student days. But all that may be changing with the increased emphasis on standardized state tests. New history standards put the traditional female front and center once again, and perhaps the end of *Men's History Month* is in sight. And if that came to pass, it would be just fine with principal Anna Feminie.

By 8 a.m., hallway noise is at a crescendo as students exchange last minute comments before the late bell sounded. Crowds of girls rule the school's "prime real estate": main stairwells, the cafeteria entrance, and the senior hall student lockers. In groups, the girls seem even more intimidating. Individual boys carefully weave their way around these "girl areas," looking down to avoid unwanted stares and snares. The strategy is less than effective. Sometimes the boys are forced to pretend that they do not hear those louder-than-a-whisper offensive comments. At other times, the boys rapidly side-

step the outstretched arms of some of the more aggressive girls who are trying to impress their friends. Boys at Paul High travel in bands for safety, like convoys at sea. They smile a lot and speak a little. Although they do not quite understand it all, they do know that they are at some risk, even in their own school, and taking precautions has become second nature.

Girls dominate in classrooms as well. They freely shout out answers, and teachers accept their behavior as "natural," part of their more aggressive biological makeup. Not true for the boys. When boys call out, they are likely to be reminded to "raise your hand." Even when girls do not shout out, teachers call on girls more often than boys, reward them more, help them more, and criticize them more. With girls as the center of classroom attention, boys seem content to sit quietly on the sidelines: low profiles are safe profiles.

Most boys take to their quiet, second class role with incredible grace. Boys enroll in the programs more suitable for their nature, the humanities and social sciences courses, as well as the typical and predictable vocational programs. Few boys are assigned to costly special education programs. While educating boys' is relatively inexpensive, there are awards associated with lower career goals, docility and conformity. Every quarter, boys are rewarded with higher report card grades. Boys are also more likely to be listed on the honor roll and chosen to be the school valedictorian. Teachers appreciate boys who do their work on time, cause few disruptions, demand less in class, rarely complain, and do not need costly special education programs.

While these high report card grades are comforting, low-test scores are disturbing. When the SATs and other competitive tests roll around, boys' scores lag behind girls in both math and verbal skills. On virtually every "high stakes" test that matters, including the Advanced Placement tests and later the Graduate Record Exam, girls outscore boys. Few adults wonder why boys' high report card grades are not reflected in these very important test scores.

While the athletic field offers a change of venue, it is basically the same story. At Alice Paul, boys' football, baseball and basketball do not hold a candle to girls' field hockey and soccer. The student newspaper is filled with the exploits of Alice Paul Amazons, as the female athletes are called. The "Gentlemen Amazons," the boys' teams, draw smaller crowds and less coverage in the school paper. Funding for just one of the girls' teams can equal the entire male athletic budget. Although some parents have tried to bolster male sports, coaches, parents, and the influential state athletic association have thwarted their efforts.

Female domination of athletics is accompanied by the ringing of a cash register. A few female athletes have

won not only college scholarships, but moved into the multi-million dollar professional ranks. Amazon booster clubs have been generous to Alice Paul, funding the new athletic field, the state of the art girls' training facility, and a number of athletic scholarships. The Alice Paul Amazons ignite school spirit, and have won several state championships. No one was surprised five years ago when the former girls' field hockey coach, Anna Feminie, was chosen as the new school principal.

If Alice Paul were alive today, she would be proud of her Amazons. Alice Paul women dominate corporate boardrooms and government offices, and many are leaders promoting social reform around the globe. And Alice would be no less proud of the men who graduate from her school, true partners with women at work and at home. (*Camera Fade Out*)

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The description of fictional Alice Paul High is a true reflection of hundreds of studies of school life, with one obvious modification (after all, it is *Bizarro* world): the genders have been reversed. The idea that "girls rule" in school is not only silly, it is intentionally deceptive. So why all this recent commotion about "a war on boys"?

Certainly boys do not always fit comfortably into the school culture, but this has little to do with girls, and a lot to do with how we school. In fact, both girls and boys confront different school challenges, and they respond in different ways. Girls are more likely to react to problems in a quieter and less disruptive fashion, while boys are more likely to act out—or drop out. Males of color in particular drop out of high school more often and enroll in college less frequently than either minority females or white males. Decades of studies, books and reports have documented the school difficulties of boys generally, and boys of color in particular. The new twist in the current debate is scapegoating the feminist movement. And for those who were never very comfortable with the feminist movement, these new books and their ultraconservative spokespeople have an allure. Many mainstream media fixate on the audience appeal of a "Mars versus Venus" scenario, portraying boys as hapless victims of "male-hating feminists." Even educators and parents who do not blame females for the problems boys experience still buy into the argument that girls are "ahead" in school. But for people to believe that "girls are responsible for boys' problems," they must repress historical realities: these problems predated the women's movement. Boys' reading difficulties, for example, existed long before modern feminism was a twinkle in Betty Friedan's eye, and the dropout rate has actually decreased since the publication of *The Feminine Mystique*. Ironically, it was female teachers who fought hard to remove corporal punishment, while promoting new instructional strategies that moved teachers beyond lecture

and recitation. Women educators led the movement for more humane classrooms, and the current attack on feminism has the potential of hurting boys as well as girls.

The truth is that *both* boys and girls exhibit different strengths and have different needs, and gender stereotypes shortchanges both. So where are we in terms of the progress made for both girls and boys in school today? And what challenges still remain? The following "Report Card" takes us beyond the phony gender war and offers a succinct update of salient research findings

THE REPORT CARD: *THE COSTS OF GENDER BIAS*

(one you'll never get from school)

Grades and Tests

Females

- Females receive better grades from elementary school through college, but not everyone sees this as good news. Some believe that this may be one of the "rewards" girls receive for more quiet and conforming classroom behavior.¹
- Female scores in several areas have improved dramatically in recent years. Their performance on science and math achievement tests has improved, and they now take more Advanced Placement tests than boys. Yet they lag behind males on America's "high stakes" tests, scoring lower on both the verbal and mathematics sections of the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT), the Advanced Placement (AP) exams, and the Graduate Record Exam (GRE) for masters and doctoral programs.²

Males

- Males (and students from low-income families) not only receive lower grades, but they are more likely to be grade repeaters. Many believe that school norms and culture conflict with many male behavior patterns.³
- The National Assessment of Educational Progress as well as other exams indicate that males perform significantly below females in writing and reading achievement.⁴

Academic Enrollment

Females

- Female enrollment in science and mathematics courses has increased dramatically in recent years. Girls are more likely to take biology and chemistry as well as trigonometry and algebra II. However, boys still dominate physics, calculus, and more advanced courses, and are more likely to take all three core science courses — biology, chemistry, and physics.⁵

- College programs are highly segregated, with women earning between 75 and 90% of the degrees in education, nursing, home economics, library science, psychology and social work. Women lag behind men in Ph.D.s (40%) and professional degrees (42%), and are the minority at 7 out of 8 Ivy League schools.⁶
- Computer science and technology reflect increasing gender disparities. Boys not only enroll in more of these courses, but also enroll in the more advanced courses. Girls are more likely to be found in word processing and clerical support programs. Girls are also less likely to use computers outside of school, and girls from all ethnic groups rate themselves considerably lower than boys on technological ability. Current software products are more likely to reinforce these gender stereotypes and bias rather than reduce them.⁷

Males

- Males have a higher high school dropout rate than females (13% to 10%), and lag behind females in extracurricular participation, including school government, literary activities and the performing arts.⁸
- Men are the minority (44%) of students enrolled in both undergraduate and graduate institutions and, as a group lag behind women in degree attainment at the associate (39%), bachelor (44%) and masters (44%) levels. Although white males and females attend college in fairly equal proportions, African-American and Hispanic males are particularly under-represented at all educational levels.⁹
- Gender segregation continues to limit the academic and careers majors of all students. Male college students comprise only 12 percent of elementary teaching majors, 11 percent of special education majors, 12 percent of those preparing in library science, and 14 percent of students majoring in social work.¹⁰

Academic Interactions and Special Programs

Females

- Females receive fewer academic contacts in class. They are less likely to be called upon by name, are asked fewer complex and abstract questions, receive less praise or constructive feedback, and are given less direction on how to do things for themselves. In short, girls are more likely to be invisible members of classrooms.¹¹
- In elementary school, girls are identified for gifted programs more often than boys, however by high school fewer girls remain in gifted programs, particularly fewer African American and Hispanic females. Gender segregation is evident as girls are less likely to be found in gifted math and science programs.¹²

Males

- Boys receive more teacher attention than females, including more negative attention. They are disciplined more harshly, more publicly, and more frequently than girls, even when they violate the same rules. Parents of male elementary school students (24%) are contacted more frequently about their child's behavior or schoolwork than parents of female students (12%), and boys constitute 71% of school suspensions.¹³
- Males account for two-thirds of all students served in special education. The disproportionate representation of males in special education is greatest in the categories of emotional disturbance (78% male), learning disability (68% male), and mental retardation (58% male).¹⁴

Health and Athletics

Females

- About one million U. S. teenagers get pregnant each year, a higher percentage than other Western nations. Fifty percent of adolescent girls believe they are overweight, and thirteen percent are diagnosed with anorexia, bulimia, or binge-eating disorder.¹⁵
- Girls who play sports enjoy a variety of health benefits, including lower rates of pregnancy, drug use, and depression. But despite these benefits, only 50% of girls are enrolled in high school physical education classes. Women today coach only 45.6% of women's college teams, and only 1% of men's teams, while men direct about four out of five women's programs.¹⁶

Males

- Males are more likely to succumb to serious disease and be victims of accidents or violence than females. The average life expectancy of men is approximately six years shorter than that of women.¹⁷
- Boys are the majority (60%) of high school athletes. Male athletes in NCAA Division I programs graduate at a lower rate than female athletes (52% v 68%).¹⁸

Career Preparation and Family and Parenting

Females

- Women dominate lower paying careers, (over 90% of secretaries, receptionists, bookkeepers, registered nurses, and hairdressers/cosmetologists), and on average, a female college graduate earns \$4,000 less annually than a male with a college diploma. Nearly two out of three working women today do not have a pension plan.¹⁹
- Over 45 percent of families headed by women live in poverty, particularly woman of color. When both par-

ents are present, women are still expected to assume the majority of these responsibilities.²⁰

Males

- Men comprise 99% of corporate officers in America's 500 largest companies, but are only 16% of all elementary school teachers, and 7% of nurses (although this is an increase, up from 1% of nurses in 1972).²¹
- Women and men express different views of fatherhood. Men emphasize the need for the father to earn a good income and to provide solutions to family problems. Women, on the other hand, stress the need for fathers to assist in caring for children and in responding to the emotional needs of the family. These differing perceptions of fatherhood increase family strain and anxiety.²²

Even this brief overview of gender differences does little more than confirm common sense observations: neither boys nor girls “rule in school.” Sometimes even progress can mask problems. While a great deal has been written about females attending college in greater numbers than males, this has at least as much to do with color as gender. These enrollment figures are shaped in large part by the serious dearth of males of color in post-secondary programs. Moreover, attendance figures provide only one indicator; enrollments in specific college majors tell a different story. As a result of striking gender segregation in college programs, women and men follow very different career paths, with very different economic consequences. Although the majority of students are female, the college culture is still strongly influenced by male leaders. Four out of five full professors are males, more male professors (72%) are awarded tenure than female professors (52%), and for the last 30 years, full time male professors have consistently earned more than their female peers.²³ Even at the elementary and secondary levels, schools continue to be managed by male principals and superintendents. If feminists are waging a “war on boys,” as some proclaim, they are being led by male generals.

It is not surprising that many educators are confused about gender issues: information and misinformation abound. There is little doubt that boys and school are not now, nor have they ever been, a match made in heaven. But this is a far cry from concluding that there is a gender war against them, or that girls now “rule” in school, as one recent magazine cover proclaimed. In the midst of the adult controversy, we can easily overlook the obvious, like asking children how they see the issue. Students consistently report that girls get easier treatment in school, are the better students, and are less likely to get into trouble. Yet school lessons are not always life lessons. When researcher Cynthia Mee asked middle school students about boys and girls, both had more positive things to say about being a boy than being a girl.

When in another study, over a thousand Michigan elementary school students were asked to describe what life would be like if they were born a member of the opposite sex, over 40 percent of the girls saw positive advantages to being a boy, from better jobs to more respect. Ninety-five percent of the boys saw no advantage to being a female, and a number of boys in the 1991 study indicated they would consider suicide rather than living life as a female. While some adults may choose to argue that females are the advantaged gender, girls and boys often see the world before them quite differently.²⁴

The success of the backlash movement has taught us a great many lessons, including the slow pace of social change, as well as the power of political ideologues to set the educational agenda. How ironic that the gender debate, once thought to be synonymous with females, now hinges on how well boys are doing in school. And in the end, reframing gender equity to include boys may prove to be a very positive development. For now, it is up to America's educators to duck the barrage of the gender war crowd, and to continue their efforts to make schools fairer and more humane environments for all our students.

ENDNOTES

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