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**The Boys at the Back**

BY CHRISTINA HOFF SOMMERS

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[The Great Divide](https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/category/the-great-divide/) is a series about inequality.

Boys score as well as or better than girls on most standardized tests, yet they are far less likely to get good grades, take advanced classes or attend college. Why? A [study](https://www.terry.uga.edu/~cornwl/research/cmvp.genderdiffs.pdf) coming out this week in The [Journal of Human Resources](https://jhr.uwpress.org/) gives an important answer. Teachers of classes as early as kindergarten factor good behavior into grades — and girls, as a rule, comport themselves far better than boys.

The study’s authors analyzed data from more than 5,800 students from kindergarten through fifth grade and found that boys across all racial groups and in all major subject areas received lower grades than their test scores would have predicted.

The scholars attributed this “misalignment” to differences in “noncognitive skills”: attentiveness, persistence, eagerness to learn, the ability to sit still and work independently. As most parents know, girls tend to develop these skills earlier and more naturally than boys.

No previous study, to my knowledge, has demonstrated that the well-known gender gap in school grades begins so early and is almost entirely attributable to differences in behavior. The researchers found that teachers rated boys as less proficient even when the boys did just as well as the girls on tests of reading, math and science. (The teachers did not know the test scores in advance.) If the teachers had not accounted for classroom behavior, the boys’ grades, like the girls’, would have matched their test scores.

That boys struggle with school is hardly news. Think of Shakespeare’s “whining schoolboy with his satchel and shining morning face, creeping like snail unwillingly to school.” Over all, it’s likely that girls have long behaved better than boys at school (and earned better grades as a result), but their early academic success was not enough to overcome significant subsequent disadvantages: families’ favoring sons over daughters in allocating scarce resources for schooling; cultural norms that de-emphasized girls’ education, particularly past high school; an industrial economy that did not require a college degree to earn a living wage; and persistent discrimination toward women in the workplace.

Those disadvantages have lessened since about the 1970s. Parents, especially those of education and means, began to value their daughters’ human capital as much as their sons’. Universities that had been dominated by affluent white men embraced meritocratic values and diversity of gender, race and class. The shift from a labor-intensive, manufacturing-reliant economy to a knowledge-based service economy significantly increased the relative value of college and postgraduate degrees. And while workplace inequities persisted, changing attitudes, legislation and litigation began to level the occupational playing field.

As these shifts were occurring, girls began their advance in education. In 1985, boys and girls took Advanced Placement exams at nearly the same rate. Around 1990, girls moved ahead of boys, and have never looked back. Women now account for roughly 60 percent of associate’s, bachelor’s and master’s degrees and have begun to outpace men in obtaining Ph.D.’s.

There are some who say, well, too bad for the boys. If they are inattentive, obstreperous and distracting to their teachers and peers, that’s their problem. After all, the ability to regulate one’s impulses, delay gratification, sit still and pay close attention are the cornerstones of success in school and in the work force. It’s long past time for women to claim their rightful share of the economic rewards that redound to those who do well in school.

As one critic told me recently, the classroom is no more rigged against boys than workplaces are rigged against lazy and unfocused workers. But unproductive workers are adults — not 5-year-olds. If boys are restless and unfocused, why not look for ways to help them do better? As a nation, can we afford not to?

A few decades ago, when we realized that girls languished behind boys in math and science, we mounted a concerted effort to give them more support, with significant success. Shouldn’t we do the same for boys?

When I made this argument in my book “The War Against Boys,” almost no one was talking about boys’ academic, social and vocational problems. Now, 12 years later, the press, books and academic journals are teeming with such accounts. Witness the crop of books in recent years: Leonard Sax’s “Boys Adrift,” Liza Mundy’s “The Richer Sex,” Hanna Rosin’s “The End of Men.”

For a revised version of the book, due out this summer, I’ve changed the subtitle — to “How Misguided Policies Are Harming Our Young Men” from “How Misguided Feminism Is Harming Our Young Men” — and moved away from criticizing feminism; instead I emphasized boy-averse trends like the decline of recess, zero-tolerance disciplinary policies, the tendency to criminalize minor juvenile misconduct and the turn away from single-sex schooling. As our schools have become more feelings-centered, risk-averse, collaboration-oriented and sedentary, they have moved further and further from boys’ characteristic sensibilities. Concerns about boys arose during a time of tech bubble prosperity; now, more than a decade later, there are major policy reasons — besides the stale “culture wars” of the 1990s — to focus on boys’ schooling.

One is the heightened attention to school achievement as the cornerstone of lifelong success. Grades determine entry into advanced classes, enrichment programs and honor societies. They open — or close — doors to higher education. “If grade disparities emerge this early on, it’s not surprising that by the time these children are ready to go to college, girls will be better positioned,” says [Christopher M. Cornwell](https://www.terry.uga.edu/~cornwl/), an economist at the University of Georgia and an author of the new study, along with his colleague [David B. Mustard](https://www.terry.uga.edu/directory/profile/mustard/) and [Jessica Van Parys](https://sites.google.com/site/jvanparyscom/) of Columbia University.

A second reason is globalization. Richard Whitmire, an education writer, and William Brozo, a literacy expert, write that “the global economic race we read so much about — the marathon to produce the most educated work force, and therefore the most prosperous nation — really comes down to a calculation: whichever nation solves these ‘boy troubles’ wins the race.” That’s probably an overstatement, but we do know that the large-scale entry of women into the work force paid large economic dividends. It stands to reason that raising male academic achievement is essential to raising labor productivity and, ultimately, living standards.

A third reason: improving the performance of black, Latino and lower-income kids requires particular attention to boys. Black women are nearly twice as likely to earn a college degree as black men. At some historically black colleges, the gap is astounding: Fisk is now 64 female; Howard, 67 percent; Clark Atlanta, 75 percent. The economist [Andrew M. Sum](https://www.economics.neu.edu/people/sum/) and his colleagues at the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University examined the Boston Public Schools and found that for the graduating class of 2007, there were 191 black girls for every 100 boys going on to attend a four-year college or university. Among Hispanics, the ratio was 175 girls for every 100 boys; among whites, 153 for every 100.

Young men from middle-class or more comfortable backgrounds aren’t lagging quite as far behind, but the gender gap exists there, too. Judith Kleinfeld, a psychology professor at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks, analyzed the reading skills of white males from college-educated families. She showed that at the end of high school, 23 percent of the these boys scored “below basic,” compared with 7 percent of their female counterparts. “This means that almost one in four boys who have college-educated parents cannot read a newspaper with understanding,” she wrote.

WHAT might we do to help boys improve? For one thing, we can follow the example of the British, the Canadians and the Australians. They have openly addressed the problem of male underachievement. They are not indulging boys’ tendency to be inattentive. Instead, they are experimenting with programs to help them become more organized, focused and engaged. These include more boy-friendly reading assignments (science fiction, fantasy, sports, espionage, battles); more recess (where boys can engage in rough-and-tumble as a respite from classroom routine); campaigns to encourage male literacy; more single-sex classes; and more male teachers (and female teachers interested in the pedagogical challenges boys pose).

These efforts should start early, but even high school isn’t too late. Consider Aviation High School in New York City. A faded orange brick building with green aluminum trim, it fits comfortably with its gritty neighbors — a steelyard, a tool-supply outlet and a 24-hour gas station and convenience store — in Long Island City, Queens.

On a visit to Aviation I observed a classroom of 14- and 15-year-olds focused on constructing miniaturized, electrically wired airplane wings from mostly raw materials. In another class, students worked in teams — with a student foreman and crew chief — to take apart and then rebuild a small jet engine in just 20 days. In addition to pursuing a standard high school curriculum, Aviation students spend half of the day in hands-on classes on airframes, hydraulics and electrical systems. They put up with demanding English and history classes because unless they do well in them, they cannot spend their afternoons tinkering with the engine of a Cessna 411.

The school’s 2,200 pupils — mostly students of color, from low-income households — have a 95 percent attendance rate and a 90 percent graduation rate, with 80 percent going on to college. The school is coed; although girls make up only 16 percent of the student population, they appear to be flourishing. The New York City Department of Education has repeatedly awarded Aviation an “A” on its annual school progress reports. U.S. News & World Report has cited it as one of the best high schools in the nation.

“The school is all about structure,” an assistant principal, Ralph Santiago, told me. The faculty emphasizes organization, precision, workmanship and attention to detail. The students are kept so busy and are so fascinated with what they are doing that they have neither the time nor the desire for antics.

Not everyone of either sex is interested in airplanes. But vocational high schools with serious academic requirements are an important part of the solution to male disengagement from school.

I can sympathize with those who roll their eyes at the relatively recent alarm over boys’ achievement. Where was the indignation when men dominated higher education, decade after decade? Isn’t it time for women and girls to enjoy the advantages? The impulse is understandable but misguided. I became a feminist in the 1970s because I did not appreciate male chauvinism. I still don’t. But the proper corrective to chauvinism is not to reverse it and practice it against males, but rather basic fairness. And fairness today requires us to address the serious educational deficits of boys and young men. The rise of women, however long overdue, does not require the fall of men.

*Christina Hoff Sommers is a*[*resident scholar*](https://www.aei.org/scholar/christina-hoff-sommers/)*at the American Enterprise Institute and the*[*author*](https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2000/05/the-war-against-boys/304659/)*of “The War Against Boys.”*