



Written by [Selwyn Duke](#) on December 8, 2009

## Boys' Educational Failure Is No Mystery

A lot has changed since 1960. If Connie Francis were to sing "Where the Boys Are" today, she would not likely be talking about Ft. Lauderdale. And she probably wouldn't be talking about college, either. This is because, in a decades-old phenomenon, boys have increasingly been stumbling academically.



Colleges have taken note of this and, in certain cases (mostly private institutions), have actually been favoring boys in the admissions process. It's an interesting, albeit unofficial, twist on affirmative action. But this, in turn, has been noted by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, inspiring it to investigate whether colleges discriminate against girls by admitting less qualified boys.

It's tempting to delve into the double standards evident here. When politically favored groups underperform, quotas are virtuous; when other groups do — such as boys — quotas are a vice. There is also Title IX, which has been used to ensure that the number of female student athletes in a school is proportional to girls' percentage of its student body, despite the fact that far more boys are interested in sports. Yet Big Brother doesn't apply this principle to other extracurricular activities, most of which are dominated by girls. Even more outrageously, when colleges voluntarily institute something approximating proportionality in the most important sphere, academics (to keep the male/female student ratio fairly close to 50/50), Big Brother investigates them. Yet I don't want to devote too much ink to this today, because boys don't really need affirmative action. They need correct action.

Stories about boys' academic malaise will no doubt surprise some, yet the statistics are staggering. Treating the issue in the *Wall Street Journal*, Richard Whitmire [writes](#):

Nearly 58% of all those earning bachelor's degrees are women. Graduate programs are headed in the same direction, and the [sex] gaps at community colleges — where 62% of those earning two-year degrees are female — are even wider.

...The numbers are startling. This summer the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University published the results of a study tracking the students who graduated from Boston Public Schools in 2007. Their conclusion: For every 167 females in four-year colleges, there were 100 males.

But the die for this is cast early, with the gap already manifesting itself in elementary school. Moreover, [writes](#) Alex Frasca at *American Thinker*:

By now we know that boys lag girls in almost every sort of school performance measure: grades, honors received, participation in student council, honor societies, school newspapers and debate



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teams, and college enrollment. Many more boys than girls are suspended from school, forced to repeat a grade, and drop out prior to graduation. Boys are more than three times over-represented in special education classes.

And providing anecdotal evidence in a sister piece on the topic, Frasca [writes](#):

Our 9th-grade son attends a California public high school where the ratio of boys to girls is roughly 50/50. The latest edition of his school's parent's club newsletter honors the students who are achievers in various categories of academic activity. Of the first place finishers in the regional science fair, 9 out of 11 are female. The winner of the Rotary Club and Lions' Club Speech Contest are mentioned, both female. The school's Mock Trial championship team comprises 15 members; 11 are female.

It wasn't always like this. In 1972, college enrollment numbers were reversed — 60-40 in boys' favor. Boys also long performed better on exams; in fact, male aptitude in the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), inspired educators to make it more "girl friendly" in the 1990s (makes one wonder if a new question might be: Who did Justin dump Cindy for? A. Elizabeth, B. Amber...). And when I attended elementary school in the 1970s, the best students in my class were usually boys. So what changed? Have the lads suddenly taken a stupid pill?

In seeking to answer these questions, there are two prevailing explanations. One of them, which finds favor among the Right, blames our feminist spirit of the age and was recently articulated by the intrepid Phyllis Schlafly, who [wrote](#):

Elementary schools are not only ruled by females — they are dominated by feminists who make school unpleasant for boys from the get-go.

...Elementary school teachers used to understand that boys will be boys, but teachers now look upon boys as just unruly girls. Feminists manifest hostility to males and to masculine traits such as competitiveness and aggressiveness, and instead reward typical female behaviors such as non-assertiveness and group cooperation.

Schools cannot make gender go away by pretending that boys do not have an innate masculinity, or by trying to suppress it with ridiculous zero-tolerance punishments, banning sports such as dodge ball and tag, and allowing only playground games without winners.

I would add that this anti-male bias completely [permeates our society](#). *Leave it to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best* have been replaced by inane sitcoms such as *Everyone Loves Raymond* (except me), in which men are routinely portrayed as bumbling boobs overshadowed by dominant, thoroughly competent women. This is reflected in commercials as well, where wives are shown treating husbands like children. We see this bias in products, such as the "All Men are Bastards" [knife block](#) and, more egregiously, t-shirts and other products marketed to young girls with messages such as "Boys are stupid. Throw rocks at them," "Boys Are Great. Every Girl Should Own One," and "Lobotomy: How to train boys." Now, when I was little, it certainly was a cute rite of passage to say you "hated girls" and for the lasses to perhaps say boys were "icky" (except for me). But shouldn't such things be left in childhood? Should adults be rubber-stamping anti-boy messages just to make a buck?

Then, it's said today that portraying women in traditional roles reinforces "harmful stereotypes." Thus do we find ridiculously masculinized female television characters who are not only smarter than the male ones, but also tougher. And the old show *Amos & Andy* is *verboden* because it's said to stereotype blacks. But if we really believe that entertainment can so devastate people's self-image, why are we



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consistently exposing boys to negative portrayals of their sex through it?

Having said this, while our society's misandrist tone is destructive, when cited as the *sole* cause of boys' woes, it's also a distraction. But then, what is the cause? Is it a "mystery" as Whitmire avers in his *Journal* piece?

This brings us to the second prevailing explanation, something briefly mentioned by Schlafly when she wrote, "Five- and 6-year-old boys are not as able or willing as little girls to sit quietly at a desk and do neat work with pencil and paper." This reflects the now common idea that boys just can't learn in a highly structured school setting, that they require an action-oriented learning environment. It's popular with both the right and left because it combines the boys-will-be-boys traditional understanding with a psycho-babbly, new-age approach. It has something for everyone — except the truth.

### **The Answer**

Yet the explanation ignores history. Years ago, when boys were performing much better, schools were *far more structured*; discipline was by the rule and enforced with the ruler, sitting was not a request but a demand. Boys got precisely what they need today: more discipline, not less.

And the reason why girls aren't hurt as much by this lack of structure has to do with differences between the sexes. Girls are inside-the-box thinkers while boys are outside-the-box thinkers; girls are more likely to follow society's path, right or wrong, while boys are more likely to beat their own path, right or wrong. This is why virtually all revolutionaries — good and bad, from Thomas Jefferson to Vladimir Lenin — are men, and why they always will be.

Related to this is that boys have a tremendous amount of what I'd call "creative energy." For example, think about how boys may immerse themselves in an endeavor (e.g., model rocketry, a sport, computers, etc.) with a single-mindedness and zeal rarely seen among girls. This energy can be focused constructively or destructively, but it *will* be focused somewhere. It's just a matter of whether boys will design airplanes and buildings or destroy them. And how do you focus this energy? Discipline. This is why boys so often thrive in a military-school type environment.

So while there are secondary factors (I treated the issue more comprehensively [here](#) in one of the more important pieces I've written), I don't think boys' academic woes are a mystery — I think we fear the solution. As G.K. Chesterton once wrote, "Men invent new ideals because they are afraid to attempt old ideals. They look forward with enthusiasm, because they are afraid to look back."

We need the rod, not Ritalin; faith, not more funding; and old tradition, not new technology. Boys haven't changed — society has. Where do you think the problem lies?



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