

THE NEW GENDER GAP: A DECLARATION OF WAR

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EDUCATION LAW & POLICY
SPRING 2015

INTRODUCTION

The ever-present gender gap in America has long perpetuated the landscape of the education system. The tendency to shortchange females in male-dominated schools is a rudimentary subject of concern.¹ However, amid rapidly surfacing evidence that girls are outperforming boys on almost every measure of academic success over the past decade, a ‘rising chorus of voices’ suggests males are now the ones in peril.² The gender gap – that is, the new gender gap – persists to alter the landscape of education and is showing no significant signs of retreat.³

The gender-gap-in-education debate tends to attract polarizing expositions, framing the conversation in terms of winners and losers. The current dialogue supports a zero sum mentality – a belief that if schools expend resources and devote attention to one gender, then the other gender will concomitantly sacrifice those resources and that attention. Christina Hoff Sommers advocates the zero-sum mentality in her book *The War Against Boys: How Misguided Feminism is Harming Our Young Men*.⁴ Sommers argues that the changing school landscape of schools favor girls and place boys at a disadvantage, of which she declares a “war against boys.”⁵

¹ Richard Whitmire and Susan McGee Bailey, *Gender Gap: Are Boys Being Short Changed in K-12 Schooling?* Education Next, available at <http://educationnext.org/gender-gap/>

² *Id.*

³ Kathryn Weins, *The New Gender Gap: What Went Wrong*, The Journal of Education (2005).

⁴ CHRISTINA HOFF SOMMERS, *THE WAR AGAINST BOYS: HOW MISGUIDED FEMINISM IS HARMING OUT YOUNG MEN* (Touchstone 2001).

⁵ *Id.*

This paper analyzes the new gender gap and argues against framing the conversation in terms of a zero sum analysis. Section I of this paper briefly describes the rise of the new gender gap. Section II discusses possible causes of the new gender gap, including innate biological differences and distinct social dichotomy. Section III goes on to address possible solutions to the gender gap issue. Finally, this paper concludes with the detriment of a zero-sum analysis and the declaration of a “war against boys,” arguing for a more congenial approach to the gender gap debate.

I. THE MALE GENDER GAP

Teachers across the country have been perplexed by the underachievement of boys in the classroom.⁶ Kathryn Weins, a former teacher and school administrator, astutely observed this phenomenon in her book, *The New Gender Gap: What Went Wrong?* Weins received her teacher education preparation in the mid-1990s.⁷ At this time, Weins stated, “researchers and practitioners were concerned with the quality of learning available to girls.”⁸ This concern stressed a problem opposite of the one she observed throughout her career.⁹ Weins stated, “For years and in a variety of settings, I watched boys fail to engage in school.”¹⁰ This observation is known as the new gender gap: the male gender gap.

⁶ Weins, *supra* note 3 at 11.

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ *Id.*

The rise of the new gender gap is complex and nuanced. Census data shows that twice as many men as women received bachelor's degrees in 1960.¹¹ However, by the mid-1980s, there was an unprecedented shift in educational attainment – women not only caught up, but also began to surpass men.¹² Today, male dropout rates, graduation rates, grades, and test scores pale in comparison to their female counterparts.¹³ In addition, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, young women make up nearly 60 percent of college students and earn about one-third more bachelor's degrees than men.¹⁴

II. CAUSES OF THE NEW GENDER GAP

The rise of women in education is commonly attributed to the decline of discrimination and shift in societal norms, such as reduced pressure on women to marry and have children young.¹⁵ Lesley Stahl, author of *Girls Move Ahead*, attributes the rapid advancement of girls to the “exaggeration of female vulnerability.”¹⁶ Nonetheless, while girls skyrocket ahead, theories of why boys are struggling to keep up abound.

A. Biological Differences

Scholarship suggests that many factors contribute to the gender gap problem in education, including biological differences between boys and girls. These differences are

¹¹ *Population Characteristics*, U.S. CENSUS, available at <http://www.census.gov/hhes/socdemo/education/data/cps/1969/P20-194.pdf>

¹² *The Reverse Gender Gap*, Leigh University College of Education (2015), available at <https://coe.lehigh.edu/content/reverse-gender-gap>

¹³ Whitmire, *supra* note 1

¹⁴ *Undergraduate enrolment*, National Center for Education Statistics, available at https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cha.asp

¹⁵ Whitmire, *supra* note 1

¹⁶ Lesley Stahl, *The Gender Gap: Boys Lagging* (2002), available at <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/the-gender-gap-boys-lagging/>

often attributed to innate differences in brain development.¹⁷ Harriet Hanlon, a researcher at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, studied innate differences in brain development between boys and girls.¹⁸ Hanlon discovered that some of the regions of the brain involved in “mechanical reasoning, visual targeting and spatial reasoning mature four to eight years earlier in boys.”¹⁹ Conversely, Hanlan discovered that the parts of the brain associated with verbal fluency mature several years earlier in girls.²⁰

Social philosopher Michael Gurian, author of *Boys and Girls Learn Differently!*, similarly attributes academic performance differences to evolved gender dissimilarities in the brain. Gurian argues that boys and girls learn in fundamentally different ways and at different rates.²¹ For example, at the elementary level, girls perform better in dim lighting, whereas boys perform better in bright lighting.²² Girls are better at learning a foreign language, whereas boys are better at reading maps.²³ Girls focus on relationships and communication, whereas boys focus on action and exploration.²⁴ With ample evidence of the vast array of gender learning differences, Gurian concludes, “both boys and girls are victims of the gender disadvantage in schools.”²⁵

Psychologist Leonard Sax, author of *Why Gender Matters*, claims that if a child is asked to do something not developmentally appropriate, he or she will likely fail and thus

¹⁷ Amanda Ripley, *Who Says a Woman Can't be Einstein?* TIME (2005), available at <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1032332,00.html>

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ Michael Gurian, *Boys and Girls Learn Differently!* (2001); See also MICHAEL J. KAUFMAN & SHERELYN R. KAUFMAN, EDUCATION LAW, POLICY, AND PRACTICES: CASES AND MATERIALS (Aspen 2013).

²² Kaufman, see *supra* 21 at 596.

²³ *Id.*

²⁴ *Id.*

²⁵ *Id.* at 597.

develop an aversion to the subject.²⁶ Accordingly, Sax advocates for altering the school environment “so differences don't become limitations.”²⁷ The question is, however, how do schools prevent differences from becoming limitations? Further, how do schools remedy the gender disadvantage without “declaring war”?

B. Social Construct

In addition to biological differences, some scholars theorize that social forces fuel the gender gap. These social forces are often preserved by a hidden curriculum, “which consists of the unspoken academic, social, and cultural messages that are communicated to students.”²⁸ For example, studies suggest that teachers are more inclined to ask boys for help in science and math demonstrations.²⁹ As a result, girls believe that they are innately inferior to their male counterparts in these subjects.³⁰

Gender expectations limit both boys and girls, and at this point they may constrain boys even more than girls.³¹ Gendered assumptions about literacy have hindered male performance; in much the same ways that gendered assumptions about science and math have inhibited girls.³² Alexander Kopelman, co-founder and head of the Children’s Arts Guild in New York, supports the view that gender socialization is detrimental to boys.³³ Kopelman denotes this view with a lesson that many boys are taught at an early age: the

²⁶ Ripley, *supra* note 16, at 55.

²⁷ *Id.* at 56.

²⁸ THE GLOSSARY OF EDUCATION REFORM, available at <http://edglossary.org/hidden-curriculum/>

²⁹ Jasna Jovanovic & Candice Dreves, *National Network for Child Care, Math, Science, and Girls: Can We Close the Gender Gap?* (1996), available at http://www.nccc.org/Curriculum/sac52_math.science.girls.html

³⁰ *Id.*

³¹ Whitmire, *supra* note 1

³² Whitmire, *supra* note 1

³³ See *supra* note 11

classic, “boys don’t cry.”³⁴ In affect, Kopelman says, “What we’re learning is to cut away a very essential part of ourselves, and to view it as the other, and as something that’s weak and undesirable.”³⁵ According to Kopelman, this idea of what “boys and girls do and don’t do” can impact boys’ interest in books, because reading is perceived as a “girl thing.”³⁶

Reading and writing have always been an integral foundation for classroom learning, but school reform has pushed literacy demands into increasingly earlier grades.³⁷ Richard Whitmire, author of *Why Boys Fail: Saving our Sons from an Educational System That’s Leaving Them Behind*, explains that the extra emphasis on literacy has placed boys at a disadvantage “from the get-go.”³⁸ Whitmire explains, “Boys are at a developmental disadvantage when it comes to early literacy challenges.”³⁹ And, “[w]here girls tend to pick up reading earlier, boys typically need more time.”⁴⁰ Whitmire argues that, while some other factors may contribute to the problem, the one major issue that’s holding boys back is the literacy issue.⁴¹ He claims, “If you solve this one big thing, then you could solve the brunt of the issue.”⁴²

Another suggested cause of the new gender gap, and common point of contention, is the notion that schools place boys at a systematic disadvantage. One such systematic

³⁴ *Id.*

³⁵ *Id.*

³⁶ *Id.*

³⁷ Rose Garrett, *Gender Gap: Why Boys Can’t Keep Up* (2011), available at <http://www.education.com/magazine/article/the-gender-gap/Wide/>

³⁸ *Id.*

³⁹ *Id.*

⁴⁰ *Id.*

⁴¹ *Id.*

⁴² *Id.*

disadvantage is the dominance of female teachers across the nation.⁴³ Many argue that because female teachers make decisions about curricular content, this places boys at a clear disadvantage.⁴⁴ Moreover, some contend, “that female teachers instinctively reinforce ‘female’ behavior and fail to acknowledge, or even punish, the gender-specific behaviors of boys.”⁴⁵

A further systematic disadvantage alludes to the structure of the classroom and the style of teaching. Whitmire claims boys are lagging in education because today’s schools are better suited for girls than boys, “with [the] emphasis on order, sitting still, and passive learning.”⁴⁶ Sommers employs a similar view in her book, where she wrote, “Classrooms remodeled to serve the needs of girls are creating a reverse sexism that hurts boys.”⁴⁷ Somers suggests the changing school landscape has placed boys at a disadvantage.⁴⁸

III. CLOSING THE NEW GENDER GAP

While the gender gap persists to alter the landscape of the education system, education scholars and policy makers feverishly debate the optimal approach to remedy the great gender divide in America. Given the perplexity of the new gender gap, there is no one apparent solution. However, according to Leeron Avnery, author of *The Gender Gap: A Persistent Problem that Congress has yet to Fix*, it is the government’s responsibility to close the gap.⁴⁹ Avery states:

⁴³ See *supra* note 11

⁴⁴ *Id.*

⁴⁵ *Id.*

⁴⁶ *Id.*

⁴⁷ *Id.*

⁴⁸ *Id.*

⁴⁹ Leon Avnery, *The Gender Gap: A Persistent Problem that Congress has yet to Address*, Wm. & Mary J. Women & L, 395.

A federal statute aimed at closing the female gender gap will likely be met with Equal Protection protests. To alleviate this issue, the government can instead create a statute that will focus on closing both gender gaps. States should submit statistics on both gender gaps. States that have only one gender gap problem may receive funds to close only the gender gap problem that exists in that state, though it is unlikely that a state will have only one gender gap since both are prevalent. States with both gender gap problems should submit plans detailing how they will close both gender gaps and should receive funds relative to the intensity of each gender gap problem.⁵⁰

According to Avnery, the federal government can model a program to close the gender gap after the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLBA), which purpose is to close the achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students.⁵¹ Avnery claims that NCLBA demonstrates the federal government's ability to intervene and take action against inequality in education in America's public schools.⁵² The government achieved this by providing an incentive for compliance through funding.⁵³ Further, "the specifics of the edification plans [were] left to the individual states, enabling the local governments to decide what is best for their schools."⁵⁴ Accordingly, the federal government can apply the same goals and reasoning that it uses in NCLBA to the gender gap problem.⁵⁵ For example, Avnery suggests, "the government can entice states to close the gap by offering federal funds to those states that submit a plan to close the gender gap."⁵⁶ Federal action may be the best possible solution, as Avnery suggests, however, Congress has yet to address the educational gender gap issue in any form.⁵⁷ Accordingly, viable alternate avenues should be explored, devoid of federal legislative action.

⁵⁰ *Id.* at 419.

⁵¹ *Id.* at 397.

⁵² *Id.*

⁵³ *Id.*

⁵⁴ *Id.*

⁵⁵ *Id.*

⁵⁶ *Id.*

⁵⁷ *Id.*

One possible route to alleviate the gender is through same-sex education. In 2006, Education Secretary Margaret Spellings eased federal regulations, “allowing schools to offer single-sex classrooms and schools, as long as such options are completely voluntary.”⁵⁸ Leonard Sax and many others agree that merely placing boys in separate classrooms from girls accomplishes little.⁵⁹ However, single-sex education often enhances student success when teachers use techniques geared toward the gender of their students.⁶⁰

Research suggests that single-sex education can broaden the educational prospects for both girls and boys.⁶¹ Advocates claim that single-sex schools tend to break down gender stereotypes.⁶² For example, girls feel less pressured to compete with boys, particularly in male-dominated subjects such as math and science.⁶³ Conversely, boys more freely pursue traditionally “feminine” interests, such as art and reading. However, some critics emphasize the crucial purpose of public education: developing effective citizens.⁶⁴ Whitmire advocates for this crucial purpose, saying, “We need to consider the tradeoffs we may be making in sex-segregating students, closing off opportunities for learning from and with each other.”⁶⁵

In addition to formal methods of regulation, schools may address the new gender gap issue with creative alternatives. Psychologist Adam Cox explores such alternative

⁵⁸ Kristin Stanberry, *Single-Sex Education: The Pros and Cons*, available at <http://www.greatschools.org/find-a-school/defining-your-ideal/1139-single-sex-education-the-pros-and-cons.gs>

⁵⁹ *Id.*

⁶⁰ *Id.*

⁶¹ *Id.*

⁶² *Id.*

⁶³ *Id.*

⁶⁴ Whitmire, *supra* note 1

⁶⁵ *Id.*

methods.⁶⁶ Cox notes that while many girls absorb information by listening and observing, many boys rely on kinesthetic learning (i.e. movement and touch) to grasp new information.⁶⁷ The typical classroom, however, is not conducive to the male learning style – students are expected to sit still while the teacher delivers the lesson.⁶⁸ Fenn School, an independent all-boys school in Concord, Massachusetts, has developed a creative method for coping with kinesthetic-oriented boys.⁶⁹ At Fenn, “Lower School day includes ‘flop,’ a few minutes break to just flop on the ground.” Cox explains that this is an ideal intervention for boys because it encourages them to cope with excessive energy levels.⁷⁰ Other creative solutions to the new gender gap include more male teachers in the lower grades, more boy-friendly books, and more projects that involve doing something “heroic.”⁷¹

IV. CONCLUSION

The gender gap persists to alter the landscape of education, as it has for years. Women have struggled through adversity to battle the gender gap, and many continue to battle the gender gap in hopes of a more equitable education. Dialogue surrounding the “new” gender gap tends to position girls and boys at odds. Framing the conversation in terms of winners and losers presents its own set of problems. Cox directly addresses this problem, illustrated by Sommer’s zero-sum theory and the “war against boys”:

The anxiety that lies beneath much of the gender consternation is a zero sum mentality that leads some to believe that if we devote resources and attention to

⁶⁶ See *supra* note 11

⁶⁷ *Id.*

⁶⁸ *Id.*

⁶⁹ *Id.*

⁷⁰ *Id.*

⁷¹ *Id.*

boys, those resources and that attention must result in a concomitant reduction for girls. I think that's erroneous.⁷²

A “war against boys” is a skewed impression of reality. Men and women are not in opposition. Both genders have fallen victim to the gender gap. A fight that was traditionally left to women now includes everyone. There is no war against boys; this is a war against the gender gap.

⁷² *Id.*