
Failing in School? Yes; Victims of War? No

Cornelius Riordan
Providence College

America is still far away from achieving gender equity. Thirty years after the passage of Title IX, women still represent only 42 percent of the slots in sports programs (Schemo 2003). A 2000 report by the General Accounting Office found that two thirds of the colleges whose Title IX records came under review by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights defended their records on the basis of meeting the degree of interest in sports expressed by female students (U.S. General Accounting Office 2000). This is the least-positive method of meeting the Title IX guidelines after that of providing proportional participation and making steady progress toward improving opportunities for girls and women. And with much work still to be done to achieve equity in athletics, Title IX recently found itself under attack by critics who contended that the rules were sabotaging some men's athletic teams. Yet, it is critical to distinguish carefully the areas within education in which males are not doing well.

Over the past decade, especially in the past several years, a host of popular books and scientific reports have argued that females possess a significant advantage, on average, on most central indicators of educational outcomes. Movement toward this century-ending state of affairs can be observed in the results of trends as early as 1980. All this suggests that the broad nationwide effort to bring about gender equity in schools has been effective. Although many social policy interventions have null effects (as is often the case with efforts to modify racial disparities), these positive results for females are not surprising, given the magnitude of the intervention. As a result of these trends, however, boys, rather than girls, are increasingly on the short end of the gender gap in many school outcomes. Declaring that the evidence is actually universal, Rowe and Rowe (2002:2) con-

cluded that "boys, on average, achieve at significantly lower levels than girls on ALL areas of the assessed *cognitive* curriculum throughout their primary and secondary schooling."

To suggest that there is a crisis for boys in schools does not imply, as some have claimed, that the cause is misguided feminism or bogus science or that there has been a war against boys (Sommers 2000). Likewise, it should not serve as a platform for disingenuously acknowledging that boys do have problems in school, yet criticizing those who push forward the problems of boys for heating up a "gender war" while they continue to push forward an agenda for girls as if nothing new had been uncovered. Nor does it imply that there are not still areas in school and beyond school where girls require more attention than do boys. Rather, it suggests that the gender-equity educational policies of the past 30 years have been relatively successful and that in the wake of this success, the specific needs of boys require a careful reassessment.

Recent reports have confirmed that males, not females, are increasingly on the unfavorable side of the gender gap in education and developmental matters. For example, enrollments in institutions of higher education in the 1990s favored females by a ratio of 54 percent to 46 percent (Bae et al. 2000). As recently as 1980, the ratio was 50:50. Of course, in 1970, the ratio favored males by a margin of 59 to 41. Because of this large gap favoring males just 30 years ago, it is easy to understand how the reversal has gone unnoticed. Among African Americans and Hispanic Americans, the gap actually favored females in 1970 and has expanded substantially during these past two decades. This pattern is repeated throughout Europe. The issue has recently become a matter of concern to college officials who are interested in maintaining a balanced male-female ratio. In 2003, college applications are

approaching a 60:40 gender split favoring females.

We can also see the problem emerging over the past two decades by looking at data on occupational expectations among males and females. In 1972, there was only a small gap favoring females in high school-graduating seniors who expected to attain "professional" occupations by age 30. By 1992, this gap had increased dramatically, which is not surprising since more females than males were attending college in the 1990s (Green et al. 1995). Moreover, in 1972, more boys than girls were enrolled in college-preparatory high school programs; by 1992, this situation was fully reversed, with more girls than boys in these academic tracks.

The U.S. Department of Education's *Condition of Education 1995* (Smith et al. 1995:13) concluded that "the gap in reading proficiency (favoring girls) is roughly equivalent to about one and a half years of schooling." The Program for International Assessment found a similar reading gap for 15-year-old students in every Western OECD country of the world in 2000 and noted that there were no significant gender differences in either mathematics or science scores in the United States (Lemke et al. 2002). Hedges and Nowell (1995) showed that boys' writing skills are significantly and profoundly lower than those of girls. It is true that some of the foregoing sources have shown gaps favoring boys in science and mathematics, but the differences are smaller and continue to decrease (Bae et al. 2000).

The Educational Testing Service's four-year study reinforced this emergent view of the gender gap. In this report, Willingham and Cole (1997) analyzed data from 400 different tests from more than 1,500 different data sets. They found that for most subject-matter tests, gender differences were small and that whenever a gender difference was found, it "cut both ways." The researchers acknowledged that the results contradict the view that girls need to catch up with boys. In particular, they noted that "12th grade girls have substantially closed the familiar math and science gap over the past 30 years, but there continues to be a fairly large gap in writing skills that boys have not closed" (p. 12). The test-score outcomes did not vary to any great degree across racial-ethnic groups.

But there are other indicators that deserve attention as well. Girls have consistently obtained better grades and higher class ranks than have boys. Approximately three times as many boys as girls are enrolled in special education classes (Smith et al. 1995). In addition, more boys than girls are involved in all types of crimes, delinquent and violent behavior, and the use of alcohol and drugs, both in and out of school (Hafner et al. 1990).

Several reports of the National Center on Education Statistics have found unfavorable results for boys in studies of 3- to 5-year-old children. For example, in *Approaching Kindergarten*, Zill et al. (1995) drew on the 1993 National Household Educational Survey to show that boys score lower than girls on a wide range of literacy and motor-skill measures, as judged by their parents, who were interviewed in the study. At the beginning of school, boys are handicapped by reading scores that are significantly lower than girls', along with significantly lower scores on social rating scales. Teachers accord boys lower ratings in mathematics and general knowledge, even when there is no actual difference, as determined by direct independent assessments (Riordan 2002). All this suggests that the broad nationwide efforts to raise females' achievement in schools have been effective. As a result of these trends, males, rather than females, are now on the short end of the gender gap in many school outcomes. A by-product of this scenario is that there is a growing pool of idle men who are out of school and unemployed.

There are, of course, other factors that require consideration in estimating the direction of the gender gap. One of these factors is the degree of sexual harassment that occurs both in and out of school. In fact, nationwide surveys in 1993 and 2001 (American Association of University Women 2001) reported that girls had been sexually harassed to a greater degree than have boys along a wide range of specific harassment behaviors. On average, 83 percent of the girls and 60 percent of the boys had received unwanted sexual advances either in school or on the school grounds or when going to and from school.

Another issue is that educational outcomes do not transfer immediately into changes beyond the classroom. Ultimately, educational

advantages for females, should they persist, will lead to greater equity in occupational attainment and income. But such greater equity is not yet a reality. Women continue to be undervalued in the workplace, excluded from leadership posts in many occupations, and underpaid relative to equally qualified men. This issue can be conceived as the distinction between getting "into" the proverbial pipeline and getting "through" it. But, as Stockard (1985:320) noted, these occupational and income disparities "cannot be traced, except in a most limited and tenuous manner, to educational achievement and experiences."

Thus, as we move into the 21st century, we must recognize that males are not flourishing in school relative to females. This being the case, the educational needs of males require close monitoring over the next decade, which may lead to a more balanced approach to the study of gender equity in schools.

REFERENCES

- American Association of University Women. 2001. *Hostile Hallways: Bullying, Teasing, and Sexual Harassment in School*. Commissioned and researched by Harris Interactive. Washington, DC: Author.
- Bae, Yupin, Susan Choy, Claire Geddes, Jennifer Sable, and Thomas Snyder. 2000. *Trends in Educational Equity of Girls and Women*. Washington, DC: Office of Educational Research and Improvement.
- Green, Patricia J., Bernard L. Dugoni, Steven J. Ingels, and Peggy Quinn. 1995. *Trends Among High School Seniors, 1972-1992* (NCES 95-380). 1995. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement.
- Hafner, Anne, Steven Ingels, Barbara Schneider, and David Stevenson. 1990. *A Profile of the American Eighth Grader: NELS:88 Student Descriptive Summary*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.
- Hedges, Larry V., and Amy Nowell. 1995, July. "Sex Differences in Mental Test Scores, Variability, and Numbers of High-Scoring Individuals." *Science* 269:41-45.
- Lemke, Mariann, Christopher Calsyn, Laura Lippman, Leslie Jocelyn, David Kastberg, Yan Yun Liu, Stephen Roey, Trevor Williams, Thea Kruger, and Ghedam Bairu. 2002. "Outcomes of Learning: Results From the 2000 Program for International Student Assessment of 15-Year-Olds in Reading, Mathematics, and Science." *Education Statistics Quarterly* 4:59-67.
- Riordan, Cornelius. 2002. "Gender Gaps Among First Time Kindergarten Children in the Public Schools: The Importance of Entry Age and Motor Skills." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association.
- Rowe, Kenneth J., and Katherine S. Rowe. 2002. "What Matter Most: Evidence-Based Findings of Key Factors Affecting the Educational Experiences and Outcomes for Girls and Boys throughout their Primary and Secondary Schooling." *Inquiry into the Education of Boys*. Canberra: Parliament of Australia, House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training. Available online at <http://www.acer.edu.au/research/documents/RoweBoysInquiry2.pdf>
- Schemo, Diana Jean. 2003, January 29. "Female Athletes Slam Changes to Title IX Proposal by Panel." *New York Times*, pp. C21-C22.
- Smith, Thomas M., Marianne Perie, Nabeel Alsalam, Rebecca Pratt Mahoney, Yupin Bae, and Beth Aronstamm Young. 1995. *The Condition of Education 1995*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education.
- Sommers, Christina Hoff. 2000. *The War Against Boys: How Misguided Feminism is Harming Our Young Men*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Stockard, Jean. 1985. "Education and Gender Equality: A Critical View." Pp. 293-321 in *Sociology of Education and Socialization*, edited by Alan C. Kerckhoff. Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.
- U.S. General Accounting Office. 2000. "Gender Equity: Men's and Women's Participation in Higher Education." (Letter report, December 15, 2000, GAO-01-128). Washington, DC. Available online at <http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/useftp.cgi?IPaddress=162.140.64.21&filename=d01128.txt&directory=/diskb/wais/data/gao>
- Willingham, Warren W., and Nancy S. Cole. (1997). *Gender and Fair Assessment*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Zill, Nicholas, Mary Collins, Jerry West, and Elvie Germino Hausken. 1995. *Approaching Kindergarten: A Look at Preschoolers in the United States*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education.

Cornelius Riordan, Ph.D., is Professor of Sociology, Department of Sociology, Providence College. He has studied the effects of single- and mixed-sex education at all levels of schooling and is the author of *Girls and Boys in School: Together or Separate?* (Teachers College Press, 1990). His main areas of specialization are the social organization of schools, evaluation research, and gender differences in school performance. He is the author of a textbook in the sociology of education entitled *Equality and Achievement* (2nd ed.; Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2003). Address all correspondence to Dr. Cornelius Riordan, Department of Sociology, Providence College, 549 River Avenue, Howley Hall 119, Providence, RI 02918; E-mail: Crordan@providence.edu.

Delivered by Ingenta to
UNIV OF IOWA HOSPITAL (cid 3393),
University of Iowa Law Library (cid 90106746),
University of Iowa Libraries (cid 1024),
University of Iowa Libraries (cid 25109625)
IP: 128.255.165.131
Date: 2004..12..23..21..42..

