How to Make School Better for Boys

Start by acknowledging that boys are languishing while girls are succeeding.

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Sep 13, 2013

I recently appeared on MSNBC’s The Cycle to discuss the new edition of my book The War Against Boys. The four hosts were having none of it. A war on boys? They countered with the wage gap and the prominence of men
across the professions. One of them concluded, “I don’t think the patriarchy is under any threat.”

The MSNBC skeptics are hardly alone in dismissing the plight of boys and young men. Even those who acknowledge that boys are losing in school argue that they’re winning in life. But the facts are otherwise. American boys across the ability spectrum are struggling in the nation’s schools, with teachers and administrators failing to engage their specific interests and needs. This neglect has ominous implications not only for the boy's social and intellectual development but for the national economy, as policy analysts are just beginning to calculate.

As the United States moves toward a knowledge-based economy, school achievement has become the cornerstone of lifelong success. Women are adapting; men are not. Yet the education establishment and federal government are, with some notable exceptions, looking the other way.

Women in the United States now earn 62 percent of associate’s degrees, 57 percent of bachelor’s degrees, 60 percent of master’s degrees, and 52 percent of doctorates. College admissions officers were at first baffled, then concerned, and finally panicked over the dearth of male applicants. If male enrollment falls to 40 percent or below, female students begin to flee. Officials at schools at or near the tipping point (American University, Boston University, Brandeis University, New York University, the University of Georgia, and the University of North Carolina, to name only a few) are helplessly watching as their campuses become like retirement villages, with a surfeit of women competing for a handful of surviving men. Henry Broaddus, dean of admissions at William and Mary, explains the new anxiety: “[W]omen who enroll ... expect to see men on campus. It’s not the College of Mary and Mary; it’s the College of William and Mary.”
Boys in all ethnic groups and social classes are far less likely than their sisters to feel connected to school, to earn good grades, or to have high academic aspirations. A recent working paper from the National Bureau of Economic Research documents a remarkable trend among high-achieving students: In the 1980s, nearly the same number of top male and female high school
students said they planned to pursue a postgraduate degree (13 percent of boys and 15 percent of girls). By the 2000s, 27 percent of girls expressed that ambition, compared with 16 percent of boys. During the same period, the gap between girls and boys earning mostly A’s nearly doubled—from three to five percentage points.

This gap in education engagement has dire economic consequences for boys. A 2011 Brookings Institution report quantifies the economic decline of the median male: For men ages 25 to 64 with no high school diploma, median annual earnings have declined 66 percent since 1969; for men with only a high school diploma, wages declined by 47 percent. Millions of male workers, say the Brookings authors, have been “unhitched from the engine of growth.” The College Board delivered this disturbing message in a 2011 report about Hispanic and African-American boys and young adults: “Nearly half of young men of color age 15 to 24 who graduate from high school will end up unemployed, incarcerated or dead.” Working-class white boys are faring only slightly better. When economist Andrew Sum and his colleagues at the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University examined gender disparities in the Boston Public Schools, they found that for the class of 2007, among blacks and Hispanics, there were 186 females for every 100 males attending a four-year college or university. For white students: 153 females to every 100 males.

What can we do to improve the prospects of boys? For one thing, we must acknowledge the fact that boys and girls are different. In many education and government circles, it remains taboo to broach the topic of sex differences. Many gender scholars insist that the sexes are cognitively interchangeable and argue that any talk of difference only encourages sexism and stereotyping. In the current environment, to speak of difference invites opprobrium, and to advocate for male-specific interventions invites passionate and organized opposition. Meanwhile, one gender difference
refuses to go away: Boys are languishing academically, while girls are soaring.

Young men in Great Britain, Australia, and Canada have also fallen behind. But in stark contrast to the United States, these countries are energetically, even desperately, looking for ways to help boys improve. Why? They view widespread male underachievement as a national threat: A country with too many languishing males risks losing its economic edge. So these nations have established dozens of boy-focused commissions, task forces, and working groups. Using evidence and not ideology as their guide, officials in these countries don’t hesitate to recommend sex-specific solutions. The British Parliamentary Boys’ Reading Commission urges, “Every teacher should have an up-to-date knowledge of reading material that will appeal to disengaged boys.” A Canadian report on improving boys’ literacy recommends active classrooms “that capitalize on the boys’ spirit of competition”— games, contests, debates. An Australian study found that adolescent males, across racial and socioeconomic lines, shared a common complaint, “School doesn’t offer the courses that most boys want to do, mainly courses and course work that prepare them for employment.”

Sumitra Rajagopalan, an adjunct professor of biomechanics at Canada’s McGill University, developed a program for disengaged teenage boys in Montreal, where one in three male students drops out of high school. The male students she met were bored by their classroom instruction and starved for hands-on activities. She was shocked to find that many had never held a hammer or screwdriver. Under her supervision, the boys built a solar driven Stirling engine from Coca-Cola cans and straws.” Boys are born tinkerers,” she said. “They have a deep-seated need to rip things apart, decode their inner workings, create stuff.”

Rajagopalan’s insight is supported by a large body of research showing that taken as a group, men prefer working with things and women prefer working
with people. Of course, there are female tinkerers who like to work with things and gladly enter occupations such as pipefitting and metallurgy. But the number of men eager to enter these fields is substantially greater. Women still predominate—sometimes overwhelmingly—in empathy-centered fields such as early-childhood education, social work, veterinary medicine, and psychology, while men prevail in the mechanical vocations such as car repair, oil drilling, and electrical engineering.

Young men may be a vanishing breed on the college campus, but there are some colleges that have no trouble attracting them—schools whose names include the letters T-E-C-H. Georgia Tech is 68 percent male; Rochester Institute of Technology, 68 percent; South Dakota School of Mines and Technology, 74 percent. This affinity pattern points to one highly promising strategy for reconnecting boys with school: vocational education, now called Career and Technical Education (CTE).

In a rare example of the academic establishment taking note of boys’ trouble in school, the Harvard Graduate School of Education recently published a major study, Pathways to Prosperity, that highlights the “yawning gender gap” in education favoring women: “Our system... clearly does not work well for many, especially young men.” The authors call for a national revival of vocational education in secondary schools. They cite several existing programs that could serve as a model for national reform, including the Massachusetts system, sometimes called the “Cadillac of Career Training Education.”

Massachusetts has a network of 26 academically rigorous vocational-technical high schools serving 27,000 male and female students. Students in magnet schools such as Worcester Technical, Madison Park Technical Vocational, and Blackstone Valley Regional Vocational Technical take traditional academic courses but spend half their time apprenticing in a field
of their choice. These include computer repair, telecommunications networking, carpentry, early childhood education, plumbing, heating, refrigeration, and cosmetology. As Pathways reports, these schools have some of the state’s highest graduation and college matriculation rates, and close to 96 percent pass the states’ rigorous high-stakes graduation test.

Blackstone Valley Tech in Upton, Massachusetts, should be studied by anyone looking for solutions to the boy problem. It is working wonders with girls (who comprise 44 percent of the student body), but its success with boys is astonishing. According to a white paper on vocational education by the Commonwealth’s Pioneer Institute, “One in four Valley Technical students enter their freshman year with a fourth-grade reading level.” The school immerses these students in an intense, individualized remediation program until they read proficiently at grade level. These potentially disaffected students put up with remediation as well as a full load of college preparatory courses (including honors and Advanced Placement classes), because otherwise they could not spend half the semester apprenticing in diesel mechanics, computer repair, or automotive engineering.

In former times, vocational high schools were often dumping grounds for low achievers. Today, in Massachusetts, they are launching pads into the middle class.

Recent research shows that enrollment in high school vocational programs has dramatic effects on students’ likelihood of graduating from high school—especially boys. But efforts to engage more boys in career and technical programs face a formidable challenge. In a series of scathing reports, the National Council on Women and Girls Education (NCWGE—a 38-year-old consortium that today includes heavy hitters such as the AAUW, the National Women’s Law Center, the ACLU, NOW, the Ms. Foundation, and the National Education Association) has condemned high school vocational
training schools as hotbeds of "sex segregation."

Because of decades of successful lobbying by NCWGE groups, high school and college career and technical training programs face government sanctions and loss of funds if they fail to recruit and graduate sufficient numbers of female students into “non-traditional” fields. Over the years, untold millions of state and federal dollars have been devoted to recruiting and retaining young women into fields like pipefitting, automotive repair, construction, drywall installing, manufacturing, and refrigeration mechanics. But according to Statchat, a University of Virginia workforce blog, these efforts at vocational equity “haven’t had much of an impact.” Despite an unfathomable number of girl-focused programs and interventions, “technical and manual occupations tend to be dominated by men, patterns that have held steady for many years.”

In March 2013 NCWGE released a report urging the need to fight even harder against “barriers girls and women face in entering nontraditional fields.” Among its nine key recommendations to Congress: more federal funding and challenge grants to help states close the gender gaps in career and technical education (CTE); mandate every state to install a CTE gender equity coordinator; and impose harsher punishments on states that fail to meet “performance measures” –i.e. gender quotas.

Instead of spending millions of dollars attempting to transform aspiring cosmetologists into welders, education officials should concentrate on helping young people, male and female, enter careers that interest them. And right now, boys are the underserved population requiring attention.

In the U.S., a powerful network of women’s groups works ceaselessly to protect and promote what it sees as female interest. But there is no counterpart working for boys—they are on their own. This contrasts
dramatically with constructive, problem-solving approach of education leaders and government officials in Great Britain, Canada, and Australia. The British have their parliamentary “toolkit of effective practices” for educating boys—while Americans have the National Women’s Law Center’s Tools of the Trade: Using the Law to Address Sex Segregation in High School Career and Technical Education.

The reluctance to face up to the boy gap is evident at every level of government. In Washington, President Obama established a White House Council on Women and Girls shortly after taking office in 2009, declaring: “When our daughters don’t have the same education and career opportunities as our sons, that affects...our economy and our future as a nation.” On the other hand, the proposal for a Council for Boys and Men from a bi-partisan group of academics and political leaders has now been languishing in Secretary of Education Arne Duncan’s office for two years.

Similarly, in Maine, the Portland Press Herald ran an alarming story about the educational deficits of boys—reporting that high school girls outnumber boys by almost a 2-1 ratio in top-10 senior rankings, that men earn about 38 percent of the bachelor's degrees awarded by Maine's public universities, and that boys both rich and poor had fallen seriously behind their sisters. But the director of Women’s Studies at the University of Southern Maine, Susan Feiner, expressed frustration over the sudden concern for boys. “It is kind of ironic that a couple of years into a disparity between male and female attendance in college it becomes ‘Oh my God, we really need to look at this. The world is going to end.’”

Feiner’s complaint is understandable but seriously misguided. It was wrong to ignore women’s educational needs for so long, and cause for celebration when we turned our attention to meeting those needs. But turning the tables and neglecting boys is not the answer. Why not be fair to both? Great Britain,
Australia, and Canada are Western democracies just as committed to gender equality as we are. Yet they are seriously addressing their boy gap. If they can do it, so can we.

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