



### ***Can Boys Succeed in Later Life If They Can't Read As Well As Girls?***

March is national reading month—and a good time to focus on some rather bleak news about the reading gap between boys and girls. From elementary through high school, males are reading at lower levels than females. This doesn't bode well for future job opportunities for men or for the overall health of our workforce. I think this is an education crisis that is not receiving nearly the attention it ought to.

For the past four years, the Center on Education Policy has annually collected results from all 50 states on tests required for accountability under the No Child Left Behind Act. These data show a clear, national trend of males lagging behind females in every state at the elementary, middle and high school levels

[http://www.cep-dc.org/cfcontent\\_file.cfm?Attachment=Kober%5FFullReport%5F2008%2D09%5FPart2%5FGaps%2Epdf](http://www.cep-dc.org/cfcontent_file.cfm?Attachment=Kober%5FFullReport%5F2008%2D09%5FPart2%5FGaps%2Epdf).

Over the past few decades, the nation has focused on improving math achievement for girls, and this effort is paying off. Girls have made gains in math and are now achieving at roughly the same level as boys on state tests. Years ago, when females lagged behind males in math, some experts asserted that females' brains were structured differently than males, which limited their ability to learn math. Women have proved those theories to be flat-out wrong!

But in reading, boys, as a group, have not closed the gap with girls. And this isn't the only indicator of academic problems for boys. Consider these other trends:

- *Females are graduating from high school at higher rates than males.* Nationally, 72 percent of female students graduate from high school, compared with 65 percent of male students.

- *The gender gap in high school graduation rates is particularly large for students of color.* Among African American youth, about 59 percent of girls and 48 percent of boys completed high school. Among Latino youth, about 58 percent of girls and 49 percent of boys graduated. By comparison, 79% of white females and 74% of white males completed high school.
- *Women are going on to college at higher rates than men.* Between 1967 and 2000, the college enrollment rate of 18- to 24-year-old female high school graduates increased by about 20 percentage points, from 25.1 to 45.6 percent. But the comparable rate for men decreased from 44.7 to 40.9 percent, a drop of almost 4 points.
- *Females are graduating from college at higher rates than men.* In 1970, men received a majority of all the bachelor's degrees awarded in all 50 states. By 2001, women were receiving a majority of the bachelor's degrees. In fact, women are earning a majority of the bachelor's degrees among every racial/ethnic group--white, African American, Latino, Asian American, and American Indian.

These trends have reaped positive results for females. Women are finally moving up in the workforce—not only because gender discrimination has diminished, but also because women are earning the education credentials needed to get good jobs. Men, on the other hand, are falling behind in the workforce, most likely because of their educational deficiencies.

Economic analyses frequently note the lagging wages of blue collar men, especially those without a high school diploma. But, interestingly, young, single women earn 17 percent more than men in New York, 12 percent more in Los Angeles, and 14 percent more in Raleigh and Charlotte, N.C. While these gains by young women may be a sign of other shifts, it is important to note that, on average, men still earn more than women.

President Obama has set a goal that by 2020, all adult Americans will have had at least one year of higher education or career training, and the U.S. will have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world. As the President has pointed

out, “the countries that out-teach us today will out-compete us tomorrow” unless we boost our competitiveness.

We can’t reach this goal if only one gender does well in school. Women are making gains that are long overdue, and good for the country. But, men are not doing as well, which bodes poorly for the country.

Both genders need to excel, if the country is to do well. The nation can begin by improving the reading skills of boys at the elementary, middle, and high school levels and by boosting high school and college graduation rates of young men. At the same time, we should continue to help young women improve in math as well as reading and encourage their participation in high-paying college majors and careers, such as engineering.

A major shift in the academic achievement of males—and their prospects for a good life—is occurring right before our eyes. From my review of the scant research in this area, we haven’t even begun to agree on the reasons for these trends. We had better find those reasons and then do something about it, for the sake of both individuals and the nation’s economic future.

*Submitted by Jack Jennings, President and CEO of the Center on Education Policy*