



# National Education Association

A Report on the Status of Women in Education:  
Achieving Gender Equity for  
Women and Girls



Great Public Schools  
for Every Student

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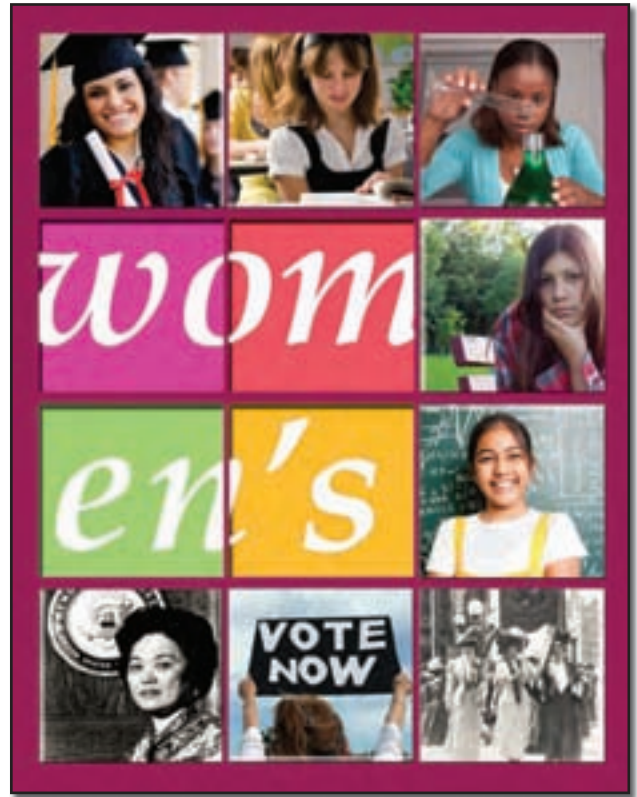
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By Pamela Rios Mobley

with Sabrina Holcomb



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for Every Student*

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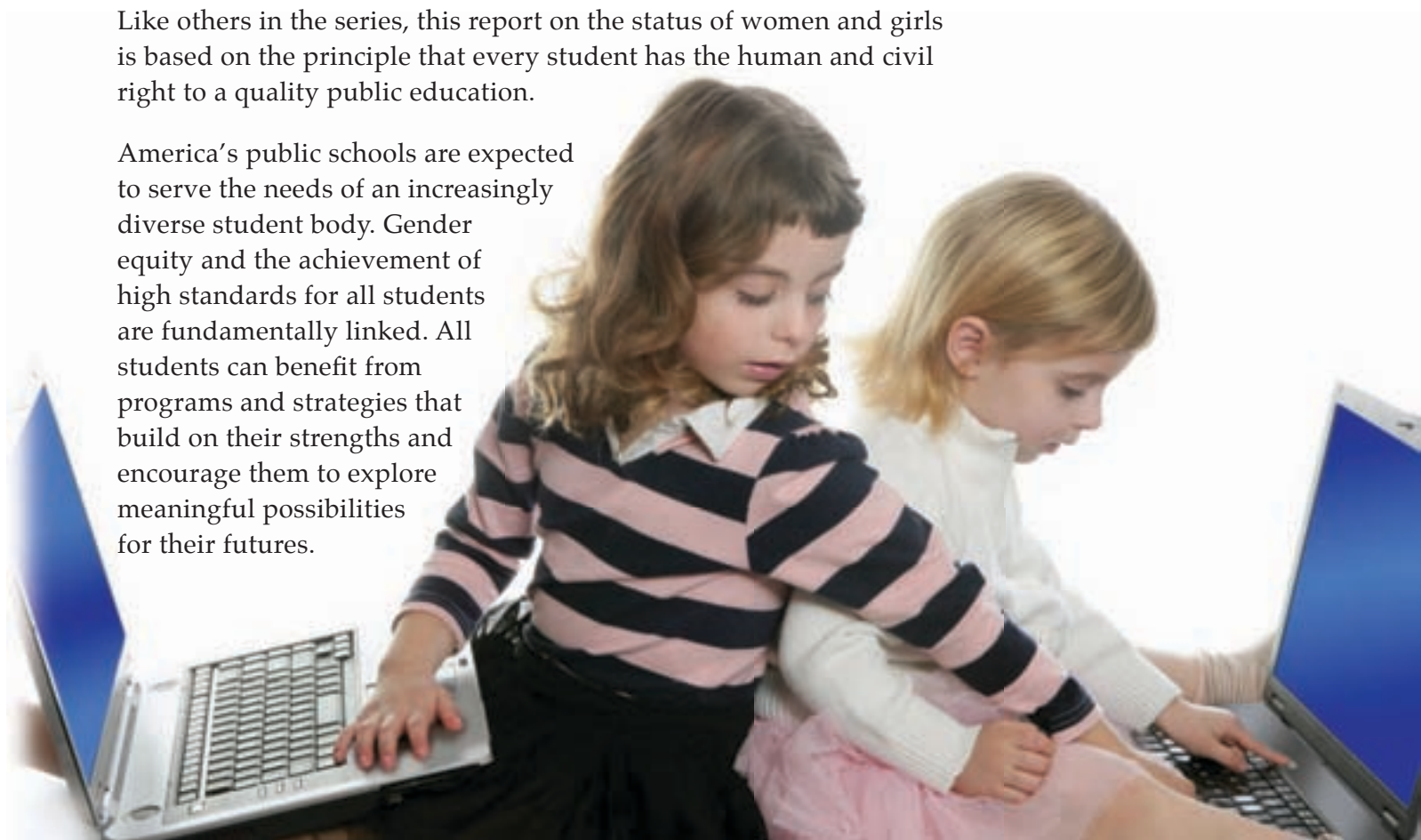
# The Status of Underserved Groups in Education

**T**he National Education Association's commitment to creating great public schools for every student requires working to ensure all students are learning and succeeding in schools. This task is challenging. From their beginnings, our nation's schools have treated students differently depending on their race, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, social class, sexual orientation, immigration status, language proficiency, and ability. Even today, significant gaps in academic attainment and achievement persist among these and other groups.

In 2005, NEA began publishing a series of reports on the status of underserved groups in education. Five reports have been published covering: American Indians and Alaska Natives; Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders; Hispanics; Blacks; and Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender people. These reports draw on the proceedings from national summits that brought together researchers, community advocates, and NEA members to discuss the problems experienced by each group and explore promising strategies for change in policy and practice.

Like others in the series, this report on the status of women and girls is based on the principle that every student has the human and civil right to a quality public education.

America's public schools are expected to serve the needs of an increasingly diverse student body. Gender equity and the achievement of high standards for all students are fundamentally linked. All students can benefit from programs and strategies that build on their strengths and encourage them to explore meaningful possibilities for their futures.



# NEA National Summit on the Status of Women in Education

**O**n April 4, 2009, the National Education Association hosted its first “National Summit on the Status of Women in Education.” The Summit brought together advocates from the community, women’s organizations, academia, and NEA to discuss what can be done to address critical issues facing women and girls. Through a series of moderated discussions, summit participants and presenters worked together to outline policy recommendations for issues pertaining to education (girls and graduation and girls in math and science), social relationships (girls and sexual harassment), and women’s rights (girls’ athletics and single-sex education under Title IX legislation). Presenters included:

## **When Girls Don’t Graduate, We All Fail: Ensuring Access to Education for Pregnant and Parenting Students**

- Lara S. Kaufmann—Senior Counsel, National Women’s Law Center
- Elizabeth Link—Counselor, Bryant Adult Alternative High School, Fairfax County, Virginia

## **What You Don’t Know Can Hurt Them: Positioning of Girls of Color in Mathematics and Science Education**

- Cirecie A. West-Olatunji—Assistant Professor, Department of Counselor Education, University of Florida

## **A Rising Pandemic of Sexual Violence in K-12 Schools: Locating a Secret Problem**

- Nan Stein—Senior Research Scientist, Wellesley College, Center for Research on Women and Co-Director, National Violence Against Women Prevention Research Center

## **Gender Equity and Sports: Title IX for Rookies and Ringers**

- Phyllis Lerner—Public Policy Officer, Women’s Sports Foundation
- Lisa Maatz—Director, Public Policy and Government Relations, American Association of University Women









# Unfinished Business

**A**merican women have made such remarkable civil and social progress, it's easy to forget how far we've come. A recent issue of *TIME* reminded the reader that if she had been a woman leafing through the magazine a scant 40 years ago, "the odds were good that your husband provided the money to buy it. . . . That if you got breast cancer, he might be asked to sign the form authorizing a mastectomy. That your son was heading to college but not your daughter. And that your boss, if you had a job, could explain that he was paying you less because, after all, you were probably working just for pocket money."

Much has changed in 40 years: For the first time in U.S. history, women surpass men in the nation's payrolls,<sup>1</sup> a record number of women serve in Congress, and women make up the majority of students in undergraduate and graduate programs. All in all, today's women have greater social freedoms, more civil protections under the law, and a pantheon of modern women who've broken new ground: from Congresswoman Patsy Takemoto Mink, the author of Title IX legislation, to Secretaries of State Condeleeza Rice and Hillary Rodham Clinton; from Supreme Court Justices Sandra Day O'Connor, Ruth Bader Ginsberg, and Sonia Sotomoyor to Chief Wilma Mankiller, the first female head of the Cherokee Nation; from Elizabeth Duncan Koontz, the first Black president of the National Education Association, to unparalleled entertainment icon, businesswoman, and philanthropist Oprah Winfrey.

The list goes on, and in the face of so many victories, it's easy to overlook the very real inequalities and discrimination women—especially "everyday women"—still face. Consider: The average woman makes only 77 cents for every dollar a man makes.<sup>2</sup> Women still end up in lower-paying careers more typically identified as "feminine," with a high percentage concentrated in administrative support jobs.<sup>3</sup> Sixty-eight percent of professional women work in education and healthcare, where salaries tend to be lower, compared to 29 percent of men.<sup>4</sup> And only nine percent of women, compared to 45 percent of men, are employed in high-paying computer and engineering fields. Despite the gains of the last four decades, there's still a "glass ceiling" keeping women

from high-level positions in high-tech fields, government, and business. These economic disparities aren't just unjust; they come at a time when more women than ever—both married and single—carry the chief financial burden of supporting their families in a faltering economy.

For many women of color, the monumental changes that have occurred for the general population of American women remain distant dreams against a backdrop of ever increasing demographic and cultural shifts. Girls of color must confront racism as well as sexism, and girls from low-income families face severe obstacles as well—disparities that play out at school as well as home. Although girls in general are well-represented in the K-12 and higher education arenas (they perform well on national reading and writing assessments, are progressing in math and science, and make up the majority of college students in both undergraduate and graduate programs), girls of color are more likely to attend struggling schools, encounter low teacher expectations, and receive inadequate nutrition and care.

Even though the gap between girls and boys in high school gifted programs is closing, there remains an obvious discrepancy between the number of White female students and the number of Black, Hispanic, and American Indian girls who participate in these programs. Perhaps most disturbing, dropout rates are rising for girls as well as boys, and although this trend transcends race, the rate is higher for girls of color, especially Blacks, American Indians, and Hispanics. And while high school and college graduation rates for Asian-Pacific Islander



females seem high on the surface, when you dig a little deeper, the rates are lower for Southeast Asian, Native Hawaiian, and other Pacific Islander students.

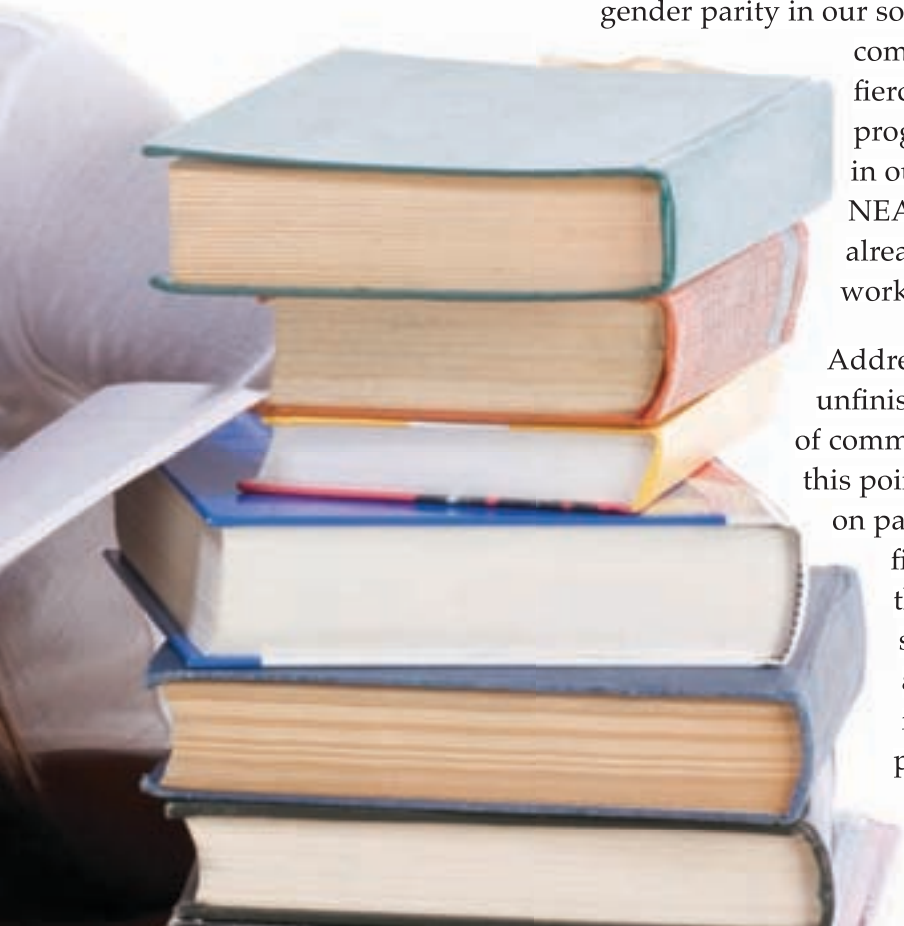
Clearly, the popular perception that most girls sail through school is flawed. Female students are multidimensional individuals with diverse perspectives, needs, and developmental contexts. Adults who work directly with them must be sensitive to the intersection of gender with other aspects of their identities—including race, ethnicity, social class, sexuality, disability, linguistic status, immigration status, age, and the communities in which they live—that influence girls' academic achievements, attitudes, and, ultimately, their futures.

The challenge, as we go forward, is ensuring that all female students have access to a high-quality and equitable education; that concerns about male educational decline don't usurp gender equity for girls and women; and that the hard-won gains of the past century—the gains that opened so many doors—aren't slowly eroded. To assist in this challenge, this report looks at the lives of the girls and women who attend our nation's schools through three lenses: education, social relationships, and women's rights.

There is much work left to do before women and girls achieve gender parity in our society and our schools. Yet, when it

comes to women's issues, we're missing that fierce urgency that fuels and sustains social progress. "We have to reawaken the advocate in ourselves," says Kathy Parks, chair of NEA's Women's Issues Committee. "We've already fought this war, but an advocate's work is never done."

Addressing present inequities—finishing unfinished business—requires the same level of commitment and passion that brought us to this point in history. Now is not the time to rest on past gains. Now is the time to continue the fight for future generations. NEA believes that a commitment to gender equity will strengthen the capacity of schools to create an educational climate that encourages females *and* males to realize their highest potential.







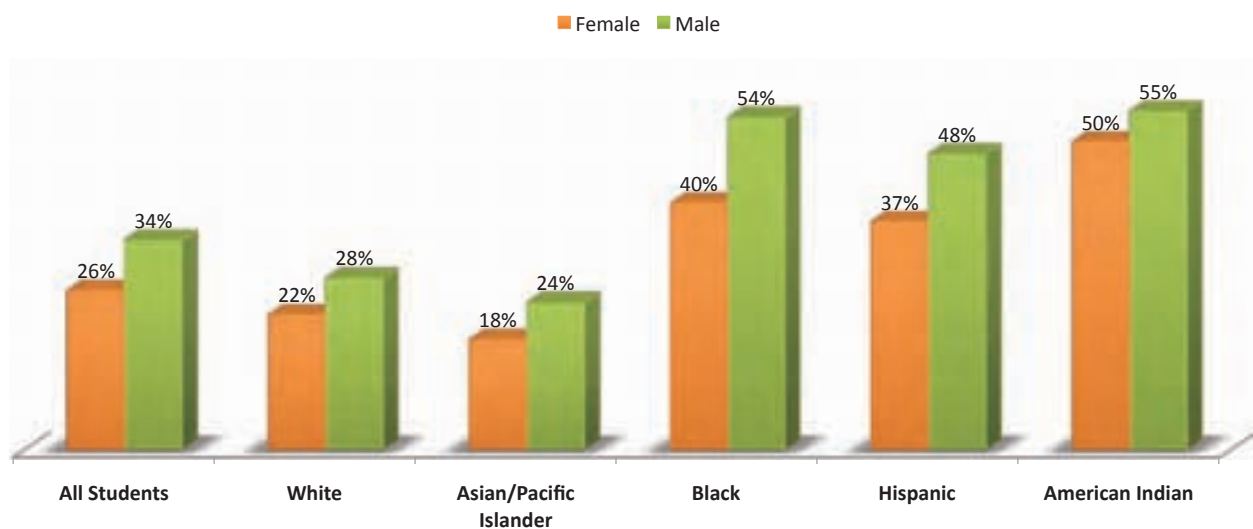
# Education

When it comes to education, most Americans tend to believe that girls, by and large, are doing well in school. This perspective has certainly been influenced by the decade-long spotlight that's been focused on the declining performance of male students. But what has been happening with girls in this time? Are they really holding their own?

# Why Girls Drop Out

High school dropout rates are anywhere from a serious problem to a national crisis, depending on which statistics you follow. No matter the exact numbers, NEA believes that one dropout is one too many and to address the problem, we need to focus on who is dropping out—and why. The dropout problem for boys has been widely reported, but what has been generally overlooked is that girls, not just boys, are dropping out of school at dangerous rates, says a National Women’s Law Center report. The report states that approximately “one in four girls drops out of high school every year, and the rates are even worse for girls of color.” Each year, “one in two American Indian female students, four in 10 Black female students, and nearly four in 10 Hispanic female students fail to graduate with a diploma.”<sup>5</sup>

**Dropout by Race/Ethnicity and Gender**



Source: EPE Research Center, "Diplomas Count: Ready for What?" *Education Week*, June 2007.

## Barriers for Latinas

As Hispanics become one of the fastest growing segments of the student population, more attention is being focused on the disproportionate rate at which Hispanic girls are dropping out of school. *Listening to Latinas: Barriers to High School Graduation*,

a new report by the National Women’s Law Center and the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund, finds that Latina students face a variety of roadblocks to educational attainment—from poverty, immigration status, and limited English proficiency to high teen pregnancy rates.<sup>6</sup> According to the report, Hispanic girls face specific challenges in school due to the intersection of their gender and ethnicity:



- Latinas have high aspirations, but because many are influenced by family and social expectations that are often based on stereotypes of Latinas as submissive caretakers, they can doubt their ability to reach their goals.
- Caring for younger siblings or elderly relatives may fall more heavily on Latinas, leading to more school absenteeism.
- Latinas tend not to get as involved in school activities or sports as Latinos do, putting the girls at a disadvantage.
- Latinas have the highest teen pregnancy rates and teen birth rates of any racial or ethnic group, almost twice the national average.<sup>7</sup>

Lara Kaufmann, Senior Counsel for Education and Employment at the National Women’s Law Center, and a presenter at the NEA Women’s Summit, shared a revealing story about a Latina student who told her teacher she wanted to go to college. Her teacher replied that he would give her two years before she was married and pregnant. “It reinforces the message girls get from society,” says Kaufmann, “making it that much harder for girls to believe they can succeed.”

“One young student had a baby and wanted to return to school but wasn’t able to get childcare. She missed a number of classes, and even though her counselor knew this, they marked her as truant and dropped her from their attendance rolls. It’s an example of rigid policy as a push-out factor. The message this student gets from her school is ‘you don’t belong here.’ And that’s a tragedy.”

—Lara Kaufmann, National Women’s Law Center





## Connection Between Female Dropouts and Teen Pregnancy

There is no single reason why students drop out of high school (poor grades, peer problems, jobs, family responsibilities, and transient home lives are among them). However, parenthood is one of the top causes for teen girls. According to *Diploma Attainment Among Teen Mothers*, a recent study by the Child Trend Research Center, teen pregnancy has the following unintended educational consequences:

- Overall, 51 percent of teen moms have a high school diploma compared to 89 percent of women who didn't have a teen birth. Younger teen mothers are even less likely to graduate.
- Teens who drop out of school are more likely to become pregnant than their peers who stay in school.
- Children of teen mothers are 50 percent more likely to repeat a grade, are less likely to complete high school than the children of older mothers, and perform lower on standardized tests.
- Children of teen mothers also do not perform as well as children of older mothers on measures of child development and school readiness, such as cognitions and interpersonal skills.<sup>8</sup>

Researchers see a causal relationship between academic failure and teen pregnancy. Parenthood not only has an impact on the schooling of teen mothers but teen fathers as well. Any serious action to lower the high school dropout rate, especially for girls, must focus on keeping pregnant and parenting students in school.

## Female Dropouts More Vulnerable

Students who drop out of school face a veritable obstacle course of hardships: unemployment, poverty, prison, divorce, poor health, and offspring who are also likely to drop out.<sup>9</sup> When compared to boys, however, girls who drop out face even more economic privation, including higher unemployment, lower wages, and a greater reliance on public assistance to help provide for their children.<sup>10</sup>

The National Women’s Law Center reports that, “adult women without a high school diploma earn an average salary about seven percent *below* the federal poverty line (FPL) for a family of three (\$15,520 vs. \$16,600), while women with high school diplomas earn an average salary about 32 percent *above* the FPL (\$21,936 vs. \$16,600).” Not until a woman has some college education does she earn more than a man without a high school diploma.

There are major costs to be paid by individuals and the nation for every student who doesn’t graduate. Students don’t just drop out of school; they drop out of society. In addition to being a greater burden on the health care and criminal justice systems, dropouts contribute fewer tax dollars to the economy and are less likely to vote and engage in civic activities.<sup>11</sup>

### Female dropouts earn less than male dropouts in every racial/ethnic group

#### Median Annual Earnings of High School Dropouts

(Adults Aged 25-64)

Female: All	\$15,520	Male: All	\$24,698
Female: White	\$15,561	Male: White	\$25,480
Female: Black	\$14,305	Male: Black	\$21,587
Female: Asian/Pacific Islander	\$19,209	Male: Asian/Pacific Islander	\$21,024

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2007 Annual Social and Economic Supplement

All the more reason why all stakeholders—educators, policymakers, and the public—have an important role to play in preventing students from dropping out of school. No one group can do it alone. It requires a focused and integrated effort on the part of schools, lawmakers, and the community. The heartening news: There are demonstrated interventions (including comprehensive high school reform, quality early childhood programs, and smaller class sizes) that have a track record of success.<sup>12</sup> As we work to address the dropout problem, we can’t forget that girls need a lifeline, too.

## What We Know

- By third grade, 51 percent of boys have used a microscope in class, in contrast to just 37 percent of girls.
- Children's science programs feature three times as many male as female characters and twice as many adult male scientists as female scientists. Most of the female characters are portrayed in secondary roles such as lab assistants or students.
- Boys receive more math and science related toys than do girls.
- In sixth and seventh grade, girls rate popularity as more important than academic competence or independence.
- Girls from all ethnic groups rate themselves considerably lower than do boys on technological ability.
- Vocational training programs channel girls and women into low-wage jobs: cosmetology, childcare, and healthcare programs are more than 85 percent female, whereas more than 90 percent of males are clustered in the higher-paying technology and industrial trades, such as carpentry and plumbing.<sup>14</sup>

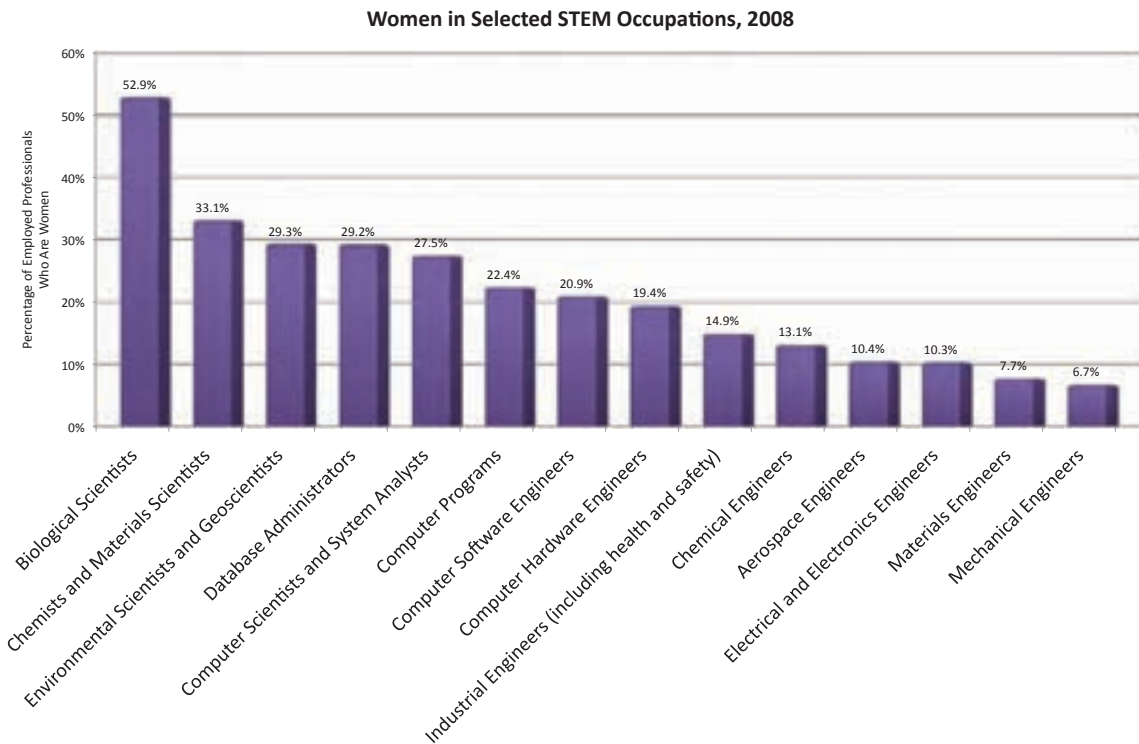
## Girls in a Tech World

The first language for today's students is not their native tongue; their first language is electronics, say educators. In today's plugged-in world, high-tech is king, and the STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) fields are widely acknowledged as absolutely crucial to a 21st Century economy. But today, decades after the landmark Title IX legislation promising the nation that the talents of students would no longer be fettered by gender discrimination, there are still too few girls pursuing studies and careers in STEM fields.

The lack of girls in STEM college majors and careers comes at a time when the high school gender gap has narrowed significantly. A recent report by the American Association of University Women (AAUW) finds that, not only are girls earning high school math and science credits at the same rate as boys, they're earning slightly higher grades in these classes. However, on high-stakes math tests, including advanced placement exams and the math section of the SAT and the ACT, boys continue to outscore girls by a small margin. Also more boys than girls take physics, calculus, computer science, and other advanced STEM courses.<sup>13</sup>







Note: Occupations are self-reported.

Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009. Women in the labor force: A databook (Report 1018) (Washington D.C.), Table 11.

## Aptitude vs. Attitude

So, what fuels the STEM gap? Some researchers say that it's attitude, not aptitude. Despite girls' gains in mathematics, in both participation and performance, negative stereotypes and the predominant image of scientists as men still make a powerful impact on the performance and career choices of girls, as early as elementary school.<sup>15</sup>

To compound the problem, both male and female students from historically underserved communities often lack exposure to advanced high school math and science courses, which, in turn, impacts their ability to pursue STEM majors in college.<sup>16</sup> According to AAUW, 31 percent of Asian American and 16 percent of White high school graduates completed calculus, compared with six percent of Black and seven percent of Hispanic graduates. Also, more Asian American and White high school students took Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate exams compared with their Black and Hispanic peers.<sup>17</sup>

## STEM and Girls of Color

Girls of color get the message from the outside world that they “don't belong in mathematics and science” from an early age, says

NEA Women's Summit presenter, Cirecie West-Olatunji, an assistant professor of counselor education at the University of Florida. At the Summit, Olatunji reported on a research study she is conducting with two of her math and science colleagues. The study, funded by the National Science Foundation, explores the way Black girls are positioned in math and science by teachers, parents, counselors, and the students themselves as they transition from elementary to middle school. Although the study concentrates on Black girls, the findings of the research team can be extrapolated to other communities of color.

The study focuses on the experiences of Black girls who attend middle schools with embedded magnet programs. The research team found that students in their local community were tracked to enter magnet schools around the fourth grade and that girls of color were seldom identified. "African-American girls knew there were many academic differences between their experiences in math and science in comparison to girls in their school's magnet program," says Tomasina Adams, a professor of mathematics education at the University of Florida and a member of the research team. Yet, if students had not already been identified to go into a magnet program, once they entered middle school, there was no way for them to cross over.

The research team shared their observations with Summit participants:

- Even when educators had close and sincere relationships with the girls and their families, their expectations for the girls remained low. "We're socializing children for different kinds of life experiences," says Olatunji. "These girls were not positioned as learners."
- Teachers were communicating their lack of comfort with the subject matter in nonverbal ways. When teaching math or science, educators were stiff, formal, and disconnected from the students. "They used their papers almost as a barrier between them and the subject matter," says Olatunji. "As soon as they stopped teaching math or science, their confidence and personalities came back and they were once more in control of their classrooms."



- Parents in low-resourced schools were engaged in their children’s education in ways that didn’t fit the mainstream definition of parent involvement (typically schools look for parent contact with school personnel). For instance, parents helped their children with homework, and if they weren’t able to, went out of their way to find someone who could. Our concept of what constitutes parent involvement depends on the culture we come from, says the research team, and needs to be expanded.
- Although some counselors were aware of the environmental barriers to math and science learning, they didn’t act on their awareness by recommending girls for summer science and math programs, acting as cultural mediators for teachers, or making their own office into a welcome environment that confirmed and encouraged students’ potential.
- The majority of girls didn’t see themselves—or people of color in general—as math and science learners, although they came alive when teachers involved them in hands-on, experiential exercises. One notable example was a group of girls whose elementary school teacher used rap exercises to teach math. The girls were more confident, active math learners when they reached middle school.

Although the study is in its last year, the team indicates the need for more research on girls of color, specifically, and girls in high-poverty, under-resourced schools. Quite a bit of work has been done in the last two decades around gender and the STEM fields, but the recorded gains have for the most part applied to middle class white females. Educators need more information about the intersection of gender and identity for students who are low-income, culturally diverse, and female, says Olatunji, so we can understand how these factors converge to create a barrier for these girls in math and science learning.

### Making STEM a Priority

NEA believes that identifying and developing talent in STEM fields should be a priority for our educational system. Our nation can’t afford to





“lose” half of its workforce to a gender gap. “By providing an equitable education for girls, we are improving education for boys as well,” says former math teacher and NEA President Dennis Van Roekel. “Our country’s future prosperity is tied to innovation spurred on by all students’ engagement in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.”

The good news for educators is that despite the fact that negative stereotypes about girls and technology are still prevalent, most children perform well when they have an educator who believes in their abilities and potential. The research shows that when girls grow up in an environment that nurtures their own personal achievements in math and science, as well as promoting the general success of women in the sciences, they’re much more likely to consider a future in a STEM field and to feel at home on an increasingly high-tech planet.<sup>18</sup>

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## Taking Action in Education

Following are recommendations for education stakeholders, developed by NEA Summit participants and our partners in the field:

### *What can we do to keep girls in school?*

#### **Policymakers and Researchers**

- Mandate and fund programs to keep pregnant and parenting students in school. Funded services would include transportation, home instruction, and a pregnancy prevention curriculum.
- Include gender disaggregation data in Average Yearly Progress reports.
- In the case of pregnant students, ensure schools’ compliance with Title IX, which contains basic non-discrimination principles—namely, that schools cannot discriminate on the basis of pregnancy. Promote staff awareness of Title IX obligations.\*
- Conduct more gender-based research—many studies fail to consider gender. Using the results of gender-based research, design interventions targeted to girls to improve retention rates.

- Educate policymakers and administrators on research about the benefits of keeping pregnant and parenting students in school. Such benefits include: higher graduation rates, perceived and actual improved community relations, and improved economic impact on the community.

## **Administrators**

- Form early intervention programs for students at risk of dropping out and for their families. Have school psychologists, counselors, and nurses create a parent support group and parent information program for pregnant and parenting students.
- Create and enforce non-discriminatory policies in regard to pregnant students, for instance, homecoming court participation, student government, etc. Make sure girls have equal access to afterschool programs, including, and beyond, athletics.\*

## **Educators**

- Promote and develop areas of competence in students who are at risk for dropping out. Provide meaningful, attainable, challenging short, mid-term, and long-term goals to keep students engaged.
- Make homework and makeup work available to pregnant and parenting students during absences and, to the extent necessary, assign a homebound teacher.
- Maintain a supportive, welcoming environment throughout the school campus to help keep pregnant and parenting teens in school.
- Work with school counselors and other staff to help develop a parent support group for pregnant and parenting teens.

## ***How can we encourage girls' participation in STEM fields?***

### **Policymakers**

- Require colleges of education to adequately prepare teaching candidates to teach mathematics and science to elementary and middle school students.
- Fund research on the intersection of gender and cultural equity to help promote pathways to math and science careers for girls and women of color.

## Administrators

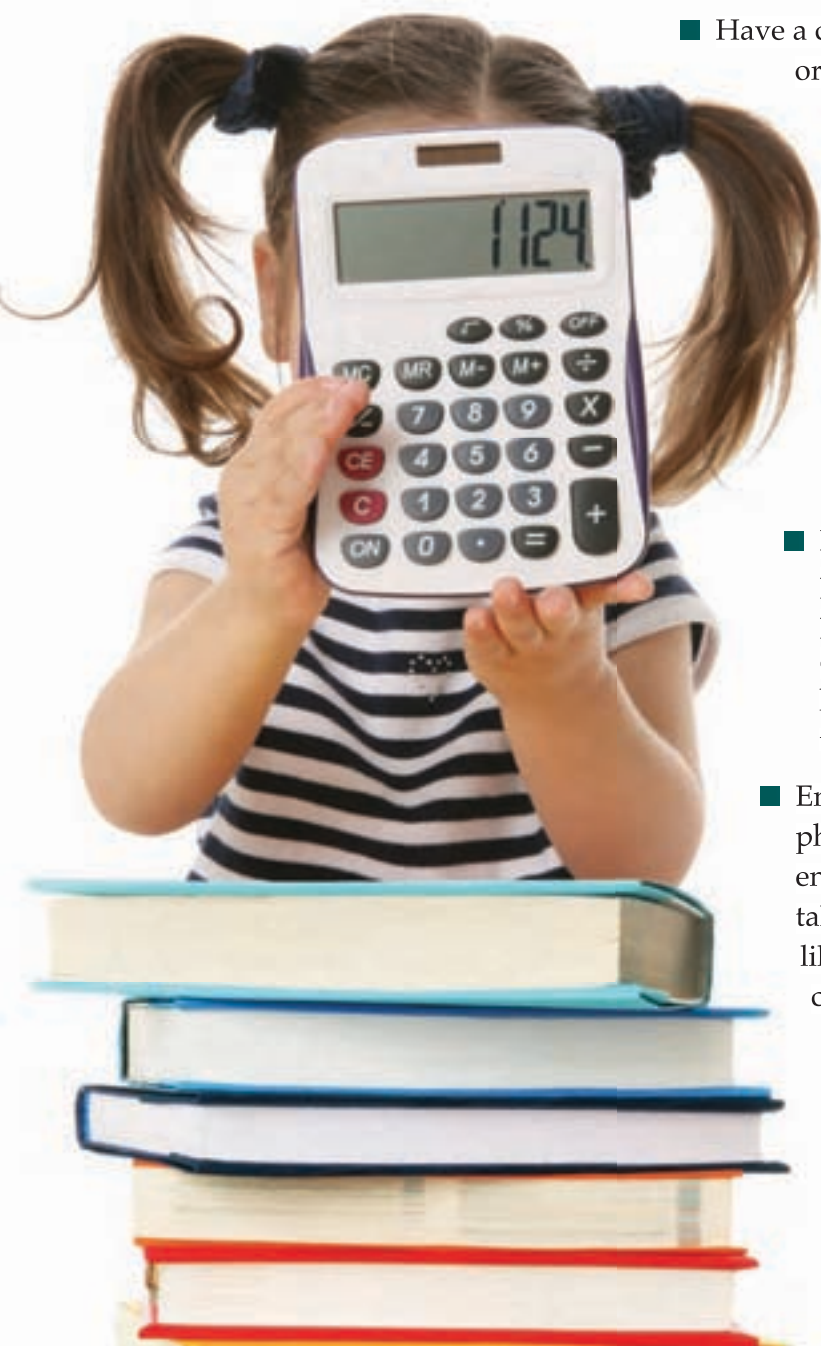
- Develop a program that provides female students with exposure and access to rigorous career and technical education.
- Provide all educators with professional development in gifted and talented strategies they can use with all students—especially around analytical and critical thinking.

## Educators and Parents

- Plan and promote an inclusive education environment that encourages girls of color to pursue STEM careers.
- Work with students' parents to reinforce positive views of female scientists at home.
  - Have a colleague videotape you while you teach a math or science class. What physical, nonverbal cues are you sending to students? Work on maintaining a relaxed manner and projecting a positive attitude toward the subject matter.
  - Encourage girls to develop their spatial skills by playing with construction toys, assembling and disassembling items, and drawing and working with their hands. Spatial skills developed in elementary and middle school can promote student interest in math, physics, and other areas.\*\*
  - Highlight uses of STEM to solve human problems. Research shows that girls often perceive STEM fields as abstract. Early college courses emphasizing real-world applications have been shown to increase the retention of women in STEM fields.\*\*
  - Encourage high school girls to take calculus, physics, chemistry, computer science, and engineering classes, when available. Girls who take calculus in high school are three times more likely to major in a scientific or engineering field in college.\*\*

\* National Women's Law Center

\*\* American Association of University Women







# Social Relationships

Relationships are important for all human beings and are particularly pivotal for young people, who are still developing mentally and emotionally. How are today's girls—who do so much of their bonding online—faring socially, inside and outside of the classroom?

# Girls and Bullying

**F**rom their very first day in a primary classroom to their last days in high school, the bonds students build help them navigate the unsteady currents of school life. When these relationships turn negative and detrimental—veering toward bullying and harassment—we begin to see how critical a supportive and healthy school environment is for the safety and well-being of all children.

More pervasive and lethal today than in the past two decades, bullying takes place not only on school buses and school grounds but through cell phone text messages and in the vast corridors of cyberspace. In fact, research finds that girls are more likely to be the target of cyberbullying and that the more time they spend online, the greater the likelihood they will be bullied.<sup>19</sup> To make matters worse, say experts, cyberbullying is even more intense than face-to-face bullying because it can occur around the clock.

Bullying and sexual harassment behaviors begin in elementary school; by middle and high school, episodes of peer-to-peer aggression escalate in both subtle and overt ways.





The transition periods in a student's school life are where we see the most tangible examples of bullying, say researchers. For example, the move from elementary to middle school, then from middle to high school, is extremely unsettling for many students.<sup>20</sup> This is the time students become part of the in-crowd or the invisible crowd, setting the tone for their social lives and peer interactions. Bullying and sexual harassment also negatively impact student learning, resulting in frequent absenteeism, truancy, and a deterioration of student performance.<sup>21</sup>

### Do Girls Bully Differently?

It's well documented that girls face a number of physical, mental, and emotional threats to their safety and well-being. In the nineties and early part of this century, much of the attention around girls and the terrible consequences of bullying focused on girls' aggression toward other girls, or the "mean girls" phenomenon.

Researchers call this type of bullying "relational aggression." The behaviors can include rumor spreading, malicious gossip, teasing, intimidation, backstabbing, ignoring, verbal insults, and exclusion from social groups and activities. In the words of Lyn Mikel Brown, professor of education and human development at Colby College, "girls who bully are not necessarily aggressive to adults and can appear quite civilized and nice."<sup>22</sup> Brown says the reasons for girl aggression include "competition over media ideas of beauty, anger at mistreatment in school, sexual harassment, a desire for respect, and survival."<sup>23</sup>

Both boys and girls engage in relational aggression and use it as a way to vent frustration and bolster social status and self-esteem, says Meda Chesney-Lind, professor of women's studies and feminist criminologist at the University of Hawaii. Chesney-Lind didn't find any evidence that girls use relational aggression as their preferred weapon of choice. In fact, she states that "in certain contexts, and against certain individuals, relational aggressions were ways the powerless punished the bad behavior of the powerful."<sup>24</sup>





“School bus drivers are often on the front lines of student bullying and sexual harassment. When I drove a bus, I would see the beginning stages of female gang members getting “sexed” into the gang—they would roll dice and the number that came up was the number of male gang members they had to sleep with. The initiation didn’t take place on the bus, of course, but they talked about it openly. This behavior crosses racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic boundaries. It’s not just an inner-city story; we see it in suburban neighborhoods with \$500,000 houses. And the sad part is that the girls are very proud of it—they see it as a badge of honor.”

—Bonnie Lee Chalfant,  
Bus driver and former director  
of the New Jersey Education  
Association

## Bullying or Sexual Harassment?

Often linked, the terms “bullying” and “sexual harassment” evolved around the same time, in the 1970s. However, Nan Stein, presenter at the NEA Women’s Summit and a senior research scientist at Wellesley College’s Center for Research on Women, cautions against conflating the two terms. “Younger and younger students are involved in more violent episodes, yet society tends to name these behaviors bullying and deny the presence of sexual harassment or violence,” Stein told Summit participants. Stein pointed to one incident in which a group of boys used a zapper on a girl’s breast, only to have a school administrator refer to the incident as “roughhousing.”

In fact, according to *Hostile Hallways*, a seminal study by the American Association of University Women, a significant percentage of students have been sexually harassed:

- Eighty-one percent of students experienced some form of sexual harassment during their school years.
- Fifty-nine percent of students were harassed occasionally.
- Twenty-seven percent of students were targeted often.
- Fifty-four percent of students said they sexually harassed someone during their school years.<sup>25</sup>

One important difference between bullying and sexual harassment, says Stein, is that sexual harassment has legal ramifications. “The bullying laws are so broad they marginalize children,” Stein warned Summit participants, “and so elastic they are extremely problematic in terms of rights.” By contrast, sexual harassment laws are more concrete; they were developed as part of civil rights legislation



to combat gender discrimination used by men to intimidate women in the workplace. This definition has expanded over the last few decades to include same-sex harassment.<sup>26</sup>

According to the research, although the main perpetrators of both sexual harassment and bullying are boys, girls experience more sexual harassment and boys experience more bullying. Girls also experience more negative emotional, mental, and physical effects from bullying and sexual harassment than boys.<sup>27</sup> As the main victims of gendered violence (along with Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender students), girls experience higher incidences of suicide, depression, insecurity, anxiety, loneliness, and low-self-esteem.<sup>28</sup>

## Dating Violence

Many researchers and advocates state that violence against women is a considerable public health concern. But one of the most pervasive problems affecting teenagers and teenage girls, specifically, is dating violence. Dating violence can be emotional, psychological, physical, or sexual, and it crosses all racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic boundaries. Girls between the ages of 14-18 are the most vulnerable. The data is eye opening and startling: according to the *Tween and Teen Dating Violence and Abuse Study*, teens experience rates of intimate partner abuse three times more than adults.<sup>29</sup> The study of tweens (11-14 year olds) and teens also found the following:

- Nearly half of all tweens (47%) and more than one in three 11-12 year olds (37%) say they have been in a boyfriend/girlfriend relationship.
- 72 percent of tweens say dating relationships begin by age 14.
- More than one in four students and their parents say sexual activity is part of tween dating relationships—*though parents believe it is not their tween who is having sex.*
- Teens report that abusive behavior increases dramatically in the teen years (age 15-18).
- Parents are unaware of how much tweens and teens are harassed/embarrassed electronically.<sup>30</sup>

Advocates and researchers agree that schools, parents, and the community can't continue to ignore the negative impact dating violence has on teenagers. The concern is that if these behaviors

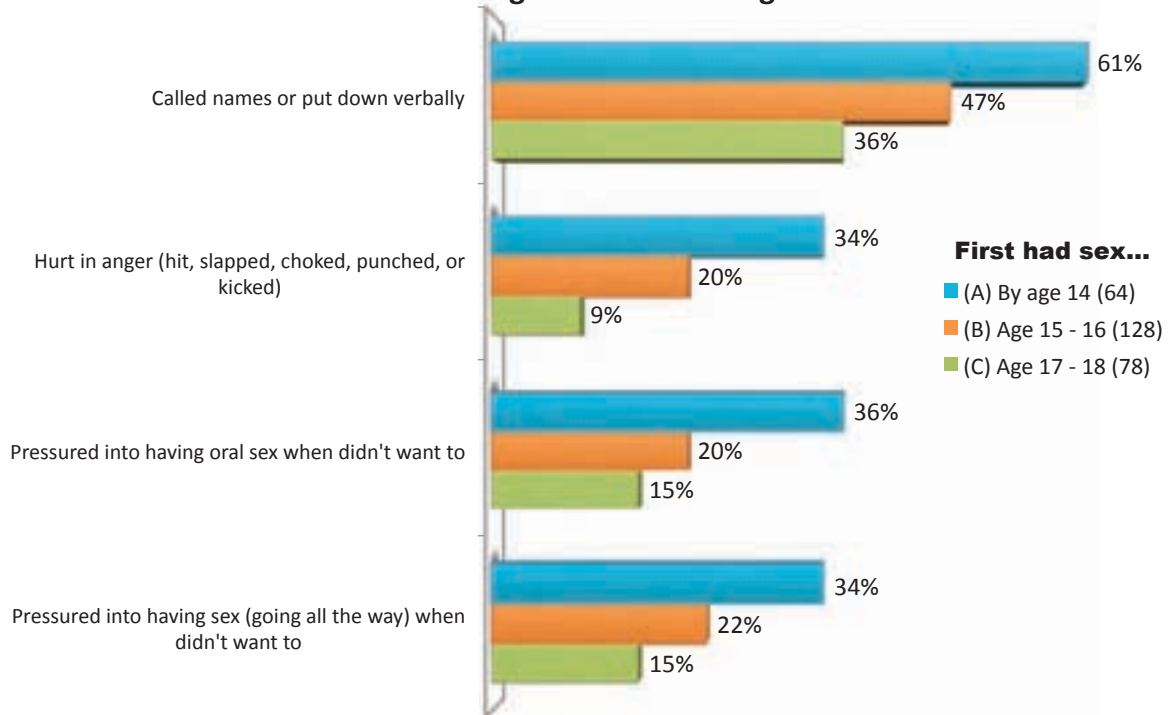
## How do you know when it's bullying?

NEA describes bullying as the systematic and chronic inflicting of physical hurt and/or psychological distress on another person. Bullying can be physical, verbal, or social. Whether it's as direct as teasing, threatening, or hitting or as indirect as rumors, exclusion, or manipulation, it often involves a power imbalance between the bully and the target.

## What is sexual harassment?

NEA and the Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights define sexual harassment as unwanted and unwelcomed behavior of a sexual nature that interferes with one's right to receive an equal educational opportunity. Sexting may be considered a form of sexual harassment.

### Abusive Dating Behaviors Among Teens



Source: Liz Claiborne Inc. Tween and Teen Dating Violence and Abuse Study 2008.

are left unchecked, they may lead to an increase in the numbers of domestic abuse incidents outside school. The American Bar Association reports:

- One in five high school girls is physically or sexually hurt by a dating partner.
- One in three teens experiences some kind of abuse in their romantic relationships.
- 57 percent of teens know someone who has been physically, sexually, or verbally abusive in a dating relationship.
- One in three teens reports knowing a friend or peer who has been hit, punched, kicked, slapped, or hurt by a dating partner.
- Teens report dating abuse via cell phones is a serious problem.<sup>31</sup>

### Keeping Students Safe

Study after study shows that bullying and sexual harassment behaviors (on school grounds, on





school buses, and even off of school property) can create a hostile environment that interferes with students' right to an education. Given the increase in the frequency and severity of such behavior, it's no surprise that bullying is one of the top—and at times number one—search terms on the NEA Web site. Yet, summit presenter Nan Stein concludes that “despite longstanding efforts toward gender equity and the current intense focus on school safety, the simple right of boys and girls to an equitable and safe school environment has yet to be secured.”<sup>32</sup>

In the face of this challenge, NEA is more committed than ever to reducing all forms of bullying and sexual harassment and is working with education stakeholders, affiliates, and partner organizations to address the root causes of student violence. Fortunately, research shows we can make a significant impact by fostering the active involvement of educators, parents, and the larger community as part of a schoolwide initiative—but first and foremost, by paying attention when students signal that they need our help.

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## Taking Action in Social Relationships

Following are recommendations for education stakeholders, developed by NEA Women's Summit participants:

### *How can we address incidents of bullying and sexual harassment in schools?*

#### **Policymakers**

- Enact anti-bullying legislation and develop effective district and state anti-bullying policies that clearly define bullying behaviors, outline prevention and reporting procedures, clarify investigation and disciplinary actions, and include training requirements.

#### **Administrators**

- Engage all necessary staff in bullying and sexual harassment trainings—including school counselors, sports coaches,

education support professionals, and any part-time, volunteer, or classified staff that have experience with bullying and sexual harassment issues.

- Enlist community organizations to help promote school anti-bullying policies, provide technical assistance and grants to increase awareness, and identify and engage parent and community partners.
- Create stringent school policies and rules that address the consequences of all types of violent behavior and make sure to enforce them. Hold a schoolwide assembly at the beginning of the year to review policies and rules with students and staff.

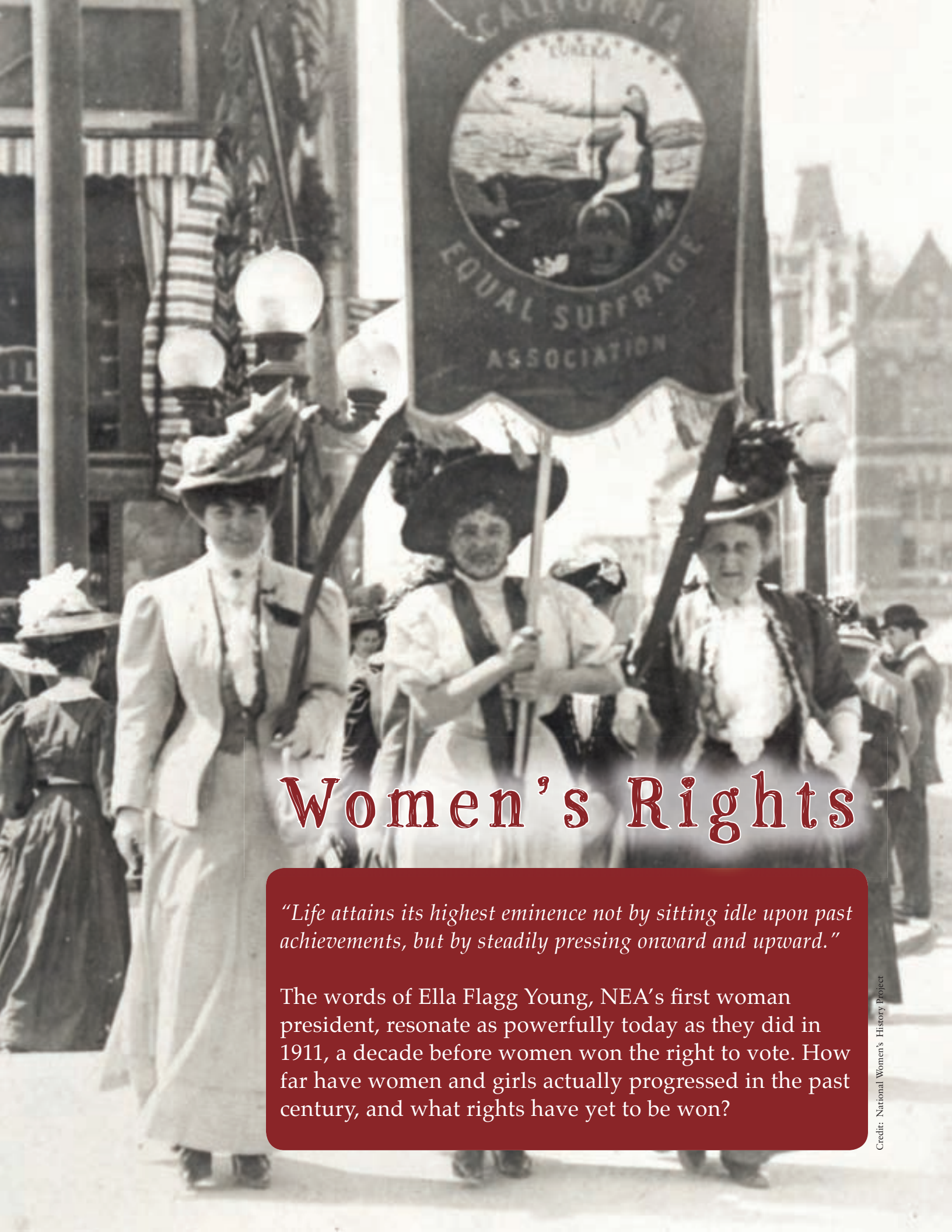
### Educators

- If a student comes to you with a complaint about being harassed or bullied, take it seriously. No allegation about potential harassment or bullying should be ignored because the charge seems improbable or because the behavior is considered a harmless rite of passage.
- Immediately report the student's complaint of harassment or bullying to the designated authority in your school (often it is the district's Title IX grievance officer). If you don't know who the person is, ask your principal. Check back with the student to see if she or he has been informed as to what steps the school system is taking.
- If a student seems to be in severe emotional or psychological distress, offer to help the student get in touch with a counselor, social worker, or school psychologist right away; be supportive, but don't give advice beyond your expertise. And if the student seems in imminent physical danger, alert the administration immediately.

### Parents and Community

- Support teachers and administrators in their efforts to create a safe school environment and advocate for school policies on harassment and violence, if none exist. Work with your PTA/PTO to promote awareness and parent training on online bullying and sexual harassment—precautions to take, computer software to use, and other strategies for monitoring students' computer use. Start talking to your children about online safety as soon as they start using the computer—from preschool through high school.





# Women's Rights

*"Life attains its highest eminence not by sitting idle upon past achievements, but by steadily pressing onward and upward."*

The words of Ella Flagg Young, NEA's first woman president, resonate as powerfully today as they did in 1911, a decade before women won the right to vote. How far have women and girls actually progressed in the past century, and what rights have yet to be won?



# Justice for Women

Women and girls have made such tremendous progress, it's hard to believe that in the early part of the 19th Century, women were denied the right to vote, own property, hold an elective office, or attend college. Married women were, for the most part, expected to spend their time keeping house for their husbands. And young women who were teachers weren't allowed to marry at all—not if they wanted to keep their jobs (many states had laws barring married educators). Not until 1920, when the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was ratified, did American women finally gain the right to vote and to change the landscapes of their lives and the prospects of their daughters and granddaughters. After WWII, American women entered the workforce in record numbers, and by the 1960s, an energized female populace had given birth to a women's liberation movement that advocated for the civil rights of all women.

With its landmark Title IX legislation in 1972, Congress promised the nation it would protect and promote the rights of girls and women. The law with the unprepossessing name had the power to compel federally funded institutions to maintain policies and programs that are gender non-discriminatory. Although many people think that Title IX is only about athletics, the law ensures equal opportunity for



women and girls in all aspects of education—from access to higher education, to fair treatment in K-12 classrooms, to equity in sports. But even with the progress made under the law, gender-based stereotypes and inequities still limit the academic and social development of girls, and in the past few years, the decades-old law has been diluted.

In 2005-2006, the Bush Administration amended Title IX to loosen the regulations around two hot-button issues that continue to attract controversy because of perceived gender inequities:

1) school athletics programs—a bone of contention for decades and 2) single-sex classes, which have drawn fire even as they've recently gained popularity.

### **Title IX and School Athletics**

Much of the controversy surrounding Title IX is centered around the impact the law has on female participation in high school and collegiate athletics. Title IX requires that male and female athletes receive the same benefits:

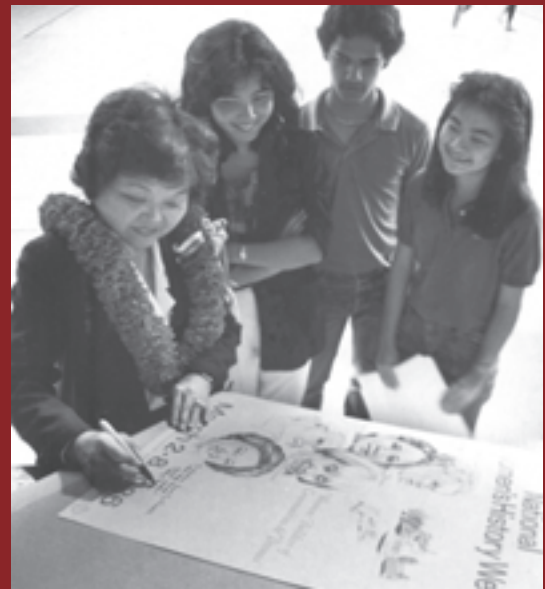
- equipment, uniforms, and supplies
- access to weight and training rooms
- equal practice facilities
- same size and quality locker rooms and competition facilities
- equal access to practice and games during prime hours (just as boys have)
- same quality coaches as boys' teams
- opportunity to play the same quality opponents
- same awards and awards banquets
- cheerleaders and band performances at girls' games.<sup>33</sup>

Many institutions expressed concerns about the impact these Title IX requirements would have on male athletics. Male sports organizations said that Title IX regulations promoted female athletes and sports to the detriment of male teams, subsequently

## **It's the Law**

Formally known as Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, the law was renamed the Patsy T. Mink Equal Opportunity in Education Act in honor of its principal author, Congresswoman Mink from Hawaii. The law states:

*"No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance."*



Congresswoman Mink signs posters for students during Women's History Week.



reducing the numbers of opportunities for males. Some colleges reported having to cut back non-revenue sports, such as wrestling and baseball, to pay for women's sports. As a consequence, there have been many attempts to change or weaken the law, including an amendment by the Bush Administration in 2005 that allowed universities and colleges to survey the student body's interest in sports as a way to determine the numbers of women interested in sports on campus.

Women's organizations were very concerned that low survey response rates would provide inaccurate data about girls' interests in sports, especially in light of the positive impact Title IX has had on the participation of girls in school athletics. In 1972, fewer than 300,000 girls competed in high school sports compared to 3.5 million high school boys. Today, approximately three million high school girls and 4.4 million high school boys play a sport. The results on college campuses are similar; women's participation on college level teams has increased by a stunning 456 percent.<sup>34</sup>

Increased participation in sports has led to positive benefits in other areas: According to Summit presenter Phyllis Lerner, a public policy officer for the Women's Sports Foundation, research shows that women and girls who play sports are less likely to be pregnant or parenting teens, drop out of school, be in abusive relationships, abuse drugs and alcohol, and develop breast cancer and other health concerns later in life. They are more likely to earn better grades, communicate better with parents and teachers, rise to management level jobs, thrive in the workplace, and live long-term, healthier lives.<sup>35</sup>

### **Title IX and Single-Sex Education**

In 2006, a loosening of Title IX regulations around single-sex public schools and classes was spurred, in large part, by the bleak academic prospects for many students of color, especially boys. According to the U.S. Department of Education, "research showed that some students may learn better in single-sex environments."<sup>36</sup> Parents and community advocates in many communities of color believed that same sex education would address some of the academic and social issues besetting minority students. The loosened regulations allowed school districts to provide single sex opportunities as another way of meeting the needs of students, said supporters.



However, many women's advocacy organizations voiced opposition to what they saw as the "weakening" of Title IX regulations in single-sex education, pointing out that Title IX already allowed for single-sex classes and schools in certain situations. They were concerned that educating girls and boys separately would only serve to foster stereotypes and misunderstandings between the sexes. Another concern was gender-questioning students, who didn't fit neatly into a gender-binary, "either/or" worldview. In response to the changes in the law, the National Coalition of Women and Girls in Education concluded: 1) Without adequate safeguards, single-sex programs can increase gender discrimination. 2) The new regulations throw out the most basic safeguards. 3) The new regulations do not mandate equal treatment for students excluded from a single-sex program. 4) The new regulations rely on faulty and unproven assumptions about the benefits of single-sex programs.<sup>37</sup>

NEA also disagreed with the weakening of Title IX due to inconclusive research and urged the Department of Education to incorporate several safeguards: Single-sex education programs should be implemented only when there is strong support among the affected persons. Local school districts should be required to submit any proposed single-sex programs to the Department for review and approval before implementation. And all single-sex education programs must provide equal or at least substantially equal, not merely comparable, educational services to students of the opposite sex in all respects, both tangible and intangible.<sup>38</sup>



## NEA and Women's Rights

NEA has been at the forefront of the fight for women's rights since its founding meeting in 1857, when two women, Agnes W. Beecher and Hannah DeWolf, signed the NEA constitution and were named honorary members of the Association. In 1911, a full decade before American women gained the right to vote, NEA elected Ella Flagg Young as its first female president and endorsed the women's suffrage movement. Shortly after the merger between the NEA and the (predominantly Black) American Teachers Association in 1966, NEA elected its first Black female president, Elizabeth Duncan Koontz. By the 1970's, NEA recognized the need to prepare its female members to increase their participation as leaders in the Association, and the Women's Leadership Training Program was launched. During that period, NEA supported the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment and other historic legislation that ensured the equal protection and representation of women.

## **An Eye to the Future**

On April 20, 2010, the Obama Administration issued a “Dear Colleague” letter that withdraws the Bush Administration’s 2005 interpretation of Title IX policy affecting college sports programs. It disallows the use of a survey as the sole factor in determining the level of interest in women’s sports on campus. Women’s organizations are now waiting to see whether the Obama Administration will also rescind the loosening of the regulations that allowed more flexibility in creating single-sex classrooms and schools. The demand for single-sex education is likely to continue, however, as concern grows over the gender gaps—lower grades, high school graduation rates, and college attendance rates—for minority boys.

In response, women’s groups point to studies showing that Title IX—the civil rights law largely responsible for the unprecedented achievements of American women in just a few short decades—has benefitted the academic performance of both sexes and the nation as a whole. As we work to meet the challenges of public education in this century, NEA and other women’s rights’ advocates urge the nation to seek solutions that benefit *all* students.

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# **Taking Action in Women’s Rights**

Following are recommendations for education stakeholders, developed by NEA Summit participants and our partners in the field:

*How can we enforce and promote Title IX to provide equal opportunities for girls and women?*

## **Policymakers**

- Become totally conversant with Title IX legislation and its impact on the education of women and girls in elementary, secondary, and higher-education programs.
- Call for more compliance reviews and enhanced enforcement of Title IX regulations by the Offices for Civil Rights in the U.S. Department of Education.

- Restore federal funding to states for gender equity work, including funding for state Title IX coordinators and programs.\*

### **Administrative Agencies**

- Enforce the Title IX requirement that each institution receiving federal funds have a coordinator to ensure proper implementation of Title IX.\*
- Provide all members of the school community—including students, parents, admissions and recruitment personnel, union representatives, and staff—with information about Title IX protections, grievance procedures, and the name and contact information of the Title IX coordinator at the school, using the Internet and other means.\*

### **Educators**

- Know your rights—become familiar with Title IX regulations and how they protect students and school staff.
- Support equity in school sports for boys and girls. Do girls' athletic programs at your school have comparable equipment, facilities, and resources as boys' programs? If your school has not assigned a Title IX coordinator, consider teaming with colleagues to help promote balanced treatment of girls' and boys' activities.
- Investigate your own gender biases and make sure you don't convey those to the students. Make sure your school and classroom environment promotes gender equity and your instruction and treatment of students is inclusive.

### **Parents and Community Organizers**

- Familiarize yourself with Title IX legislation and the rights of your children under the law.
- Equitably sponsor boys' and girls' sports teams in your community. Boys' sports usually receive generous donations and preferential treatment.
- Promote community awareness of the importance of girls' athletics and their positive impact on girls' academic achievements and self-esteem.

\* *American Association of University Women*







# Conclusion

In less than a century, women have gained access, equity, and near parity in many areas of American society. The myth is that women have made these gains on the backs of males and, more specifically, at a cost to boys' education. Yet, many of the problems in education have less to do with gender disparity and more to do with institutional racism and sexism. How can we deny justice and safety for one half of our student population? Ensuring that women and girls are successful will positively impact a range of social and economic issues: poverty, healthcare, childcare, education, and family finances. During this time of economic struggle, we must remember that gender equity for women and girls is equity for all Americans.

## About the Author

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Sabrina W. Holcomb is a Senior Writer-Editor for NEA’s Human and Civil Rights Department.

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In addition, we would like to offer a special acknowledgment to the late Dr. Dorothy I. Height for her pioneering efforts on behalf of civil and women’s rights. “She was a feminist and a major spokesperson for the rights of women long before there was a women’s movement,” fellow civil rights leader John Lewis said in tribute.



# Resources

## Online

**NEA Status of Education Reports.** A series of six reports on the status of underserved groups in education. Learn about the academic status of 1) American Indians and Alaska Natives; 2) Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders; 3) Blacks; 4) Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Persons; 5) Hispanics, and 6) Women and Girls at [www.nea.org/home/20380.htm](http://www.nea.org/home/20380.htm).

**NEA Priority Schools Campaign.** The work of NEA members in struggling schools to raise student achievement. Get the latest policy news and reports from priority schools across the country at [www.neapriorityschools.org](http://www.neapriorityschools.org).

**NEA Project Graduation.** Access the latest research and publications on dropout prevention at [www.nea.org/home/DropoutPrevention.html](http://www.nea.org/home/DropoutPrevention.html).

**BNETSavvy.** A comprehensive Internet safety Web site from the National Education Association Health Information Network in partnership with Sprint. Get tools for adults to help kids connect safely at [www.bnetsavvy.org](http://www.bnetsavvy.org).

## Publications

***Focus on What Works: Learning While Female.*** A fact sheet on education issues that impact women and girls.

***Gender Equity in the Mathematics and Science Classroom: Confronting the Barriers that Remain.*** A guide published by NEA to assist educators with understanding their importance in helping girls and boys transcend stereotypes about math and science.

***Preventing Future High School Dropouts: An Advocacy and Action Guide for NEA State and Local Affiliates.*** A resource guide to assist NEA state and local affiliates in their efforts to help prevent future dropouts.

## Trainings

**Bullying and Sexual Harassment Prevention/Intervention Training Cadre.** A national peer-to-peer training program that provides skills training to state affiliates working in partnership with local school districts to combat bullying and sexual harassment in schools. The cadre provides training to members at local, state, regional, and national training events, seminars, and conferences.

**Women's Leadership Training Program.** A national peer-to-peer training program that helps NEA women members move into leadership positions at every level of the Association. All WLTP training requests are made through state affiliates.

## Other Resources

American Association of University Women  
[www.aauw.org](http://www.aauw.org)

American Federation of Teachers [www.aft.org](http://www.aft.org)

Break the Cycle—Empowering Youth to End Domestic Violence [www.breakthecycle.org](http://www.breakthecycle.org)

Girl's Incorporated [www.girlsinc.org](http://www.girlsinc.org)

Institute for Women's Policy Research  
[www.iwpr.org](http://www.iwpr.org)

National Coalition of Women and Girls in Education [www.ncwge.org](http://www.ncwge.org)

National Women's History Project  
[www.nwhp.org](http://www.nwhp.org)

National Women's Law Center [www.nwlc.org](http://www.nwlc.org)

National Council of Women's Organizations  
[www.womensorganizations.org](http://www.womensorganizations.org)

Wellesley College Center for Research on Women [www.wcwonline.org](http://www.wcwonline.org)



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