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March 15, 2006

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## Commentary

# 'Boy Crisis' in Education Is Nothing But Hype

Run Date: 03/15/06

By Rivers and Barnett  
WeNews commentators

A "boy crisis" is boiling up in media coverage of education, based on the perception that girls are outstripping boys academically. Today's commentators argue that the discussion should be about social demographics, not gender.

**Editor's Note:** The following is a commentary. The opinions expressed are those of the author and not necessarily the views of Women's eNews.

(WOMENSENEWS)--The "boy crisis" is now a major media trend.

It's been on the cover of Newsweek, featured in People magazine and examined by a PBS documentary. It's also the central issue in a suit filed by a high school student in Massachusetts saying that schools discriminate against boys.



Caryl Rivers



Rosalind Chait Barnett

The flap could harm both sexes by blinding us to the main issue; that less-advantaged boys--and girls--need help.

Instead of single-sex classrooms, we need more mentoring, more one-on-one sessions, more focus on individual kids' abilities instead of endless testing. But such programs are expensive and, at a time when schools are getting less and less federal money, how much will change? Rushing in with the wrong solutions will only make the situation worse.

Nonetheless, charges of an anti-male bias are in full swing.

"Often boys are treated like defective girls," says Houston neurologist Dr. Bruce Perry in the Jan. 30 Newsweek article, describing today's coed classes as a "biologically disrespectful model of education."

## A 'Some Boys' Crisis

But if you look at the educational studies carefully, this isn't a boys' crisis. It's a "some boys' crisis."

Overall, elite boys are doing well academically. More males than females attend Ivy League schools. And while we have been hearing that boys are virtually disappearing from college classrooms, among whites, the gender composition of colleges is pretty balanced; 51 percent female and 49 percent male, according to the National Education Association.

"On most measures boys--at least the middle-class white boys everyone seems concerned about--are doing just fine, taking their places in an unequal society to which they have always felt entitled," says Michael Kimmel, a sociologist at the State University of New York-Stony Brook and author of the 1996 book, "Manhood in America: A Cultural History."

The real issue is that some boys, and girls as well, are doing very poorly, especially if they are poor, black, Latino or working-class white. For example, in Florida--one of the states with the lowest rates of high-school graduation--81 percent of Asians and 60 percent of white students graduate while only 48 percent of Hispanics and 46 percent of African Americans do.

Across the board, Latinos and blacks of both sexes lag behind, but the gap is more dramatic for the males. In Boston public schools, for example, for every 100 white males who graduate, 104 white females do; a tiny gap. But for every 100 black males who graduate, 139 black females do; a whopping difference.

In general, boys also have more learning disabilities and seem more vulnerable to autism. But the idea of "The War Against Boys"--which is how Christina Hoff Summers titled her 2001 book--is nonsense.

### **Dangerous Generalization**

Furthermore, the idea that all boys must be taught in "boy" classrooms--as best-selling author and family therapist Michael Gurian argued last December in the Washington Post--is dangerous.

Boys are individuals, not robots cut from one type of cloth. Yes, some boys are restless, but the idea of males as natural troublemakers simply doesn't pan out.

In 1998, California set up 12 single-sex public middle and high schools, the largest U.S. public-school experiment with such schools. The schools did not succeed in boosting academic achievement, and the academic success of both girls and boys was influenced more by small classes, strong curricula and qualified teachers than by single-sex settings, according to a study by the New York-based Ford Foundation.

The 17-year-old student in Massachusetts who filed the discrimination suit said of schools: "From the elementary level, they establish a philosophy that if you sit down, follow orders and listen to what they say, you'll do well and get good grades. Men naturally rebel against this."

This might sound right, but after extensive field work in schools, University of California-Berkeley sociologist Barrie Thorne noted a bias even on the part of researchers, finding that they pay most attention to one type of boy. He's into sports, not verbal, restless, aggressive and seeks dominance. But, notes Thorne, only a minority of boys actually fit that description.

### **Geography and Income Matter**

Statistically, geography and income swamp gender when it comes to school performance. Overall, urban and rural kids trail their suburban peers. Why? Poverty is one answer, says the New York-based Urban League, which reports that kids in low-poverty areas graduate at much higher rates than kids in high-poverty areas (76 percent versus 56 percent.)

New York Times columnist David Brooks suggests that boys ought to be given books about combat to read, to hold their interest. (Forget Shakespeare, give them GI Joe?)

But many bright boys would be bored to death in the dumbed-down classes that some are advocating for them.

Schools reward children of both sexes who are focused, articulate and can follow the rules. Under-performing kids need special help. Sometimes, boys outnumber girls in this group because boys mature somewhat later. But let's not penalize the majority to solve the problems of the few.

We also notice a peculiar fear that girls' success equals boys' failure. This is one of Hoff Sommers' main themes and it was made graphic by a Business Week cover in 2003 that showed a huge girl looming over a tiny boy sitting at a desk.

But where is the evidence of women taking over the world beyond school? Females earn considerably less than males and are under-represented in high-level jobs. As Jacqueline King, a director at the American Council on Education, told the Seattle Times, "Do I think it's doomsday for the male gender? No. I look around the world, and it seems to me that men are still in charge."

*Caryl Rivers and Rosalind C. Barnett are authors of "Same Difference: How Gender Myths Are Hurting Our Relationships, Our Children and Our Jobs" (Basic Books 2004.) Rivers is a professor of journalism at Boston University and Barnett is senior scientist at the Women's Studies Research Center at Brandeis University.*

Women's eNews welcomes your comments. E-mail us at [editors@womensenews.org](mailto:editors@womensenews.org).

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