ForeWord Reviews

EDUCATION

Why Boys Fail: Saving Our Sons from an Educational System That's Leaving Them Behind

Richard Whitmire
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While glass ceilings that keep women from rising to the top and “leering professors” and “sexist bosses” are still a concern, women are making progress in the working world. Richard Whitmire, an education reporter, has been crusading for years on behalf of a group that he believes faces a greater future threat: boys.

In the United States and many other countries, boys trail girls in reading and writing but have traditionally fared better in math. In recent years, girls have increased their lead in verbal skills and have now closed the math gap. As economies become more service-oriented and manufacturing takes a back seat, reading and writing gain importance in the workplace; students’ ability to process written material also determines success in school and entry into, and graduation from, college. Educators in the United States have not faced up to the fact that many boys now lack the skills needed for survival in the academic and the broader world. Trained to look for racial and economic explanations for poor performance, teachers find it hard to see that large numbers of boys of all races and various income groups are struggling.

In Why Boys Fail, Whitmire describes his visits to schools in Delaware, New York, Washington, D.C., and New South Wales, Australia. The schools use a range of approaches to address academic problems: mentoring, phonics instruction, and single-sex classes. The author finds that teachers who achieve success are the ones who expect more from their students, offer engaging instruction, and provide individualized attention. He explains, “When you refuse to let even a single student slide by you end up helping boys the most because the boys are the big sliders.”

Unless educators and parents recognize that boys are in trouble and give them the help they need, the scenario that Whitmire outlines in the book may come true: “One day, possibly soon, thousands of mothers—mothers with sons struggling in school or daughters unable to find ‘marriageable mates’—will wonder why the gender gaps were ever considered controversial.”

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