

TROUBLE FOR BOYS

Some educational observers worry that male students in N.M. are woefully behind their female counterparts

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The most important achievement gap in New Mexico schools is not, some argue, between Hispanics and Anglos.

Nor is it between the poor and the affluent.

Rather, it is the state's boys who are lagging behind their female classmates.

"I feel boys have been kind of neglected in school and in other situations," said Paul Golding of the New Mexico Men's Council of Boys and Young Men, which is holding a conference this month looking at boys and education. "We're much more likely to blame the boy for problems than look at what might be causing it in his background or in the kind of support that he gets."

Statewide, 56 percent of boys complete high school in four years, compared with 65 percent of girls.

A similar gap exists in all ethnicities, according to state records, with male students who are Native American or who have disabilities falling below 50 percent in graduation rates.

Acclaimed author Leonard Sax, who wrote "Why Gender Matters" and "Boys Adrift," said the problem is largely motivation.

"It's not a case that boys are dumber than girls," he said.

Forty years ago, women were more likely to drop out of college for marriage and family, whereas today, it's men who are more likely to drop out, and it's for other reasons.

He blames several factors,

such as the lure of video games for some boys.

"They are finding validation, meaning of life in video games," he said. "They don't care about school, because in the world of Warcraft, they are the master."

He also said medications like Ritalin or Adderoll, used for attention-deficit disorder, appear to damage an area of the brain "responsible for translating motivation into action."

"You will get a lazy boy," he said. "Men used to be motivated to achieve and become accomplished so they could impress the girls."

The changes have occurred in the last 40 years, University of New Mexico associate sociology professor Jane Hood said, although much of the research in the last 10 years about boys is on the heels of the feminist movement and publications lamenting the problems of girls.

"It was a big push," said Hood, who is looking at New Mexico education with Lopez, an associate professor. "Examples in textbooks weren't girl friendly. There was a lot of effort being made to change that stuff. They did it too well. It upped the girl status and neglected boys."

There also has been a cultural shift in which it is considered "less masculine" to read or do well in school, she said.

Looking at an unidentified large New Mexico district, the researchers found boys were more likely to be second-year high

How to help boys succeed

- Seek out books that appeal to boys, such as action stories rather than romance. Try "Holes" by Louis Sachar, "The Great Gatsby" by F. Scott Fitzgerald, the Harry Potter books and the Horatio Hornblower series.
- Read aloud to boys, no matter their age.
- Introduce daily reading rituals in the home, starting with reading to your son and eventually, having him read aloud to you.
- Begin regular writing rituals, such as letters, thank-you notes, e-mails or journals.
- Look for strong pre-school and kindergarten classrooms that are aware of the differences in learning for boys, and that provide creative solutions to get students on the right track.
- Remain active in your son's education, keep in contact with teachers, volunteer at school and when possible, re-enforce school discipline in the home.
- Be alert for indications of emotional distress in personality or behavior, and encourage boys to discuss their feelings, if they are ready, in a nonjudgmental setting.

Source: www.boysandschools.com, Boys and Schools, a division of the Men's Health Network

Bridging the gap

The New Mexico Council for Boys and Young Men is holding a conference on "Boy Achievement Gap" on Nov. 17 at the Sandia Resort and Casino. Author Leonard Sax will be the keynote speaker. For more information or registration, e-mail nmmc2009@mgr-events.com, call 505-508-2999, or visit www.nmboys.org. The cost is \$50 per person, although scholarships are available.

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Tuesday, November 3, 2009

SCHOOLS

PUZZLES B2 • COMICS B4 • TV/WEATHER B6

B

Boys lagging in achievement

from PAGE B1

school freshmen, twice as likely to be in special education and 1.5 times as likely to be written up for discipline than female classmates. Ultimately, they are 1.6 times more likely to be referred to legal consequences.

"They seem to end up getting arrested more than the girls do," Hood said. "They get put in special ed in school. They do not get through ninth grade. Those are the kids who disproportionately get into trouble."

Golding, an economist with a recent degree in psychology, said in New Mexico, the effort has evolved from a focus on gangs to a more continued effort to improve education and provide positive male role models.

"I think being a relatively poor community and a relatively poor state, our problems tend to be magnified," he said.

Boys appear to do better when they are in single-gender classrooms, although

single-sex education comes and goes at different schools, usually dependent upon a school administrator or a teacher, he said.

North Valley Academy charter school in Albuquerque started four years ago separating boys and girls in the seventh and eighth grades as a way to cut down on distractions.

"The boys didn't feel like they needed to impress the girls, and girls didn't feel like they needed to impress the boys," principal Jerald Snider said.

Teachers notice a difference between the girls' classes and the boys'.

Math teacher Kim Ison says the boys require more explanation and examples. "They need you to go over it more," Ison said.

Nancy Lopez, an associate professor of sociology at UNM, said the breakdown becomes even worse for boys in some minority groups.

Latino boys, for instance, can be stereotyped as being "future criminals" with small rule infractions handled differently than with privileged Anglo

boys, said Lopez, author of "Hopeful Girls, Troubled Boys: Race and Gender Disparity in Urban Education."

Teachers who work with "multiple intelligences," using arts, poetry and music in instruction, tend to engage students of all ethnicity, she has found.

At one of the state's highest-performing schools, Double Eagle Elementary, staffers took note of the gender gap in reading to make some big changes in writing instruction.

"We decided, let's open up topics more and let them self-select and not be as picky," principal Robin Hoberg said. "Let the boys do what they want."

It meant teachers got more papers on aliens, military and toilet humor, but "they're sure excited. We let them go crazy."

What they saw between 2008 and 2009 test results, she said, was the gap, which had ranged from 5 to 10 points in 2008, narrowed to between 2 and 4 points in 2009.