

# 1

## Making the Call

### *Is There Really a Boy Crisis?*

*Crisis: n. pl. **cri-ses** a: An unstable or crucial time or state of affairs in which a decisive change is impending; a situation that has reached a critical phase.*

Merriam-Webster's dictionary

**Y**ou've picked up this book because you, like so many others, have a concern about the welfare of boys in school. As the mother of a son and a longtime educator myself, I share your concern. In every school, a disproportionate number of boys struggle to master basic literacy skills, sit on the bench outside the principal's office, get labeled hyperactive, and receive failing grades. Checked out, kicked out, or dropped out, too many boys—and especially boys of color and poverty—are failing to thrive in today's classrooms and schools. This is scary not only for boys but also for girls whose generation will be negatively affected by lower educational and employment levels of their male counterparts.

## 2 Writing the Playbook

So does this amount to a crisis? Or is the problem being overhyped? Whose fault is it? Does talking about boys hurt girls or diminish the importance of their needs somehow? These questions were first addressed by Michael Gurian, a pioneer in the study of gender, in his landmark book *The Wonder of Boys* (1997). With the release of the 2006 *Newsweek* story called “The Trouble With Boys” (Tyre, 2006), in which my school, Douglass Elementary, was featured, the debate continued to gain momentum and national attention. As experts polarized themselves on the issue of what we should call this problem, the trend data for boys continued its downward slide. The case is now closed on the matter. We can’t turn a blind eye to this crisis. We need to roll up our sleeves and reverse these frightening trends now.

Anyone in education who thinks our boys are not in crisis is misguided. As a mother, I could see the progressive descent into sorrow in my boys’ posture: increasingly stooped, bent . . . “defeated.” I don’t think it serves anyone to beat ourselves up about not having met boys’ needs at school in the past. Brain science and gender studies have grown by leaps and bounds over the last few decades. Now that we know better, let’s do better!

Sandy Lubert, mother of three boys and a teacher

Girls’ underachievement in math and science has been an important part of the education conversation for some time—and rightly so. Initiatives focused on girls’ achievement have been successful over time and warrant continued attention. The Center on Education Policy’s 2010 report on boys’ and girls’ achievement finds: “In general, our analyses of performance by gender on state tests found good news for

girls but bad news for boys. In math, girls are doing roughly as well as boys, and the differences that do exist in some states are small and show no clear national pattern favoring boys or girls.”

From an international perspective, research led by Paola Sapienza (Guiso, Monte, Sapienza, & Zingales, 2008) at Northwestern University shows that, in societies offering equal educational opportunities to girls, the gender gap in math closes. The authors go on to report that, in every single country tested, girls score substantially higher in

reading than boys do. The Center on Education Policy's results are consistent: In the United States in reading, boys are lagging behind girls in all states with adequate data, and these gaps are greater than 10 percentage points in some states. These analyses of state and international test results suggest that the most pressing issue related to gender gaps is the lagging performance of boys in literacy. Overlay gender gaps with those gaps associated with racial/ethnic and income subgroups, and the issue reaches alarming proportions.

How does all of this apply to your corner of the world? Most of the school-based trends for males that I've been referring to (and will discuss in greater detail later in this chapter) are universal across all groups. In fact, when I provide professional development in a school, I can pretty much sum up their challenges with boys before I even walk in the door! Reflect on these questions as they relate to your own educational organization:

Back in the early '70s, schools became acutely aware that girls were behind in math and science and college admissions. That awareness prompted principals to search for young women science and math teachers, to work on programs that would help girls in math. It worked. Girls closed the gap in math and science. We now need the same effort with boys and writing. New focus, new approaches, not more of the same.

Michael Thompson, PhD, coauthor of *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys*, and school psychologist

- Is the gender gap between boys' and girls' literacy/language arts scores pushing 10 points (or more)?
- Is boys' underachievement depressing your school's overall academic performance rating?
- Is it a crisis when an 8-year-old child who is below grade level in reading will most likely never catch up?
- Do the boys in your school earn more than 50% of the *Ds* and *Fs* and receive the majority of behavior referrals?
- Do boys make up the bulk of your noncompleters and dropouts?

#### 4 Writing the Playbook

- Is your school referring and staffing more boys than girls into special education?

This conversation—and this book—is not just for the sake of boys. Just as the success of girls is important for society as a whole, the success of boys is equally of value. When boys thrive, both boys and girls benefit. In my own school, girls made three times the expected gains in literacy when we implemented strategies to address the needs of boys. Educational achievement is not a zero-sum game. Dog-ear this page and come back to this section. This language may be just what you need as you talk with teachers, parents, and the community. It will be critical that you, as a change agent, be persuasive and compelling in creating a sense of urgency to do this work. Stakeholders must see that doing this work takes nothing away from girls because, as we will explore later, when we

implement so-called “boy-friendly” strategies, the girls flourish as well. The time is now. Another generation of boys cannot afford to wait. So, now it is time for you to decide—is there a boy crisis?

How do we systemically stop that flow of dropouts? We have to cut that spigot off at the preschool level.

Leslie Block, PhD, consultant, Leslie S. Block & Associates

### ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

- Boys are 30% more likely than girls to flunk or drop out of school;
- Boys are almost twice as likely to repeat a grade;
- At the end of 12th grade, 26% of boys are below basic in writing compared to 11% of girls;
- In reading at the end of 12th grade, one-third of males are below basic compared to 22% of females;
- The underperformance of 17-year-old boys in reading is equivalent to 1.5 years of schooling;
- At the fourth and eighth grades, very similar gender gaps occur in both reading and writing;
- In 2005, females' average GPA was 3.09 while males' was 2.86;

- In 2006, the median girl was 17 percentile points in class rank above the median boy;
- Three times as many boys as girls say they do no homework;
- Thirty percent of boys say they usually or often go to school unprepared;
- By kindergarten, one in four black boys believes that he will fail in school;
- At the end of 12th grade, 42% of black boys fall far below basic in writing compared to 21% of black girls
- Fifty-five percent of black boys in high school are at risk of being off course or are off course for graduation;
- Almost one in four black boys is chronically absent; and
- When it comes to grades and homework, girls outperform boys in elementary, secondary, high school, college, and even graduate school.

**Special Education**

- Seventy percent of students in special education are boys;
- Boys make up 76% of students diagnosed with emotional disabilities and are three times as likely to be labeled conduct disordered;
- Learning disabled students are 73% male;
- Boys are four to five times more likely than girls to be diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD); and
- Black males between the ages of 6 and 21 are more likely to be labeled as mentally retarded and learning disabled and less likely to be in programs for the gifted than are white boys.

If a boy is undereducated, too often the first thought is to refer him for special education. Interventions come too late for many boys and are not diagnostic, specific, or monitored.

High school vice principal,  
Los Angeles Unified School District

**Discipline**

- Males are twice as likely to be suspended as females;
- Black males are six times as likely to be suspended as white males;
- In order from most frequently suspended to least frequently suspended: black males, white males, black females, white females;
- Males are 4.5 times as likely to be expelled as females;
- Males are more than four times as likely as girls to be referred to the office; and
- Males receive corporal punishment four times as often as girls.

*(Continued)*

(Continued)

### Participation in Clubs/Activities

- Girls are over 1.6 times more likely to be involved in student council and student government;
- Girls are almost twice as likely to be involved in academic clubs;
- Membership in academic honor societies are 2-to-1 girls; and
- Athletics is the only extracurricular activity where boys' participation exceeds that of girls.

We are losing our boys, turning out many young men without motivation and confidence. You have the ability to change this trend now and make your school a boy-friendly place where both boys and girls can find mastery and thrive.

Betsy Hoke, retired school principal

### College & Beyond

- Fifty-four percent of female sophomores are taking a college preparatory curriculum in high school compared to just 48% of males;
- Fewer than 30% of black boys in New York City graduated in 2011 with a Regents diploma, which is the diploma that indicates college readiness;
- Three-fourths of girls go on to college versus two-thirds of boys;
- Females are 1.5 times more likely to graduate from college (this is the opposite of the Baby Boomer generation, for whom 1.5 times more males than females graduated);
- Among blacks and Hispanics, women are more than twice as likely to earn college degrees than their male counterparts;
- According to 2008 U.S. Census Bureau data, young single women who are childless outearn their male counterparts in 39 of the 50 biggest cities in the United States and match them in another 8;
- Only one-third of black males under the age of 25 is employed;
- One in three black boys will do time in jail; and
- African American males make up only 6% of the U.S. population but make up more than 50% of the prison population.

---

Sources for statistics: Chaplin & Klasik, 2006; Greene & Winters, 2006; Gurian & Stevens, 2007; Kleinfeld, 2009; Losen & Orfield, 2002; Luscombe, 2010; Noguera, 2008; Payne & Slocumb, 2011; Planty et al., 2007; Schott Foundation, 2006; Sciotto, Nolfi, & Bluhm, 2004; Slocumb, 2004; Urban Studies Council, 2012.

## THE FINAL BUZZER

The current statistics for boys and young men demand the attention of not only educators but also policymakers, legislators, and everyday citizens. If we don't reverse trends now, we risk raising a generation of men who do not fulfill their educational and employment potential.

We have to find a hook for these boys so that they can really dial in. If school doesn't hook them, guess what's going to hook them?

Leslie Block, PhD, consultant, Leslie S. Block & Associates

- Don't get caught up in the media debate about whether or not boys' problems rise to the level of a "crisis." Instead, take responsibility for the students in your school—dig up the data and reverse the downward trends for your boys.
- The education community has made great strides helping girls in the areas of math and science. Continue this important work and be empowered to seek the same improvements for boys in literacy, language arts, and college preparedness.
- As you educate staff members, parents, board members, and community members at large, share data from this chapter. Many people in our communities are unaware of the extent of these alarming trends. Let the data speak for itself and create a sense of urgency in your community.

*Look around—How are the boys in your school doing?  
Are there areas where your boys are underperforming?  
What do the boys tell you about their school experience?*

Warren Blair, principal, Wheat Ridge Middle School



Additional materials and resources related to *Writing the Playbook: A Practitioner's Guide to Creating a Boy-Friendly School* can be found at [www.boyfriendlyschools.com](http://www.boyfriendlyschools.com). Kelley King can be reached at [kellykingpd@hotmail.com](mailto:kellykingpd@hotmail.com).