

# EDUCATION WEEK

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## COMMENTARY

### Helping Boys in Reading Without Starting a Gender War

By Jack Jennings

Over the last several decades, concerns about differences in academic performance between boys and girls have typically focused on the performance of girls in mathematics and why they lagged behind their male peers. In particular, studies indicated that high school girls trailed boys in math achievement and took less rigorous courses. The debates that followed those findings led to heated conversations about the role genetic differences, culture, child-rearing practices, and teachers' actions play in fostering an academic gender gap.

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A **new report** by the Center on Education Policy, which I head, shows just how the times have changed. ("**Boys Trail Girls in Reading Across States**," March 31, 2010.) Released last month, the report finds that as of 2008, girls had reached rough parity with boys in math achievement on state tests and consistently do better than boys in reading. Instead of the crisis for girls that was the rallying call for years and produced much-needed attention to the academic plight of females, we now have a "boy crisis." The data from our study make it clear that something happening in schools is holding boys back in reading. Yet, in spite of increasingly abundant data such as ours, education has not yet acknowledged the extent of the problem, much less sketched out strategies to address it.

First, the good news for girls. The historic gap that had been the big concern between boys and girls no longer exists, at least not on state assessments. In fact, there was no consistent gender gap in math at the elementary, middle, or high school levels in terms of the percentages of boys and girls reaching the "proficient" level of performance on state tests in 2008. In grade 4 math, where we analyzed performance by the basic, proficient, and advanced achievement levels, the median percentages of boys and girls reaching those levels were quite similar. Overall, states tended to have greater shares of girls reaching the basic level, roughly equal percentages of girls reaching the proficient level, and greater shares of boys reaching the advanced level, though these differences were very small in most states.

**"While there are earnest and necessary conversations about gaps between different demographic groups, there is no similar discussion about gender gaps—not to mention the greatest at-risk groups in reading,**

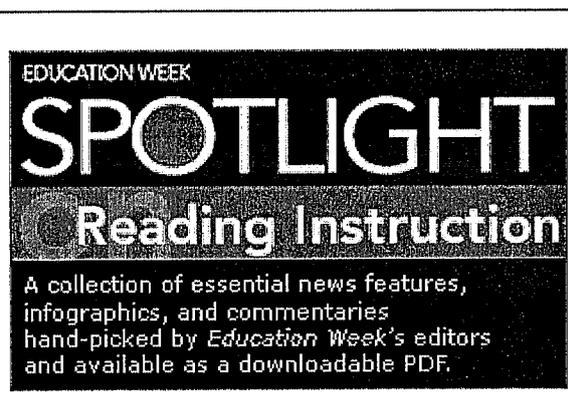
Now the bad news for boys. Most dramatically, boys were behind girls in every state and at every grade level in the 45-plus states with sufficient data to be included in the report. Even states that are considered national leaders in school reform had achievement gaps between boys and girls in reading. Massachusetts, for example, had a 13-percentage-point difference between boys and girls in grade 4 reading. Maryland had a 10-percentage-point difference in favor of girls in grade 8. And in Texas, an early leader in standards-based reform, girls led boys by 8 percentage points on the state high school math test.

**which are minority males."**

To be clear, the news is not all bad for boys in reading. Depending on how you look at the data, there are some indications that boys have narrowed the gap with girls over time in many states. According to the percentage of students scoring proficient, that reading gap has narrowed somewhat in 52 percent of the cases we analyzed, although it has widened 40 percent of the time. But according to average, or mean, test scores, the gap has widened as often as it has narrowed. And mean test scores are a more useful indicator for looking at gaps because they capture changes across the achievement spectrum.

Data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress confirm the trend of girls outperforming boys in reading. Girls, on average, scored significantly higher than boys in reading on both the 2009 state-by-state NAEP and the 2008 long-term-trends NAEP. The male-female gap on the state-by-state NAEP has not changed since 1992 at grade 4, but has narrowed somewhat at grade 8.

In essence, girls have erased the gender gap in mathematics, and boys consistently perform lower than girls in reading. The data in this report demonstrate that the trend in reading is no fluke. It is a clear and unmistakable national trend that can be addressed without damaging the progress that has been made by girls. One way to view this reading gap is to consider that it would take eight to 10 years for boys to close the gap with girls, if boys improved at an average rate and girls made no gains, which runs counter to the goal of improvement for all students.



We should and must take pride in the fact that no gender gap exists for girls in math. We should also see reason for optimism in another finding from our report—namely, that both boys and girls have made gains in reading and math proficiency since 2002 in a large majority of states. But being able to read well is so basic to learning that we must initiate a serious national effort to improve the reading achievement of boys from the early grades on.

Other studies confirm the need for greater attention to the school performance of boys. Girls now finish high school, go on to college, and finish college and obtain a degree at greater rates than boys. Those trends favoring girls are relatively recent.

As a starting point for closing the reading gap, the nation needs to admit that there is a