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CITY & STATE

When it comes to school, girls rule

Gender gap: Educators are studying why boys have fallen behind in the classroom after years of effort to put sexes on equal footing

By Staci Hupp
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What once was a playground taunt has turned out to be true: Girls are better than boys.

Girls have eclipsed boys on state and national tests. They are more likely to stay in school and to graduate, and they demand less special attention than boys, data show.

That marks a dramatic turn from the time when schools were urged to nurture girls' brains instead of their baking skills. School officials and experts now fear the effort to pull girls up to an equal footing had an unintended consequence.

"Boys are lagging, and in my view we are seeing the tip of a very serious national problem," said Judith Kleinfeld, a psychology professor at the University of Alaska in Fairbanks.

A U.S. Department of Education study last month noted the academic edge that boys once held has vanished, and "the issue now is that boys seem to be falling behind," said Education Secretary Rod Paige. "We need to spend some time researching the problem."



Blaze Stahl, 9, seen here talking to Sheandra Hansbrough (foreground) and Tiffany Lewandowski, improved academically after enrolling in programs at Girls Inc. -- Rob Goebel / The Star

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Nationally, girls are outperforming boys in academics

■ **Girls**

■ **Boys**

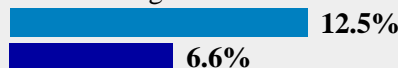
Girl's ambitions outstrip boys'

Percentage of high school seniors saying they will "definitely" attend a four-year college:



More boys have learning disabilities *

Percentage of first- through fifth- graders with learning disabilities:



Boys are dropping out of school **

Percentage of 16- to 24-year-olds who

In Indiana:

• For the past two years, girls in third, sixth and eighth grades have edged out boys on statewide exams in every category except third-grade math. In that subject, girls and boys have been in a dead heat.

• Two-thirds of special education students last year were boys.

• Sixty percent of Indiana's dropouts last year were boys, and boys outnumber girls in the state's juvenile courts.

Nationally, girls already had eclipsed boys in reading and English, but their lead appears to be growing.

They also have caught up to boys in math and science classes and are more likely to earn a college diploma within six years, the federal Education Department's study found.

The big question with the performance gap is why.

Early studies showed that girls mature faster than boys, develop verbal skills earlier and are conditioned to behave better than boys.

Today, some researchers link a gender gap in the classroom to a lack of male role models. The number of men who pick teaching careers is at a 40-year low nationally at a time when more children grow up without fathers. And some scientists believe decades of feminist-driven attention on girls has paid off.

Colleges offer girls-only scholarships and summer programs for high school students, and after-school programs nurture younger girls like Blaze Stahl, of Indianapolis.

Blaze, 9, floundered when she started school. She ignored assignments and goofed off, in part because she found the schoolwork too easy.

Blaze's mother signed her up for Girls Inc., a nonprofit after-school and summer program. Now, the Indianapolis Public School 56 third-grader has skipped ahead to fourth- and fifth-grade classes.

"I feel more comfortable being myself at Girls Inc. because there are so many bullies at school," Blaze said. "I'm not afraid to act crazy at Girls Inc."

For every action, Kleinfeld said, comes a reaction. With so much focus on girls, "now there's a backlash."

drop out of high school:



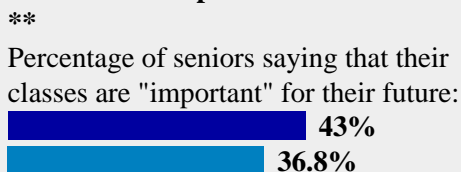
Boys falling behind in reading . . .

Girl's score advantage in 1992: 10 points
Girl's score advantage in 2002: 16 points

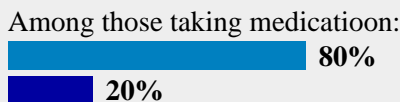
. . . and in writing

Girl's score advantage in 1992: 19 points
Girl's score advantage in 2002: 24 points

Girls are more positive about school



More boys take attention-deficit medication ***



NOTE: Data from these years:
* 1999 ** 2001 *** 2004

Sources: National Assessment of Educational Progress; U.S. Department of Education; University of Michigan survey; The Minds of Boys: How to Help Our Sons Do Their Best in School and Succeed in Life, by Michael Gurian and Kathy Stevens (to be published in September 2005)

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Bolstering boys

The gender gap has mustered little attention at the state level in Indiana, but some school officials are taking it seriously.

Ben Ledbetter, principal at Greater Clark County's New Washington Middle-High School, grew up in an era when boys and girls studied biology in separate classrooms.

Now, he has taken a page from his past to improve the odds for boys by separating them from girls in key classes. The split includes reading and math classes, which are at the heart of state achievement tests.

"We had some concern that girls were completing assignments much more rapidly and much more thoroughly" than boys, Ledbetter said.

As the Greater Clark County children grow, so does the gender gap in test scores.

The school district's third-grade girls topped the boys by 5 percentage points on this year's Indiana Statewide Testing for Educational Progress-Plus.

In sixth grade, the girls' lead grew to 14 percentage points, a disparity that carried over into the eighth-grade level. In math, girls edged out boys by 2 percentage points in each grade.

"It seems that our girls are really blossoming and most of the boys are, too, but that still seems to be an area where we have the most struggles," said Tonja Brading, an English teacher at New Washington. "It was like, 'Why do we have this little core group of boys who are underachieving?'"

Brading and another teacher, Lori Krohn, realized last year that the developmental differences between girls and boys could affect report cards.

The middle-schoolers at New Washington often come back from summer vacation looking drastically different from the squeaky-voiced, pimple-faced children who walked out the door in May.

There are boys who need a shave and girls who look more like young women.

Brading and Krohn wondered what would happen if they separated the boys from the girls. Ledbetter, who had studied at an all-male college, liked the idea.

The school tested the plan on sixth-graders for a few months last spring. In the fall, girls and boys in Grades 6, 7 and 8 were separated in key classes such as English, math and science. The children mixed during lunch, study halls and afternoon classes.

State education officials don't track single-sex classes across Indiana, but Greater Clark County officials estimate that Hoosier boys and girls are divided in about a dozen schools.

Schools in Tennessee reported success with single-sex classrooms, and a similar experiment in Edina, Minn., gave administrators some insight.

"The study found that boys were less pleased overall with the single-gender

experience," said Jenni Norlin-Weaver, director of teaching and learning for Edina schools. "They tended to say things like, 'Girls are easier on the eye.' "

Norlin-Weaver said Edina boys also acknowledged that when girls are not in their groups, it falls to them to step up and take a leadership role.

Schools in the Minneapolis suburb also have experimented with boys-only book clubs. Training to help teachers understand how boys and girls learn could be next, and school researchers have suggested regular classroom visits from fathers, grandfathers and older brothers.

"We don't have an answer yet," Norlin-Weaver said. "But I think we have in place all of the tools that we need to not only increase the awareness of gender but also to try to identify what the appropriate programs and services are."

Win with parents, children

The first measure of success for New Washington will come in the spring, when students take the Northwest Evaluation Association's standardized test.

School officials will compare the results with students' scores on a fall version of the same test. Comparisons on the ISTEP-Plus will follow next fall.

The teachers don't need data to tell them the single-sex classes have made a difference.

Boys who traditionally would have turned away from literary heroines in Brading's class now are more likely to read novels like "Rules of the Road," whose author and troubled main character are female.

"The boys will talk about a line in a poem that they wouldn't necessarily have talked about had girls been in the room," Brading said. "We really think this is working."

Children claim to like the arrangement -- the sixth-grade boys and girls asked for separate school buses on a recent field trip -- and so do their parents.

Janet Walls believes her two sons, who attend New Washington, have grown up believing girls are better students.

"They're so afraid to answer in fear that they might be wrong, or to ask a question that they think girls might think are goofy," Walls said. "They don't feel like they have to impress anyone when it's an all-boy class."

Walls also likes the separation from girls in an era when short skirts and halter tops appear to meet today's school dress codes.

"Now all they need are uniforms," she said.

Ledbetter already is inspired by one statistic: The number of troublemakers who end up in his office has dropped by half.

The principal can't wait to see what the next generation will bring.

"We're going to find out what works for us," he said. "We just felt the other way, we sort of hit the wall."

Call Star reporter Staci Hupp at (317) 444-6253.

How girls and boys perform in Indiana classrooms

Girls are more likely to graduate from high school and less likely to enter special education than their male counterparts, state records for public schools show. Girls also outpace boys on the Indiana Statewide Testing for Educational Progress-Plus.

Dropouts, by gender

	2002	2003	Percentage
Boys	3,956	4,042	60%
Girls	2,758	2,727	40%

Retained pupils, by gender

	2002	2003	2004	Percentage
Boys	8,779	8,895	11,429	60%
Girls	5,354	5,903	7,783	40%

ISTEP-Plus passing rates by gender

	2002-03		2003-04		2004-05	
	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys
3rd grade reading	77%	70%	79%	72%	79%	72%
3rd grade math	67%	68%	72%	72%	73%	73%
6th grade reading	74%	65%	76%	66%	76%	65%
6th grade math	69%	68%	74%	73%	75%	74%
8th grade reading	69%	61%	71%	62%	72%	63%
8th grade math	68%	67%	73%	71%	72%	71%

Special education pupils

According to a count made on Dec. 1, 2003 (the most recently available figures), boys comprise 66 percent of special education students in Indiana public schools, or 113,326 students out of a total of 170,765.

Source: Indiana Department of Education

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