

The Gender Wars in Education

by [Susan McGee Bailey](#) and [Patricia B. Campbell](#)

February 9, 1999

The gender wars in education are heating up again. Too much of the current dialog on the education of girls and boys has the sound of a prizefight. In one corner are those who say that boys, not girls are shortchanged in school. In fact, they say, the attention paid to girls has harmed boys. In the other corner are those who contend that boys are fine and that girls are the ones with the real problems. The bell rings and the two sides come out swinging, each with its own set of statistics to prove not only that their side is the truly shortchanged, but that it is the fault of the "other side."

What is going on here? How did we get to this point? As researchers and authors of the 1992 American Association of University Women report, *How Schools Shortchange Girls*, which has been both credited and blamed for focusing attention on girls, we are discouraged by the boy vs girl framework and tone of the current discussion. We wrote *How Schools Shortchange Girls* to show how gender stereotypes, particularly those related to education, hurt both girls and boys and to explore ways educators and the rest of us can improve schools.

Back in 1992, we pointed out that stereotypes have long limited the options of girls and boys. Viewing science and math as things boys did and art and dance as things they did not do influenced the course taking patterns and achievement levels of both sexes. We noted that although girls were getting better grades and going on for post-secondary education in greater numbers than boys, the job segregation that limits women's employment choices and the gender gap in wages continued. This is still the case.

Today teachers and parents are working together in many schools to implement policies and programs that work for girls and for boys. Girls are participating more and doing better in math, science and sports than they were a decade ago. Boys' participation and achievement in math and science are up, too, and their participation in sports remains as high as ever.

We must get past the idea that education is a zero sum game where a step forward for girls is automatically a step backward for boys. Problems remain in our schools but these problems are not limited to "only girls" or "only boys". Teachers know that when something works for girls, it often works for boys as well. For example, providing students with hands on experiments reflecting the ways science relates to daily life has proven helpful in involving girls in science. This approach works for boys, too. Not allowing student "putdowns" makes many girls feel more comfortable in class and boys find they also learn better when they don't have to worry about being teased or insulted.

Society has made significant progress in reducing some of the barriers confronting girls and women who choose traditionally male courses or jobs. Because these are almost always higher status and higher paying positions, girls and women making these choices are seen as "moving up". Less progress has been made in addressing the

barriers confronting boys and men who choose courses or jobs considered "girls' stuff" or "women's work".

We continue to value activities traditionally done by men more than we value those done by women. Adults and children alike know that society is going to be more supportive of the girl who wants to be assertive and athletic or to become an investment banker than of the boy who wants to be quiet and reflective or to become a childcare worker. "You act like a girl!" is still one of the premier insults that can be hurled at a boy.

It is clear that one factor shaping the girls vs boys framework currently in use is a concern that if being a "good student" is too closely identified with girls, many boys won't want to be good students. But rather than dealing with the real issue, why things girls do are devalued, the talk is about how "helping girls hurts boys."

What isn't talked about is our fear that boys who do "girl" things will somehow become "less manly". When caring, nurturing and the expression of feelings are seen as "girls' stuff" and "girls' stuff" is seen as not good for boys, boys are at emotional risk. This is not about being "masculine" or "feminine". It is about having the courage to challenge tradition. Without this courage neither boys nor girls will have all the choices they deserve.

Pitting boys against girls in competition for a good education is out of place in today's world. It shortchanges both sexes. The educational gender wars must cease. If we must have a war, let it be a war against ignorance. In this surely we are all on the same side!

Susan McGee Bailey is the executive director of the Wellesley Centers for Women, Wellesley, Ma.; Patricia B. Campbell is the president of Campbell-Kibler Associates, Groton, Ma.