

What's new in education reform?

Early childhood educators who stay abreast of issues in education reform can serve as an important resource in the community. By staying informed, we are more likely to understand trends that affect our preschool and kindergarten classes, answer questions from parents and community leaders, and engage in meaningful conversations about improving education.

Here are three recent books worthy of attention.

The Rise of Women: The Growing Gender Gap in Education and What It Means for American Schools

Written by Thomas A. Diprete and Claudia Buchmann. Russell Sage Foundation, 2013. (\$37.50 paperback)

In the United States and much of the industrialized world, more women than men obtain college degrees. For most of history, it was the other way around.

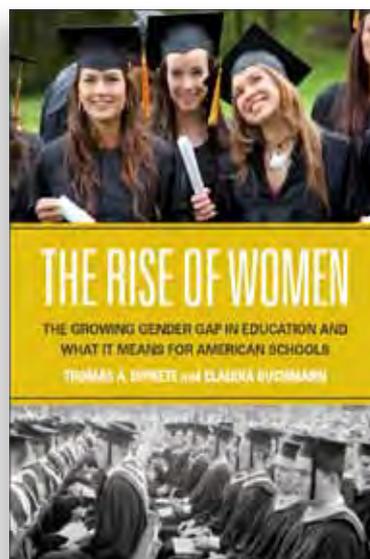
In 1982, however, women caught up with men in degrees earned and by 2010 were receiving 57 percent of them. Never mind that women still typically earn less money than men, hold fewer top positions in government and business, and do most of the child care and housework. The inescapable fact is that a growing gender gap has implications for the future of America's families, including their income, health, and lifestyle.

The authors, both sociology professors (Diprete at Columbia and Buchmann at Ohio State), present findings from their review of hundreds of studies on education. Stuffing more than 60 graphs and tables into 200 pages, they explain what has happened during the past 30 years.

They have found, for example, that starting in elementary school, boys display poorer social and

behavior skills than girls, exert less effort on school work, and have less emotional attachment to school. For boys from working-class and lower-income families, in particular, doing well in school often conflicts with notions of masculinity.

Assuming that high-performing boys who comprise the top third of male students will likely aim



for college, the authors focus on those in the middle third. Typically these boys, though they may express aspirations in middle school for higher education and good jobs, don't realize how mediocre school performance can hinder their chances for college, nor do they understand the value of a college

degree in the labor market.

What would help boys? It's not all-boy schools, nor more male teachers as role models, according to the research. Rather, it's high quality schools overall. "Better schools could improve the performance of students in general, which would help boys in particular even if such policies did not close the gender gap."

Other strategies include smaller class sizes, one-one-one interaction between students and their counselors and teachers, and extensive college preparatory programs through college fairs, SAT/ACT prep classes, visits to colleges, and other related activities.

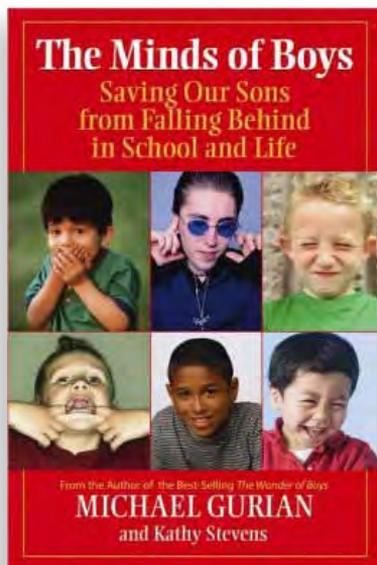
Improving the academic climate is especially important in middle school, the authors say, because that's where the foundation is laid for work habits and college aspirations. Early childhood educators might argue for the influence of high quality preschool, which might enhance boys' social and behavior skills, emotional attachment to school, and a more balanced notion about masculinity.

The Minds of Boys: Saving Our Sons from Falling Behind in School and Life

Written by Michael Gurian and Kathy Stevens.
Jossey-Bass, 2005. (\$12.06 paperback)

In contrast to the scholarly *Rise of Women* book above, *The Minds of Boys* digs into the nitty-gritty of how to support boys' learning. The authors give practical advice to parents and teachers based on their own experience and research. (Gurian struggled in school himself and Stevens had a son who did.)

As background, the authors cite differences in



male and female brains. One reported difference: "The male brain, on average, relies more heavily than does the female on spatial-mechanical stimulation and thus is inherently more stimulated by diagrams, pictures, and objects moving through space than by the monotony of words."

An entire chapter

offers suggestions to preschool educators. It describes a "boy-friendly environment" in the following ways:

- It has books (with pictures, diagrams about how things work) and blocks (large, small, interlocking).
- It is well-lighted. (Boys tend to see better in bright light.)
- Its walls have lots of visual stimulation, mainly pictures that reinforce curriculum concepts.
- It is filled with opportunities for attachment, bonding,

mentoring, and developing personal responsibility (making choices).

- It encourages gross motor and fine motor activity.
- It allows lots of physical movement. Children can move freely, while being well supervised, and boys can engage in appropriate "karate kicks" (the authors' term for playful horsing around).
- It provides a balance of natural rhythms of attention and brain recharging.
- It is a musical place where children can hear and make their own music as well as experience the music of nature (rain, wind, leaves rustling).
- Its educators get a boy's attention with a simultaneous three-pronged approach: words, eye contact, and a light touch on the arm.

Later chapters advise elementary and secondary teachers about how to help boys learn reading and writing, math, and science. The last section of the book gives suggestions for aiding boys who need extra help, such as those with learning and behavioral disorders.

Many suggestions apply to both teachers and parents. Case in point: removing key environmental stressors from kids' lives. Specifically, the authors recommend the following:

- Limit TV and video game time. The electronic medium does half the brain's work in processing visuals and sound, thus bypassing the neural elements the brain would develop if it were fully active in the natural world.
- Ensure proper nutrition. Because the brain is 80 percent water, it needs fresh, clean water every day for learning. It needs less sugar (which stimulates excess adrenalin and hinders focused attention) and more protein (peanut butter or cheese on toast for breakfast, for example, and hard-boiled eggs, yogurt, and cottage cheese for snacks).
- Prevent brain injury. Encourage boys to wear a helmet while riding a bicycle and don't use their heads for hitting a ball in soccer.

Other suggestions applying to young children:

- Let boys choose what they want to read, whether it's comic books, science fiction, or sports.
- Provide toys that require sorting by size and shape, counting, matching, and puzzles.
- Involve boys in gardening, woodworking, repair of toys and household items, and other activities that help them figure out how things work.

The principal author, Michael Gurian, has written

26 books on education, child development, and parenting, including the *New York Times* best seller, *The Wonder of Boys*. He cofounded the Gurian Institute, which conducts research and trains teachers, and consults with schools and other organizations. Find out more at www.michaelgurian.com/ and <http://gurianinstitute.com/>.

One Size Does Not Fit All: A Student's Assessment of School

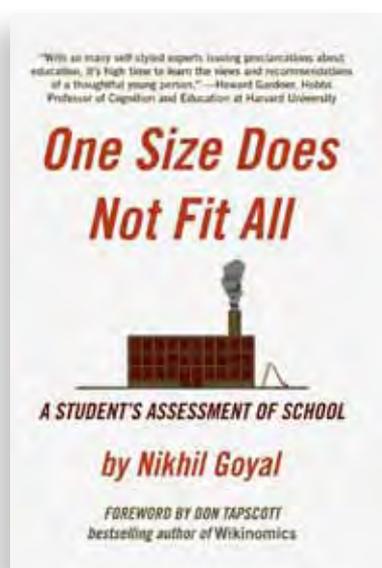
Written by Nikhil Goyal. Alternative Education Resource Organization, 2012. (\$19.95 paperback)

This book is worth reading for its frankness and candor. Plus early childhood educators will feel validated by what a young, bright student says about the role of play in learning and teachers as heroes.

Nikhil Goyal, who was a 17-year-old in a public New York high school last year, found school so “irrelevant and boring” that he wrote a book to give students a voice.

He started his research using a range of resources, from early 20th

century education reformer John Dewey to contemporary career and work analyst Daniel Pink. Using Skype and an iPhone, Goyal interviewed more than 100 experts, including Howard Gardner (who proposed multiple intelligences) and Diane Ravitch (a former U.S. assis-



tant secretary of education) as well as teachers, policy makers, parents, and students.

The resulting recommendations call for a radical overhaul of our education system. Among them:

- Group kids by ability, not age.
- Abolish grades. Use other assessment methods such as portfolios and skill demonstration.
- Transform the college admissions process, including abolishing entrance exams and advanced

placement programs.

- Stop lecturing. Engage students in inquiry and discovery.
- Instead of separating learning into subjects, engage students in projects that require multidisciplinary skills.
- Bring play into the classroom.
- Make school a community and apprentice-based system.
- Pay teachers more. Give them more autonomy.

Goyal's bias—and passion—is creativity and entrepreneurship. He quotes Reid Hoffman, cofounder of the social network LinkedIn: “All humans are entrepreneurs not because they should start companies but because the will to create is encoded in human DNA, and creation is the essence of entrepreneurship.”

Creativity comes through play. Unfortunately, Goyal says, “play is hammered out of kids. Play is now a four-letter word in society.” He explains what early childhood educators have long known: Play is how kids learn. “It's an outlet for creativity, exploration and discovery.” It enables children to develop the six C's skills needed for success in later life: collaboration, communication, content, critical thinking, creative innovation, and confidence.

Goyal has much to say about education practices and policies and says it fearlessly. As an example, he characterizes the landmark 1983 government report *A Nation at Risk* as “a golden treasury of absurd, distorted statistics.”

He deplores the tendency to treat teachers as scapegoats, noting that in military failures we don't blame the soldiers. He believes teacher evaluation is best done when the purpose is to lend them support and foster collaboration.

In the months after publishing the book, Goyal has been interviewed on national television (Fox, MSNBC), and his work has appeared in many publications, including the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and the *Huffington Post*. Learn more about him at <http://nikhilgoyal.me/>.

As a sought-after speaker, he seems to have no time for college—and he may prefer it that way. For one thing, he thinks it costs too much. Public university tuition is about three and a half times higher than it was 30 years ago. Unlike failed home mortgages where the bank can foreclose on a house, defaults on student loans have nothing for banks to

claim. Consequently, these loans last forever, and the result is a growing generation of “debt slaves.”

He insists, however, that he’s not against going to college. It’s mandatory if you want to be a doctor, lawyer, public school teacher, or engineer. In addition, he admits that employment rates are higher for college grads than for those with only a high school diploma, and a person with a bachelor’s degree will likely earn 84 percent more over a lifetime. He advises anyone thinking of going to college, however, to choose a major wisely, preferably one in a technical field.

Are his ideas realistic? See what you think by reading the book.

You probably won’t find this book in your local bookstore. But you can buy it online through such sellers as barnesandnoble.com and amazon.com as well as the publisher, educationrevolution.org. ■