

# Boys not learning language skills in school

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Boys lag behind girls and emerge from school ill-prepared for a world that demands stronger language skills than ever before, according to a new book, and their careers and even their relationship prospects are suffering as a result.

In *Why Boys Fail: Saving our Sons from an Educational System That's Leaving Them Behind*, former USA Today writer Richard Whitmire argues that the gaps between boys and girls are only widening, but there's resistance to acknowledging and fixing the problem.

"It's politically incorrect to watch out for the boys," he says. "There's still this mindset that girls have to be protected and nurtured, that men succeed so well in the marketplace, let's not worry about them. I don't think people realize the implications of not doing something."

The central contention of Whitmire's book is that: "The world has gotten more verbal; boys haven't."

Girls have an easier time with reading and language than boys in the earliest years of school, he says, but until the past two decades, boys would catch up by the time they reached Grade 4 or 5. Now, however, school curricula are more challenging in earlier grades -- particularly when it comes to language -- and many boys never get a firm footing in reading, he says.

And with science and math increasingly taught in word-problem format, boys struggling with language fall behind in other subjects, Whitmire says.

"Some boys absorb it just fine but a fair number don't, and they struggle, they get turned off to reading," he says. "They look around and see that mostly girls are succeeding and they conclude that school is for girls and look elsewhere for satisfaction."

Barry MacDonald, a Vancouver-based education counsellor and author of *Boy Smarts: Mentoring Boys for Success at School*, says boys tend to like visual, active learning and feel alienated by "traditional" classrooms where every answer has to be written down. He doesn't favour single-sex classrooms, but he says there aren't enough role models to show boys that learning and reading doesn't have to be girls' work.

"The gender straitjacket has actually tightened up for us males. It's almost like we have this pumped-up-on-steroids version of masculinity now and boys are simply responding to it," he says. "That reality says you're a suck-up if you like what the school does."

MacDonald points out that Canadian girls once lagged in science and math, but in recent years they've closed the gaps, according to results of the Programme for International Student Assessment from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, and they're now even further ahead of boys in reading and writing skills.

Sex differences in academic achievement are more stark in Canada than in many OECD countries, says Paul Cappon, president and CEO of the Canadian Council on Learning, and the fallout is obvious on university campuses: Just 39 per cent of university graduates in Canada are male, he says, when it was an even balance just a couple of decades ago.

"That's an enormous change in a generation," he says. "That's a societal wave, a tsunami."

And boys are eschewing university right when they need it most, Whitmire says.

Post-secondary education is "the new high school" in terms of being a basic job requirement in the eyes of many employers, he says, and strong reading and writing abilities have become a universal necessity. Even hands-on workers such as police officers and

contractors are required to produce complex written reports as part of their jobs, he says, putting boys who struggle in school or drop out at a major disadvantage.

“The requirements of literacy in a knowledge society are so different, so fundamentally more advanced than they were a generation ago,” Cappon concurs.

But Whitmire believes the most damaging potential result of the academic struggles of boys isn’t economic at all, but personal: the “marriageable mate dilemma.” Women are usually reluctant to “marry down” in terms of education, he says, and the imbalance on university campuses means there will ultimately be a dearth of degree-holding men to be potential mates for all the female graduates.

“Will they marry down? A lot of people think that they will. I don’t share that, I don’t think they will,” he says, adding he believes it’s more likely some won’t marry at all. “What’s the point? If they’re not going to be a true companion, as in an intellectual equal, and their earnings are not going to be comparable, then the incentives for marriage wane.”

But the focus of the marriageable mate issue is generally on the implications for children and families or on women’s options, he says, and the boys who will grow into men who may have a hard time finding a mate are forgotten.

“It’s a personal fulfilment issue,” he says. “I think the personal side is really, really important and I think it’s under-appreciated.”

