

# MIND THE GENDER GAP - ARE GIRLS SMARTER THAN BOYS?

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It was three years ago, during his daughter's high school graduation ceremony, that Peter Jensen noticed a trend he found disturbing: the vast majority of students crossing the stage to receive academic honours were female.

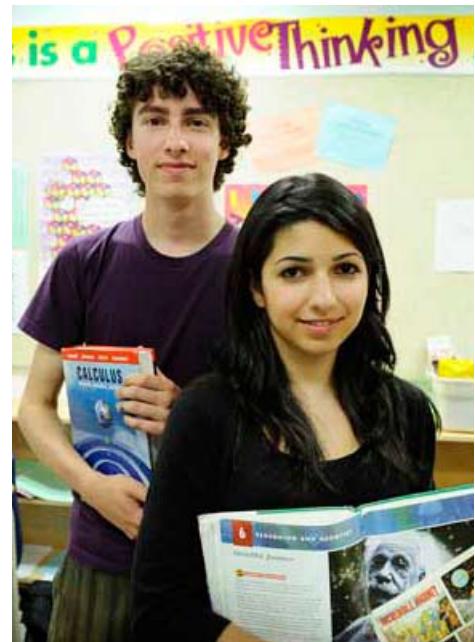
Jensen, a lawyer who had graduated from high school in the 1960s when boys dominated awards ceremonies, was taken aback. "There must have been 30 girls (on stage) before the first boy," he recalled of the celebration at Argyle secondary school in North Vancouver.

While not longing for a return to the imbalance of yesteryear, he was shocked by the reversal of the numbers. He contacted the school to inquire if there was anything unusual about the 2006 graduating class and request a gender breakdown of the students receiving the school's honours that year.

The data he received showed that Argyle girls had cleaned up on the boys in all grades and all award categories. In the distinguished honour roll, there were 84 girls and 44 boys; top scholars included 81 girls and 12 boys and the outstanding service award was given to 28 girls and 9 boys.

What surprised Jensen more than the numbers was the apparent lack of concern. "It seemed absolutely astonishing that Argyle and the district would have this data and not act upon it," he said. Imagine if that gender balance were reversed, he remarked, "It would be considered a scandal."

Jensen approached Argyle principal Peter Ewens and convinced him the school had a problem. When classes resumed that fall, Ewens called his department heads together and, according to meeting minutes, presented



Elliott Squire and Negar Amiri, both students at Sutherland secondary school in North Vancouver, suggest that boys fall behind girls in school because of a lack of drive that leads them to neglect their homework.

Photograph by: Mark van Manen,  
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graphic evidence of "a huge gender inequity between Argyle girls' and boys' academic achievement."

He distributed materials developed by Barry MacDonald, who became B.C.'s expert on boy learning after publishing a book called *Boy Smarts – Mentoring Boys for Success at School*. Ewens offered to cover the costs for anyone interested in attending MacDonald's workshops.

But the next year, Ewens was transferred to Handsworth secondary school and the initiative was abandoned. Jensen, who had become passionate about what he regarded as a serious failing of the school system, was crest-fallen. "Suddenly, I was back to square one," he said.

### District brushes off sex talk

Bruce Crowe became aware of the gender gap in North Vancouver schools in 2003, a year after he made the leap from parent leader to school board trustee.

He was attending a district luncheon to honour the top Grade 12 students from all North Vancouver schools. The room was packed with graduates, educators, business sponsors and politicians when the keynote speaker began his address. "I'm here to talk to you about sex," Crowe recalled the speaker, a North Vancouver principal, saying.

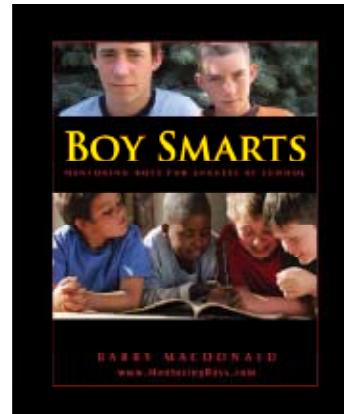
The sex he wanted to talk about was the one that was under-represented among graduates attending the luncheon. Look around the room, the principal continued. "We have a problem."

When Crowe met Jensen in 2008, the lawyer had been petitioning the district for two years to address the gender gap. He was growing frustrated, feeling that superintendent John Lewis and others in the district were giving him the brush-off.

Jensen and Crowe, who was no longer a trustee, decided to work together, and in October they fired off a letter to Lewis and then-education minister Shirley Bond outlining their concerns and complaining that no one was taking the issue seriously. "We are not froth-at-the-mouth people," they stated. "We do this from a sense of alarm at what we have found."

Ministry statistics provide ample evidence of the gender gap that has been observed by many during grad ceremonies. One set of statistics — the number of students receiving \$1,000 provincial scholarships for excellent Grade 12 exam results — shows that hundreds more girls than boys win every year.

The Foundation Skills Assessment (FSA), the province's annual test of



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basic skills in elementary schools, routinely identifies a significant gender gap in reading and writing, although not so much in math.

Last year, the tests found that 19 per cent of Grade 4 boys in B.C. and 14 per cent of the girls weren't meeting expectations in reading. The figures were similar for writing with 23 per cent of boys and 13 per cent of girls not making the grade. In math, 21 per cent of boys and 22 per cent of girls weren't up to par.

## **The Grade 7 results show the same gender gaps.**

The differences are evident in graduation rates as well. Province-wide, 81 per cent of girls complete high school within the expected time frame while only 74 per cent of boys do the same.

University enrolments show similar trends. At the University of B.C. and Simon Fraser University, the male-female ratios of undergraduates are 46:54 and 45:55 respectively. At the University of Victoria, 41.6 per cent of students are male and 58.4 per cent are female.

Average marks for high-school boys began to plummet some time prior to 1995, but no one in B.C. was talking about it until 1997 when Patrick Clarke, a long-time teacher, was interviewed by The Vancouver Sun.

Clarke had been away from the classroom for a dozen years and when he returned to a teaching post at Alpha secondary in Burnaby, he was struck by the huge cultural shift that had occurred in his absence.

"To put it bluntly, the girls are running the place," he told The Sun at the time.

Boys had slipped from the honour roll to the suspension list, and not just in Burnaby. Figures from around the province confirmed that female students were much more likely than male students to be successful in school.

The new education minister, Margaret MacDiarmid, acknowledges the problem. "It's true, a greater number of girls than boys are graduating, scoring higher in provincial exams, receiving scholarships and moving on to post-secondary learning," she said in a statement to The Vancouver Sun.

Nearly a third of B.C.'s 60 school districts have developed programs to improve boys' performance, she added. "For example, some districts are engaging students differently and looking at research about brain function

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and developmental stages of boys and girls and how that affects learning." That suggests more than 40 districts are doing nothing.

### Fear hinders boys' learning

Elliott Squire and Negar Amiri are two students — one male, one female — who have done exceedingly well in North Vancouver schools. Both 17, they will graduate this month and continue their studies in September at UBC.

They acknowledged that girls generally experience more success than boys in high school, but suggest it may be a problem of boys lacking drive or neglecting their homework. "I'm not sure what the schools could do to fix it," Squire said.

Roger van Renesse, who graduated from Argyle this month, suggested girls have an easier time asking questions and seeking help. When boys say they don't understand something, everyone assumes they weren't paying attention.

He proposed simple changes he said might help male students who have a hard time staying focused: Reduce the length of classes or allow short breaks and group work to break the monotony of lectures. This year, Argyle extended classes to 75 minutes. "After so long, my eyes start to drift to the clock and my focus is gone," van Renesse said.

Amanda Wang, valedictorian at Sentinel secondary in West Vancouver, agreed girls are more willing to ask questions. "Guys get embarrassed easily and they want to appear cool," she said. It doesn't help that some girls laugh at their questions.

Girls may be more successful with awards and scholarships because they're more likely than boys to be involved in their communities, and volunteer work is often taken into account, Wang said, adding: "Girls are more interested in socializing."

MacDonald doesn't purport to have all the answers, but he has spent a lot of time studying boy learning. Recently, he has turned his attention from B.C. to Ontario because he says that province is more interested in addressing the problem. "Here, people don't want to talk about it."

There is also a willingness in Ontario to work collaboratively to find answers. "In B.C., there is just an amazing amount of conflict," he said, referring in particular to the decade-old battle over standardized testing.

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The Ontario Teachers' Federation recently wrote to MacDonald seeking advice on whether single-sex education is worth pursuing. The letter began: "In recent years, Ontario educators have been grappling with questions related to closing the significant gap between boys and girls on provincial assessments." That's a letter he would never receive in B.C., he noted.

MacDonald doesn't advocate a one-size-fits-all approach to learning and doesn't pit boys against girls. Rather, he said teachers need to explore ways of reaching all students along the male-female continuum with a variety of instructional approaches.

## Scholarship gap persists

North Vancouver superintendent John Lewis acknowledges girls have a slight edge over boys in some subjects but says that's not surprising given their earlier maturation. When boys become men, they catch up, he said. He refused to comment on the complaints from Jensen and Crowe, but in response to the issues at Argyle, he said it isn't unusual for a school to have a cohort of students with particular problems and then develop strategies to address those problems. Argyle responded to the issue and moved on, he added.

Yet, the distribution of provincial scholarships in North Vancouver suggests the gender gap persists. Last year, 75 recipients were female and 46 were male and the year before, there were 112 girls and 70 boys.

Asked what schools might do to assist boys, Lewis said identifying language problems in kindergarten would be helpful, in that teachers could provide early support to children with low literacy skills, many of whom are boys. As well, he said it's important to help students build strong academic and social connections with their schools.

Jensen and Crowe both have sons and daughters. They say their fight will continue, but it's not on behalf of their own offspring, who are well established and supported. Rather, they say, it is for the boys, who are falling through the cracks and have been for years.

Their talk has now turned to litigation. "I have tried to work within the system, but I'm over that now," Jensen said.