Closing the Gaps
Although principals feel challenged and pressured to close the racial, ethnic, and socio-economic achievement gaps so often spotlighted in the media, lurking in the shadows is a persistent but less publicized challenge: the gender gap. Those who think that it is a thing of the past are in for a surprise.

For the last few years, little attention has been paid to gender barriers, in part because so many educators considered gender to mean only girls. Since girls out-score boys on most standardized achievement tests, receive better report card grades, and are much less likely to be behavior problems, the conclusion seemed obvious: gender was not a problem.

In reality, gender bias is very much an issue for both boys and girls, an issue too many educators fail to see. For example, can you imagine a teacher organizing a spelling bee by matching black students against white students? Certainly not in today’s society. But consider the same teacher organizing the same activity by gender, boys against girls. That’s a practice so common that it has become an acceptable—and unquestioned—part of school life. But why? We have yet to come across a single study showing that gender segregation and competition serve any positive educational, social, or psychological purpose. Still, we see some schools separating girls and boys in lunchrooms, class lines, playgrounds, and school buses.

Gender bias is difficult to detect because it affects girls and boys in different ways. In school, it is the boys who may be expected to “act out” and rebel at school work, while the girls are expected to be docile, conforming, and willing to work hard. As different as those behaviors appear, they both reflect gender stereotyping. While there has been some progress in breaking down this stereotyping in recent

**IN BRIEF**

The authors note that gender bias, once considered to affect only girls, continues to impact both girls and boys in ways that are often difficult to detect. They cite new challenges of single-sex education and the failure of the No Child Left Behind Act to consider gender in tracking a school’s Adequate Yearly Progress. They list some indicators of gender bias, with suggestions for how principals can deal with them.
decades—more girls taking math and science courses, and more boys exploring careers in teaching and nursing—new gender challenges have arisen.

New Challenges of NCLB

The No Child Left Behind Act includes a problematic proposal to change Title IX, the federal law prohibiting sex discrimination in education, by encouraging the establishment of public single-sex schools and classes for girls and boys. There are real danger signs in this proposal. Some educators point out that many existing single-sex schools are not particularly effective and attribute the academic successes of others less to single gender and more to smaller classes, engaged parents, well-trained teachers, and strong academic emphasis. Other educators believe that single-sex schools work less well for boys than girls, while still others believe that such schools intensify gender stereotypes and homophobia.

A California experiment in single-sex education for boys a few years ago was a case study for what can go wrong. The schools turned out to be dumping grounds for boys with behavior problems, with no funds for teacher training and no specific programs or curricula. Their failure to achieve promised results of improved academic achievement was not surprising. Nevertheless, the federal government is considering doing the same thing on a national scale. Worse yet, the federal plan speaks of “comparable,” not “equal,” single-sex schools and classes. Would a gifted science class for boys and a practical science course for girls be considered “comparable” under the NCLB definition? We don’t know.

What Principals Can Do

How can principals address old and new gender gaps? Here are some indicators to consider:

Teacher Bias. Although most teachers want to teach all children equitably, boys and girls often receive different treatment. Teachers call on boys more often than girls, wait longer for boys’ answers, and provide more precise feedback to boys. But they also punish boys more than girls, even when their behavior is similar. Girls are more likely to be quiet in class and be praised for neatness. In their classroom visits, principals need to observe how teachers interact with stu-
students and to note whether there is a persistent pattern of gender differentiation. When teachers are made aware of their unintentional bias, they will usually make an effort to be more equitable.

**Student Beliefs.** Boys and girls frequently interpret their successes and failures in very different ways. Boys typically attribute success to intelligence and failure to bad luck or insufficient effort. Girls are more likely to attribute success to good luck and failure to inability. This belief creates a harmful, self-fulfilling prophecy for girls: trying harder or risking a new approach won’t make much difference because you’re simply not smart enough. Teachers too often feed into this misconception, for example attributing boys’ success in technology to talent while dismissing girls’ success as luck or diligence (AAUW 2000). Principals need to establish equally high expectations for all students.

**Learned Helplessness.** Teachers often encourage boys to persist and solve difficult problems, while assisting girls who ask for help. This is not a good idea; girls should be encouraged to do for themselves. Yet, one study showed boys taking active roles in student-led science demonstrations, while girls were far more likely to be group notetakers (NCWGE 2002).

**Self-imposed Stereotyping.** Many girls believe they will be unpopular if they are perceived as a “brain” and may avoid “boy stuff” (e.g., math and science), while boys shun “female subjects,” like art, music, and even reading. Schools can change this kind of thinking. Find girls who love to set up and use science and technology equipment, and create more options for boys that negate self-imposed stereotypes.

**Displays and Exhibits.** What are the displays and exhibits in your schools saying? Are male or female accomplishments more likely to be recognized? Make sure that gender is equally represented.

**Sexual Harassment and Bullying.** Make sure your district is following Title IX

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**WEB RESOURCES**

American University provides access to a number of David Sadker’s articles on gender bias, including “An Educator’s Primer to the Gender War.”

[www.american.edu/sadker/](http://www.american.edu/sadker/)

The American Association of University Women (AAUW) offers an executive summary of its landmark *Gender Gaps*, with a bibliography and recommendations for educators.

[www.aauw.org/research/GGES.pdf](http://www.aauw.org/research/GGES.pdf)

The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education presents a final report on California’s pilot program in single-gender public education.

[www.oise.utoronto.ca/depts/tps/adatnow/final.pdf](http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/depts/tps/adatnow/final.pdf)
and has a policy on these issues that is communicated to teachers, students, and parents. Learning communities do not flourish where intimidation thrives or inequities are tolerated.

The gender gap is the one demographic that challenges principals of all schools, urban and rural, wealthy and poor. How strange that for many it has become so difficult to see.

References

The Many Faces of Gender Bias

Reading and Writing
■ For decades, boys have consistently lagged behind girls in reading and writing performance, a reality highlighted by standardized tests. Some attribute this to developmental or learning style differences, to an anti-school culture felt by boys, or to brain differences (NCES 2003; Pollack 1998).
■ Boys often regard reading and writing as “feminine” subjects, and report that reading threatens their masculinity (Dutro 2001/2002).

Science and Math
■ Although boys and girls like and do well in math and science in elementary school, girls become less positive and do less well in higher grades (NCES 2000).
■ By the third grade, 51 percent of boys and 37 percent of girls have used a microscope in class (NCES 2002).
■ Boys receive more math- and science-related toys than do girls (NCES 2002).

Technology
■ Girls rate themselves considerably lower than boys on technological ability and are less likely to use computers outside of school (NCWGE 2002).
■ Current software products are more likely to reinforce gender stereotypes and bias rather than reduce them (AAUW 2000).
■ Girls are five times less likely than boys to consider a technology-related career (AAUW 2000).

Achievement
■ Girls receive higher report card grades throughout their schooling career (NCWGE 2002).
■ Boys outscore girls on most high-stakes tests, including both the verbal and math sections of the SATs (ETS 2001; NCES 2000).

Psychological Barriers
■ Girls in grades 6 and 7 rate popularity more important than academic competence or independence (NCMST 2000).
■ Boys are expected to follow a “boy code,” a kind of swaggering posture that hides their vulnerabilities and suppresses dependency while leaving them feeling emotionally isolated (Pollack 1998).

Sexual Harassment and Bullying
■ Verbal and physical sexual harassment begins in elementary school. Four out of five girls, and almost as many boys, experience some form of sexual harassment (AAUW 2004).
■ Thirty percent of students are victims of bullying. Boys are both more likely to bully others and be victims of physical bullying, while girls frequently experience verbal and psychological bullying (Nansel et al. 2001).

School Staffing
■ Approximately 9 percent of the nation’s elementary school teachers are men, down from about 18 percent in 1981 (NEA 2004).
■ Almost half of elementary school principals are male (NCES 2004).


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