

THE BRITISH WRITER Kingsley Amis is reported to have said, "If there is one word that captures everything that has gone wrong since the Second World War, it's 'workshop.'" This past July, I attended the nineteenth annual conference of the National Coalition for Sex Equity in Education (NCSEE) in Kansas City, Missouri, where dozens of workshops captured everything that's going wrong with America's schools.

NCSEE (pronounced "nice-ee") is the professional organization of some six hundred "sex-equity experts" who work in the federal government, state departments of education, local schools, and with activist organizations such as the Wellesley Center for Research on Women and the American Association of University Women. These experts' job is to formulate and implement "gender-fair" education policies and programs, and offer guidance to administrators and teachers on how to deal with sexism and sexual harassment in elementary and secondary classrooms. Schools listen to them to avoid running afoul of the often complicated requirements of Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, which prohibit sex discrimination in any educational institution that receives public funds.

The NCSEE's working definition of sexual discrimination is based on the assumption that the current education system academically shortchanges girls. Its experts believe that schools actually encourage boys to be predatory towards girls ("Schools may, in fact, be training grounds for the insidious cycle of domestic violence," according to Nan Stein, an equity specialist from the Wellesley center, who spoke at the conference), and that dismantling this system of injustice by "re-socializing"

Boys Won't Be Boys

Not if educators have their way, reports *Christina Hoff Sommers*



boys is a primary and urgent educational mission. "Social change is hard. Look at Seneca Falls. It's a long, long struggle," complained keynote speaker Barbara Sprung, director of Educational Equity Concepts, Inc. But she urged her listeners not to lose hope. "We have an incredible opportunity. Kids are so malleable."

Kids may indeed be malleable, but they are not in trouble for the reasons these experts think. The NCSEE's assertion that sexism is prevalent in our school system is simply not true. Girls are not faring worse than boys. Several recent university studies, as well as data from the Department of Education

and independent research by Metropolitan Life Insurance in New York and the Search Institute in Minneapolis, unequivocally show that girls are academically stronger than boys. Girls get better grades, they take more rigorous academic programs, and they are more committed to school than their male peers. The math gap favoring boys is closing; the much larger reading gap favoring girls shows no signs of diminishing. The current college freshmen class is 56 percent female, 44 percent male.

Yet the facts do not seem to discourage NCSEE from its "long, long struggle" to change the nature of boys

and to impose upon schools programs that will actively suppress and lower male academic performance even further. That's because the NCSEE philosophy deploys "equity" and "bias" in one direction only: Any advantage boys enjoy (e.g., better scores on standardized math tests, greater participation in sports) constitutes sex bias and must be aggressively combated; any advantage girls enjoy (e.g., better scores on standardized reading tests, greater college attendance) constitutes a triumph of "equity." In this vein, NCSEE has launched a massive effort to improve girls' educational performance while the far more serious educational deficits of boys go unnoticed and unaddressed.

DR. RICHARD GREIG, a high-school principal from York, Pennsylvania, sent me a letter describing the failure of boys at his school, but his observations could apply to schoolboys throughout the country: "Students who dominate the drop-out list, the suspension list, the failure list, and other negative indices of non-achievement in school are males by a wide ratio." According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 22 percent of boys versus 13 percent of girls, "often" or "usually" come to school without completed homework; 14 percent of males versus nine percent of females report being held back a grade; two-thirds of special education students are boys.

But while the NCSEE conference may have ignored boys' academic failings, it did not ignore the alleged menace boys pose to the safety of female students. On the first day, Jackson Katz, a self-described male feminist, led a three-hour workshop on "gender-violence prevention." He spent the first hour teaching participants how to

avoid what he called the "patriarchal universe of discourse." Katz distributed a handout that included a lot of alarming (but discredited) statistics on domestic violence. When it was politely pointed out that these were factual errors, Katz and several audience members grew indignant. "This is not a discussion about statistics," cried one angry woman. The crowd was far more appreciative of a remark by another participant: "Men fear that women will laugh at them; women fear that men will kill them." At the end of his three hours, Katz told us, "I know very few healthy men."

Ironically, the Missouri conference met just a few days after the Massachusetts Board of Education reported that 59 percent of would-be teachers had failed an elementary competency test that average tenth graders would be expected to pass (writing samples included such misspellings as "improbally" and "integraty.") While the story generated hundreds of news articles and editorials on "dumbed-down teachers," none of the intense public concern penetrated the halls of the gathering.

In one workshop, Peggy Weeks, the diminutive, gray-haired director of sex equity for the Nebraska Department of Education, discussed her formulas for achieving non-sexist, bias-free schools. On a large sheet of paper with a green felt tip pen, she wrote, "Do you know why I am using a green pen? Because green is the color of hope." She then stood aside while a male colleague, Jessie Myles, wrote the following six words, vertically, on the board: Sexism, Homocentrism, Ablism, Racism, Elitism, Disablism. Myles explained that if you isolated the first letters of each of the "isms" they spelled "SHARED." "That is powerful!" Weeks gushed. (I'd previ-

ously come across Weeks' theories in an "EDEQUITY Online" discussion denying she was anti-male. "I do not hate males or boys," she posted. "I have spent my career as a woman, wife, mother, and feminist with no hesitation when it comes to calling sexism when I see it. I have seen my son caught in a society that, at its core, wants him as cannon fodder for the wars of either militarism or capitalism.")

At another workshop, Victoria Warner, an Ohio State University doctoral candidate, reported on a large-scale, seven-year equity project she and her colleagues had just completed. The purpose of the project was to develop a curriculum for high school students that would enhance their "gender-equity competencies." The results were eleven "gender-equity modules" ("GEM" for short), each consisting of small packets of practice quizzes, worksheets, class activities, assessments, and "fact" sheets.

Warner had us break down into small groups to practice a sample GEM exercise called the "Bean Strategy." She distributed baggies filled with beans. Some contained two beans; others as many as ten. We were then instructed to hold a discussion, but each time we spoke we would have to give up one of our beans. Once your bag was empty, you had to remain silent. This meant some members could speak a lot more than others. (Gender-equity activists believe boys always get "more beans" than girls do.) Later we shared our feelings about what it was like to be silenced or privileged in a discussion. Both can be upsetting, we learned.

I asked Warner whether, at any time during or after the seven-year development of the GEM project, there had been any attempt to measure

whether these activities actually improved student achievement. The good-natured Warner smiled and said disarmingly, "We have never done that. I have no idea if this stuff works."

This preference for "feel good" (or, as it may be, "feel bad") exercises over empirical research prevailed in many of the other workshops as well. NCSEE participants sat in circles, shared feelings, and performed exercises designed to improve their "sensitivity." Dr. Susan Levin Schlechter, a sex equity instructor from New York

center serves as a national clearinghouse and publisher of "gender-fair materials," and describes itself as the "primary vehicle" by which the federal government promotes sex equity in the schools. WEEA center representatives were very active at the Missouri conference. The center's director, Katherine Hanson, considers it her mission to inform the educational establishment about the extent of male violence in the United States. For several months, she has posted the following "facts" on the WEEA web site:

entire country *from all causes combined* is approximately one million. The total number of women who were murdered in 1996, the most recent year analyzed by the reports, was 3,631.) Since the best cure for male violence, according to WEEA, is the re-socialization of little boys, Hanson suggests in her web posting that educators branch out into the Little League.

"One of the most overlooked arenas of violence training within schools may be the environment that sur-



University, suggested that teachers could "create a community of learners" by scrupulously alternating "boy/girl, boy/girl" when calling upon students. A vigilant Elaine Omann, who works in the diversity office of the Aurora Public Schools in Colorado, immediately reproached Dr. Schlechter for not saying "girl/boy girl/boy."

Sadly, these attitudes will flourish if the Department of Education continues on its current course. The department currently supports the Women's Educational Equity Act Center in Newton, Massachusetts. The WEEA

- Murders by youths have increased by 27 percent since 1980;

- Rapes increased by 59 percent between 1990 and 1991;

- Every year nearly four million women are beaten to death.

Never mind that Hanson's numbers are pure fantasy. (According to the FBI Supplementary Homicide Report, murder by youths has not gone up but *down* by 20 percent since 1980. Between 1990 and 1991, rape increased four percent—but it has gone down steadily since. Furthermore, the annual number of female deaths in the

rounds athletics and sports, beginning with Little League games, where parents and friends sit on the sidelines and encourage aggressive, violent behavior."

The experts at the conference agreed that a child was never too young to begin anti-harassment training. In one workshop, Merle Froschl, co-director of Educational Equity Concepts, introduced us to *Quit it!*, a curriculum for children aged five to eight distributed by the National Education Association. The authors explain the need for programs for chil-

Christina Hoff Sommers is the W.H. Brady Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute. She is working on a book entitled, *The War Against Boys*.

◆ and reform the nation's boys. What we need, though, is an honest reckoning with the status of boys in this country. We already know that they are at a severe disadvantage in the early grades. Making them feel bad for wanting rough-and-tumble play at recess, insisting that they play tag "where no one is out," regarding and treating them as proto-harassers, will only further aggravate their plight. Congress should refuse to accept the WEEA/NCSEB report. The five-year contract should be cancelled. No one has asked, let alone authorized, the sex-equity "workshoppers" to overhaul

United States," due in December on the Status of Girls' Education in the writing an official "Report to Congress particular, they wanted assistance in ing the terms of the new contract. In tributed flyers asking for help in satisfy- play, talk about how students feel problem: "Before going outside to center for gender equity...." At the conference, WEEA representatives dis- more comprehensive national resource ing new opportunities to become a This contract offers us all sorts of excit- from the Department of Education. non-competitive play. What they nor- mally do is chasing—often chasing girls." The guide suggests ways for teachers to cope with the chasing As Sprung explained in her address, lent. Competitiveness must be curbed. designed to render little boys less vio- ing announcement on behalf of her gender-equity group: "The WEEA Equity Resource Center is happy to announce our new [five-year] contract

Earlier this year, an exultant enhanced by government support. of these experts keeps growing, unions, and schools. And the influence departments of education, teachers' ership drives policy in many state- nately they will be, since NCSEB lead- these equity experts—but unfortunately so young: "Gender-based teasing and bullying are pervasive in our country's public and private schools. We view teasing and bullying as precursors to adolescent sexual harassment and believe the roots of this behavior are to be found in early childhood socialization practices."

Quit It! includes many activities that are designed to render little boys less violent. Competitiveness must be curbed. As Sprung explained in her address, "Boys need to become interested in non-competitive play. What they normally do is chasing—often chasing girls." The guide suggests ways for teachers to cope with the chasing problem: "Before going outside to play, talk about how students feel when playing a game of tag. Do they like to be chased? Do they like to do the chasing? How does it feel to be tagged out? Get their ideas about other ways the game might be played. Then tell them that they are going to be playing a different kind of tag, one where nobody is ever "out.""

The guide recommends a new, non-violent, non-competitive version of tag called "Circle of Friends" played like this: "If a [tagged] student calls for help, two students hold hands and form a circle around her/him. This circle of friends unfreezes the student so he or she can continue playing. Students can't be tagged while making a circle."

Quit It! was not the only anti-harassment teachers' guide being plugged at the equity conference. Another, called *STOP IT, NOW!*, similarly warns that intervention cannot begin a moment too soon. "Teaching students about sexual harassment should begin in the first week of school, for all students, including kindergartners." No teacher should be influenced by

◆ and reform the nation's boys. What we need, though, is an honest reckoning with the status of boys in this country. We already know that they are at a severe disadvantage in the early grades. Making them feel bad for wanting rough-and-tumble play at recess, insisting that they play tag "where no one is out," regarding and treating them as proto-harassers, will only further aggravate their plight. Congress should refuse to accept the WEEA/NCSEB report. The five-year contract should be cancelled. No one has asked, let alone authorized, the sex-equity "workshoppers" to overhaul