

Girls Overtake Boys in School Performance

By Kim Asch

Conventional wisdom has been that girls get short shrift at school. But recent studies show the opposite is true — boys earn lower grades, and fewer are making it to college.

Horatio Alger's dauntless hero, Ragged Dick, made good by using his smarts and working hard. But that was 100 years ago. Today's Horatio Alger heroes are more likely to be girls, given that boys are poorer students who more often become disconnected from and disillusioned by school.

"Female teens are keenly aware of the opportunities available to them and are taking advantage of them in a way that males aren't," says Jennifer Park, an education analyst for Connecticut-based NFO Research. "If current trends continue, there may come a time when females are the most formally educated class."

This already is true on college campuses. In 1996, young women represented 45 percent of undergraduates, and the Department of Education projects that in 2007 there will be 9.1 million women enrolled in college, compared with 6.9 million men. A growing disparity between the incomes of high-school graduates and those with college degrees makes the trend particularly worrisome.

There is no clear answer as to why the proportion of male undergraduates is diminishing, but their experience in the lower grades probably plays a role. "Males are more apt than females to believe that the school climate is hostile to them, that teachers do not expect as much from them and give them less encouragement to do their best," notes psychology professor Judith Kleinfeld of the University of Alaska in a recent report that concludes girls have an edge in the classroom. Boys traditionally have earned lower grades, trailed girls in class rankings and won fewer school honors.

Boys suffer in greater numbers

from learning disabilities and attention-deficit disorders and are assigned to special-education classes three times more often than girls. More boys are punished, held back a grade and drop out.



Book smarts: Bucking popular notions about the state of education, girls have the edge.

Who's Who Among American High School Students, a roster of top performers, consistently recognizes more girls than boys, says publisher Joe Krouse. Of the 734,834 students recognized in the 1997-98 school year, 65 percent were girls, and almost twice as many of them had an "A" average.

During the last few years, the National Science Foundation, the American Association of University Women, or AAUW, and other groups have funded programs to boost girls' achievement in math and science. Whether these programs have helped, girls are gaining on boys in math and science, according to the AAUW's latest study, released last

October. In 1994, girls outnumbered boys in algebra and geometry classes. Roughly equal proportions of girls and boys took precalculus, calculus, trigonometry and statistics/probability. A "significantly larger" proportion of boys opted for the lowest-level high-school mathematics courses, basic and general math.

In the sciences, girls more often take both biology and chemistry, while roughly equal proportions of girls and boys enroll in engineering and geology. Physics is the only subject that remains a male domain, though many more girls enrolled in 1994 than in 1990.

Yet boys have not made nearly so much progress in their areas of weakness — reading and writing. Fewer boys than girls enroll in almost every English course — literature, composition and speech — except one: remedial English.

Black, Hispanic and American Indian boys fare the worst in schools, ranking at the bottom in terms of their achievement and attitudes about school. "Minority boys are most likely to feel discouraged about the future and least interested in getting a good education," according to a 1997 Metropolitan Life survey that examined gender issues in public schools.

The survey also found that minority girls (76 percent) are much more likely than minority boys (57 percent) to choose a good education as their top goal; minority girls (69 percent) like school the most, and white boys (49 percent) like it the least; and half of all teachers believe girls appear more confident than boys in their ability to achieve their own goals.

Both the MetLife report and the 1998-99 "State of Our Nation's Youth" survey conducted by Park

for the Horatio Alger Association expressed surprise at data showing girls are more successful students. The Horatio Alger Foundation ordered all of the data for this year's study re-examined by gender after discovering "the most optimistic and successful students" were composed of a much higher proportion of girls (63 percent) than boys (37 percent).

Concludes the MetLife report, "Contrary to the commonly held view that boys have an advantage over girls in school, girls appear to have an edge in terms of their future plans, teachers' expectations, everyday experiences at school and interactions in the classroom."