

# No Progress Report

*Schools are shortchanging boys more than ever*

## The War Against Boys: How Misguided Policies Are Harming Our Young Men

By Christina Hoff Sommers

Simon & Schuster, 2000, 2013, \$25.00; 269 pages.

As reviewed by Nathan Glazer

*The War Against Boys* was first published in 2000. At the time, the shortchanging of boys in school and in key areas of social development was less evident as a problem than it is today, and the proponents of policies to advance girls in school were much more prominent. This new edition of the book need take nothing back: the refusal or inability (often as a result of litigation) of schools to take into account or respond to the distinctive characteristics of boys is even more marked, the gap in school achievement between boys and girls even more substantial and troubling than in 2000.

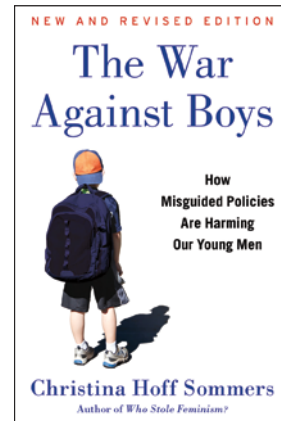
“In this revised edition,” Sommers writes, “I describe the emergence of additional boy-averse trends: the decline of recess, punitive zero-tolerance policies, myths about juvenile ‘superpredators,’ and a misguided campaign against single-sex schooling. As our schools become more feelings centered, risk averse, competition-free, and sedentary, they move further and further from the characteristic sensibilities of boys.”

The new material on the indifference or antagonism to acknowledging boys’ distinctive characteristics is seamlessly integrated with the old. Studies continue to show boys and men falling behind: young women caught up with young

men in the percentage of those with four years of college in the early 1990s, and by 2009 far surpassed them, 36 percent to 27 percent. “Even the Harvard Graduate School of Education,” Sommers reports, “once the epicenter of the silenced- and short-changed-girl movement, published a major study that acknowledged the plight of males.” (Note that Sommers has a tendency to attribute to an educational institution the work of those employed there.) The report points out that the high school education that once gave access to a job earning middle-class wages does so no longer, as unionized manufacturing has declined and been replaced by jobs demanding higher technical skills.

The movement to give special attention to girls and their needs was part of the grand drive to equality that has dominated American life and politics for decades. This is one of our glories. But the drive for equality for the sexes was accompanied by a litigious and bureaucratic fervor that often went beyond common sense: yes, girls and young women should be encouraged to engage in competitive sports, but why should a regime of strict equality in numbers be required so that some sports attractive to males had to be closed down to preserve a misguided notion of equal treatment?

Sommers gives a dispiriting account of recent governmental efforts to impose on vocational programs that have had success with boys expensive efforts to recruit girls into programs for which they show little interest. A report of



the National Coalition for Women and Girls in Education noted with alarm that in vocational programs girls comprise “only 4% of heating, A/C and refrigeration students, 5% of welding students, 6% of electrical and plumber/pipefitter students,” while girls make up 98 percent of

students enrolled in cosmetology and 87 percent of those studying child care.

A curriculum specialist at the successful Blackstone Valley Tech high school in Upton, Massachusetts, explains that “we do *everything* we can to promote non-traditional fields. We bring in successful women welders and electricians; we counsel the girls and their parents about the benefits of traditional male fields. We force them to explore fields outside their interests. But we cannot *force* them into a career they don’t want.”

But that seems not to be enough for the current administration, which hopes to use the \$1.1 billion it disburses under the Perkins Act to push more girls into “nontraditional” vocational and technical training. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has asserted that “it is time to transform” the program. The reauthorized Perkins Act in 2014, Duncan promises, “will ensure equity in access, participation, and *outcomes*.” Outcomes?

The president supports Duncan’s efforts. “The White House announced that the Department of Education would be adopting new and more vigorous application of Title IX to high school and college technical, engineering, and science programs....” Institutions receiving federal assistance

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will be “required to ensure equal access to STEM...fields.” President Obama wrote, “Title IX isn’t just about sports.” The example of how Title IX has been enforced in sports suggests a pointless punitiveness can be expected as women fall short in other fields.

Sommers points out that in 2010 women made up 64 percent of graduate students in social science, 75 percent in public administration, 78 percent in veterinary medicine, and 80 percent in health sciences. Will that attract the attention of politicians and of bureaucrats enforcing Title IX? Not very likely, according to Sommers: “There is no National Coalition for Boys in Education, no lobby promoting changes in the Perkins Act or Title IX to help them.”

And one wonders why not, in view of the serious efforts in England and Australia, also English-speaking democracies, to draw attention to the plight of boys in schooling and to adapt educational practice to their distinctive needs. Sommers reports on British headmasters and headmistresses who promote practices that work better with boys and

on spreading experiments in single-sex classes, and they are not subject to the litigation that would face them in the U.S.

In Australia, a Standing Committee on Education and Training of the House of Representatives published “Boys: Getting it Right. Report on the Inquiry into the Education of Boys.” “The report notes that earlier governmental inquiries on gender equity focused only on the needs of girls,” says Sommers. Could we expect such an inquiry from a committee of our Congress, even when controlled by Republicans?

The whole thrust of education reform today ignores, even if some specific efforts (like KIPP and E. D. Hirsch-inspired programs) may subtly respond to, the needs of boys—for action, competitiveness, rough-and-tumble activity, whether inborn or whatever, and the need, too, for a stricter and more consistent discipline to socialize these characteristics. Sommers is not in politics and avoids the question of where these differences come from. The issue brought down Harvard president Lawrence Summers when he commented on the

difference in achievement between men and women at the highest levels in math and science. Sommers notes that in intelligence tests, the normal distribution for boys spreads out wider at the tails than for girls—more scores at very high and very low levels, which is consistent with what President Summers was suggesting.

Sommers concludes with a fascinating discussion of a book, *Between Mothers and Sons* (Patricia Stevens, ed., Scribner, 1999), about “feminist mothers coping with an unforeseen and startling event—the birth of a son.” One mother describes what happened when she sent her son to a Montessori preschool “run by a goddess-worshipping multiracial women’s collective.”

Something about it did not honor his boy soul. I think it was the absence of physical competition. Boys who clashed or tussled with each other were separated and counseled by the peacemaker. Sticks were confiscated and turned into tomato stakes in the school garden.

The story is a common one. The memoir *Brothers Emanuel*, by Ezekiel Emanuel, describes the growing up of three remarkable brothers, among them Rahm, the mayor of Chicago, and Ari, a major Hollywood agent. Their mother was a convinced pacifist, but against all her efforts the boys fought and wrestled, took endangering risks, and suffered serious bruises and breaks. Ezekiel, a bioethicist and professor at the University of Pennsylvania, is arguing no thesis: he is merely describing how boys on the whole grow up, whatever the intentions of their mothers.

*The War Against Boys* is a solid book, wonderfully footnoted and indexed, telling an important story, and sorely needed now, possibly more so than in 2000.

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“How come Lewis and Clark didn’t just use MapQuest?”