

## Closing the Gender Gap: Are Women Rising?

BY BEATRICE TOWNSEND

Economic and cultural changes in the last 40 years have led to women making such sufficient gains in education that they now lead men in college enrollment and graduation rates. But the margin of gain has created a gender gap in America's education system, causing the country to lag behind other industrialized countries.

To push to improve outcomes for both men and women in education, two professors of sociology, Dr. Thomas A. DiPrete of Columbia University and Dr. Claudia Buchmann of the Ohio State University, came together for *The Rise of Women: The Growing Gender Gap in Education and What It Means for American Schools* (Russell Sage Foundation, 2013) to combine decades of research that explores how the gender gap in education came to be and offer ways to close it.

In the book, the co-authors reveal that, in the 20th century, men earned more bachelor's degrees than women. But by 2010, women's graduation rates leaped to 30 percent (from 14 percent in 1970), while the graduation rate of men rose only 7 percentage points from 20 to 27 percent, causing women to surpass men in that category in the 21st century. In 2011, salaries of full-time working women were 82 percent that of men, up from 62 percent 30 years earlier.

According to the book, as divorce rates began to rise 30 years ago, women were motivated to earn more education as insurance for a middle-class standard of living that they'd grown accustomed to while married.

To explain the growing advantage of women, DiPrete says that one needs to understand the role that family and schools play on a child's development. According to Buchmann, their research shows that, as early as kindergarten, girls, on average, have better social and behavior skills than boys. This advantage also extends to academic performance and can explain why more women finish college than men. Girls

are also found to get higher grades than boys. This grade gap is not about ability, but more so about effort and engagement. Good grades provide greater immediate gratification to girls, motivating them to put more effort into school. Boys' lower academic motivation leads to weaker academic preparation and makes them less likely to do well in college.

Another factor that may contribute to boys getting lower grades and being least likely to get a college degree is growing up without a father, or with a less-educated father, says Buchmann. It is said that blue-collar fathers might subtly reinforce the idea that school is feminizing.

In their world, masculinity equates to physical strength and hard manual labor as opposed to getting good grades. Buchmann disagrees with the opinions of commentators who propose more recess, same-sex classes and more male teachers to address boys' underachievement.

Stephanie Coontz, author of *A Strange Stirring: The Feminine Mystique and American Women at the Dawn of the 1960s*, in commenting on *Rise of Women*, says that lots of the education problems boys have do not stem from education being feminized but, instead, are due to a masculinized peer culture that encourages disengagement and disruptive behavior.

Phillip Cohen, professor of sociology at the University of Maryland, College Park, reasons that more people not completing college is not genetic or biological, but is social and economic. Commenting on the *Rise of Women*, Cohen states that majorities of people do not respond in predictably self-interested ways to economic incentives.

An example is the stagnation of male college graduation rates just as returns of a college degree spiked upward.

DiPrete and Buchmann conclude that reforms can improve education outcomes for women and men. Classrooms supportive of academic success better serve boys (who are more vulnerable and fall prey easier to lack of academic climates) and girls (who can miss out on the advantages of STEM careers). There is also a need for better guidance counseling in middle school.

DiPrete cites an excellent example of clarity of pathways leading to a specific educational goal. He states that if a boy hopes to play varsity basketball in high school, he has to start preparing in middle school. He cannot expect to start playing basketball in his junior year of high school and expect to have any chance of

making the varsity team.

Yet neither students nor teachers have a good understanding of how much work they have to do to succeed educationally; it is hard for them to calibrate their efforts. Increased knowledge would help.

Buchmann and DiPrete say they are supportive of President Obama's call for national pre-K enrollment because research shows that the advantage that girls have in social and behavioral skills is developed in their early years. Additionally, there are socioeconomic gaps where children learn pre-literacy skills, such as paying attention and interacting with others at a very young age.

President Obama's proposal would address challenges of combining work and family, when young couples quickly realize the cost of child care and pre-school education in this country. This is when some of the real hard choices have to be made that limit the human capital of highly educated men and women. ■

