



Responding to the Needs of Gifted Boys

*A Position Statement of the
Minnesota Educators of the Gifted and Talented (MEGT)*

Purpose:

Gifted boys are found in all age, socioeconomic, racial, and cultural groups. They have distinctive cognitive and affective needs that are evident from early on. Comparisons on state, national, and international achievement measures show males are falling behind when compared to females. There needs to be purposeful programming in order to meet their needs, to develop their potential and increase achievement. The goal of this paper is to provide research supported recommendations to classroom teachers and coordinators as they interact with and teach gifted males.

The issue

Boys, including gifted boys, are underachieving in K-12 school systems. On the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores in 2002, boys were seven percentage points below females in reading in Grade 4 and nine percentage points in Grade 8. Kerr and Colangelo, et al, 1993, found that extreme underachievers are 90% boys. Research shows females receive higher grades than males. On the High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE), 26% of male respondents said they devoted no time or only one hour per week for class preparation, compared to 14% for girls. Additional studies reinforce that males are underperforming when compared to females.

Cultural values create biased expectations for gifted boys in school. Societal pressures and stereotypes of masculinity may cause boys to hide their giftedness to conform to the ideal of the rugged, athletic, individualistic male. Gifted boys who are less interested in athletics may experience role conflict and lower self esteem in environments that do not value academic or artistic achievement. In a keynote speech on gender and genius in 2000, Barbara Kerr stated that gifted boys learn very early that if they are smart they had better be smart and athletic, as athletic ability makes intelligence acceptable.

In identifying gifted students, teachers often equate verbal skills with giftedness. As a result, gifted boys with spatial strengths may be overlooked and girls may be overrepresented in gifted programs. There are other challenges when supporting boys' education. Evidence shows that for some boys, their multi-potentiality, having strengths in a variety of areas, affects their ability to select an area of study in college and a career path, resulting in long term dissatisfaction with their chosen career.

The way in which schools are structured can contribute to gifted boys' underachievement. Physiological differences between girls and boys are ignored, and, learning style preferences are not always addressed in class instruction. Much school work depends on high verbal skills, and evidence shows that many males tend to rely on spatial reasoning rather than verbal reasoning. Parents are often encouraged to hold boys back from school entrance, and for gifted boys this general recommendation may not be appropriate. For gifted boys who are ready for an academic challenge, starting kindergarten early may be best. Additionally, according to Gentry and Neu, high energy gifted boys can be quite misunderstood and labeled as trouble makers when they express their creativity in the classroom, (1998).

Male underachievement results in more boys being identified for special education, fewer boys of color being identified for gifted programs, and boys' negative attitudes towards school. Compared to girls, boys comprise a smaller percentage of those participating in Advanced Placement (AP) courses and are outperformed by girls on AP testing (Stall, 2003). They also have higher high school dropout rates, higher grade retention rates, and are less represented in higher education, including graduate degree programs, than girls.



Recommendations:

- ✻ Provide professional development for teachers in identifying gifted learners, expanding their understanding of giftedness to go beyond verbal skills and achievement, and acknowledge that high ability may be masked by bad behavior.
- ✻ Include cognitive readiness as a priority in school entrance recommendations.
- ✻ Expand teachers' instructional strategies to address the learning styles of many gifted boys.
 - ✻ Use speaking and listening in teaching reading
 - ✻ Bring more creativity and variety to reading and writing curricula
 - ✻ Use more technology
 - ✻ Provide for a greater amount of physical activity in lessons
 - ✻ Use less lecture and more spatial and diagrammatic lessons
 - ✻ Include books high on action
 - ✻ Use bibliotherapy to address affective needs
- ✻ Provide accelerated learning in areas of interest.
- ✻ Create opportunities for gifted boys to move periodically throughout the day.
- ✻ Make a variety of co-curricular activities available to interest boys who are not athletes.
- ✻ Offer leadership training for gifted boys.
- ✻ Counsel boys to explore various career and occupation options.
- ✻ Match boys with mentors who can support them in goal setting.
- ✻ Provide gifted boys with male role models who have intellectual depth.

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