

Winter 2013

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Recommended Citation

Boudreau, E. (2013). Girls achieve, boys underachieve. *Spiritan Magazine*, 37 (1). Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-tc/vol37/iss1/5>

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Girls achieve, boys underachieve

Evan Boudreau

Education is for girls, or at least that's how the majority of young boys see it, says Jim Brown.

Brown, a graduate of Neil McNeil High School, is a former Director of Education for the Huron-Perth and the Hastings Prince Edward Catholic District School Boards. He has published his findings in *Rescuing Our Underachieving Sons*.

"Many elementary schools are entirely staffed by women and the majority of secondary school teachers are now women," said Brown. "One of the reasons for the push for affirmative action for female teachers at the secondary level was that when girls got to secondary school, they no longer identified education as something that women did because virtually all the teachers were men.

"Now that the situation is reversed, ... (boys) see education and schooling as something that little girls do."

Economic repercussions

Brown argues that this mentality will have a negative effect upon the Canadian economy. With boys lacking a gender-relevant connection to education, many will end up as basic high school graduates — if even that. The result will be many going on to high risk, low paying jobs.

There's data to support this concern, said Brown, who retired with 40 years experience as a professional educator. According to Statistics Canada — in 1972, men dominated university campuses, representing about 75% of the undergraduate student body. Fast forward to 2008 and the male undergraduate population now stands at 45%.

"The good news is we've helped girls to become achievers. The bad news is the unintended consequences that we've driven boys to be underachievers — meaning that they are not achieving to their potential," said Brown. "Once you've discouraged boys from pursuing advanced education, you now lose that pool of talent. It has economic repercussions for the whole country just as not educating girls had in the past."

To highlight these repercussions Brown points to veterinary medicine, a field once almost entirely dominated by men, but now almost exclusively pursued by women. Brown stressed that the problem isn't that women are being employed in a

non-traditional field, rather, they are changing the traditional role of that profession.

The traditional role of veterinarians was to assist farmers with the health of their livestock, such as birthing calves with average birth-weight between 30 and 45 kilograms. But female veterinarians tend to shy away from such work, preferring to work on smaller domestic pets. Thus, the number of livestock health care specialists has decreased. By applying the rule of supply and demand it is easy to see that fewer livestock veterinarians means higher costs for farmers, leading to higher prices for their commodities, which are in turn passed on at the supermarket checkout.



“The problem is fixable — but we need to start now to see a change 15 years from now.”

While females are encouraged to take on non-traditional roles, even by Brown, boys are not awarded the same support which is why they tend to flood those high risk, lower paying jobs where job security is scarce.

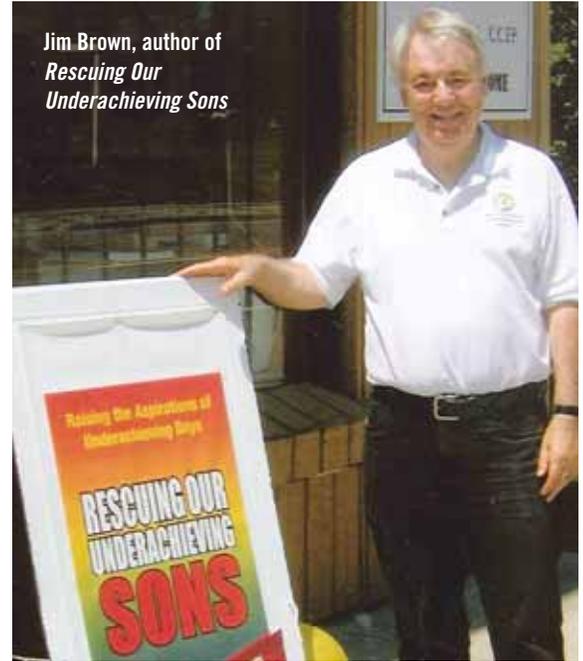
A fixable problem

“Girls have always been encouraged to engage in boy activities, but boys have always been laughed at if they engaged in girl activities,” he said.

But it’s not an irreversible trend, said Brown.

“The problem is fixable — but we need to start now to see a change 15 years from now. We need to start helping parents make minor changes in what they do that will help children before they go to school. Then we need to do something a little different when they arrive at school — not phenomenally different, and then that needs to continue through the school system.”

For parents, Brown said the answer is simple. Buy their sons books, not hockey sticks and basketballs. He said boys



Jim Brown, author of *Rescuing Our Underachieving Sons*

arrive at school on average six months behind the reading level of their female counterparts — a direct correlation to the number of books parents buy their daughters compared to their sons — about ten times more for girls. He added that parents also tend to read more frequently to their daughters, which develops a bond between child and books.

Only one response

Since publishing the book in August 2011, Brown has tried to get it into the hands of every Director of Education in the Catholic system, as well as distribute supplementary material to the Catholic Supervisory Officers and other Board staff with the cost coming out of his own pocket. The only response came from the Dufferin-Peel Board.

He has also attempted to contact Trustees Associations to have them acknowledge the issue. But Brown said he has been rebuked, hearing that it was not part of their mandate.

“The difficulty I have is getting in the door. As a former educator the tendency is to say we don’t have a problem ... and if we do we can solve it,” he said. “That worries me a bit from the point of view of a social justice issue. I have not had a lot of success with the Catholic Boards. However, when I talk to the Public School Boards ... I get calls back from the directors saying, ‘We’d be happy to have you work with our schools.’”

A possible reason for this, Brown believes, is that many of those holding high-ranking positions at the Catholic School Boards were employed during the period of affirmative action. Thus they are unlikely to now admit that a program they supported, and because of which possibly received a job, needs to be fixed. ■

Courtesy of *Catholic Register*.

