



Building on Strengths:

Helping Boys Succeed in Portland Public Schools

Prepared by Howard Hiton, M.S., L.P.C.

On Behalf of Portland Public Schools



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Introduction

Is there anyone who has never been inspired by the sheer energy and zest for life that a playful boy embodies? At their best, boys combine vitality, courage, and compassion with a casual and carefree approach to life. In a school setting, boys have many assets. Educators value their self-confidence, problem-solving skills, and direct communication style. Their competitive nature can be an invaluable asset in promoting group and self-improvement.

Yet, at the same time, boys and their relationship to school violence and poor academic performance are a topic of concern for schools around the country. Educators are asking how to help more boys succeed in school; how to increase boys' connection to people in schools; and how to stem the tide of school violence. This document explores research from education, gender studies, psychology, and developmental psychology in an effort to touch on the major themes affecting boys' lives. It is my hope that this work will serve as a starting point for further dialogue among Portland Public Schools personnel and lead to improvements in Portland Public Schools.

As in the rest of the United States, too many boys in Portland Public Schools appear to be having trouble thriving in school. Among the most telling district statistics for the 1999-2000 school year are the following:

- Sixty-seven percent of students in special education classes were male.
- Seventy percent of middle and high school students receiving discipline referrals were male.
- Only 88 percent of male high-school seniors graduated compared with 94 percent of female seniors. For individual high schools, the difference between male and female graduation rates was as high as 22 percent.

Certainly some boys are at higher risk for problems than others. Young men of color, for instance, show even more cause for concern than boys as a whole. It is beyond the scope of this short paper to address the many important cultural risk factors that individual boys must face. However, many of the challenges that boys face are universal, including difficulty forming relationships and pressure toward a skewed definition of masculinity. This paper focuses on broad steps that schools can take to help all boys. It also provides some references for material dealing more directly with the intersections of gender, race, and socioeconomic status.

In addition, while there is much overlap between boys and girls, the truth remains that boys and girls are different. Many of their challenges are different, as are the intervention strategies to which they will respond. In fact, a gender specific approach to improving girls' academic performance has already benefited female students. Such success breeds hope that strategies aimed specifically at boys can also work.

Recent advances in brain research confirm that boys' brains have structural differences compared to girls' brains, and that these differences affect how boys learn and relate. Schools must acknowledge the role that biology plays in boys' difficulties with language skills, challenges with emotional expression, variations in aggression control, and in their need for movement. "Many aspects of American schools are not sympathetic to boys," writes Harvard Medical School pediatrician Eli Newberger. "Their robust behavior, physicality and translation of anxiety into inattention is frequently pathologized and demonized" (Newcomb 2000).

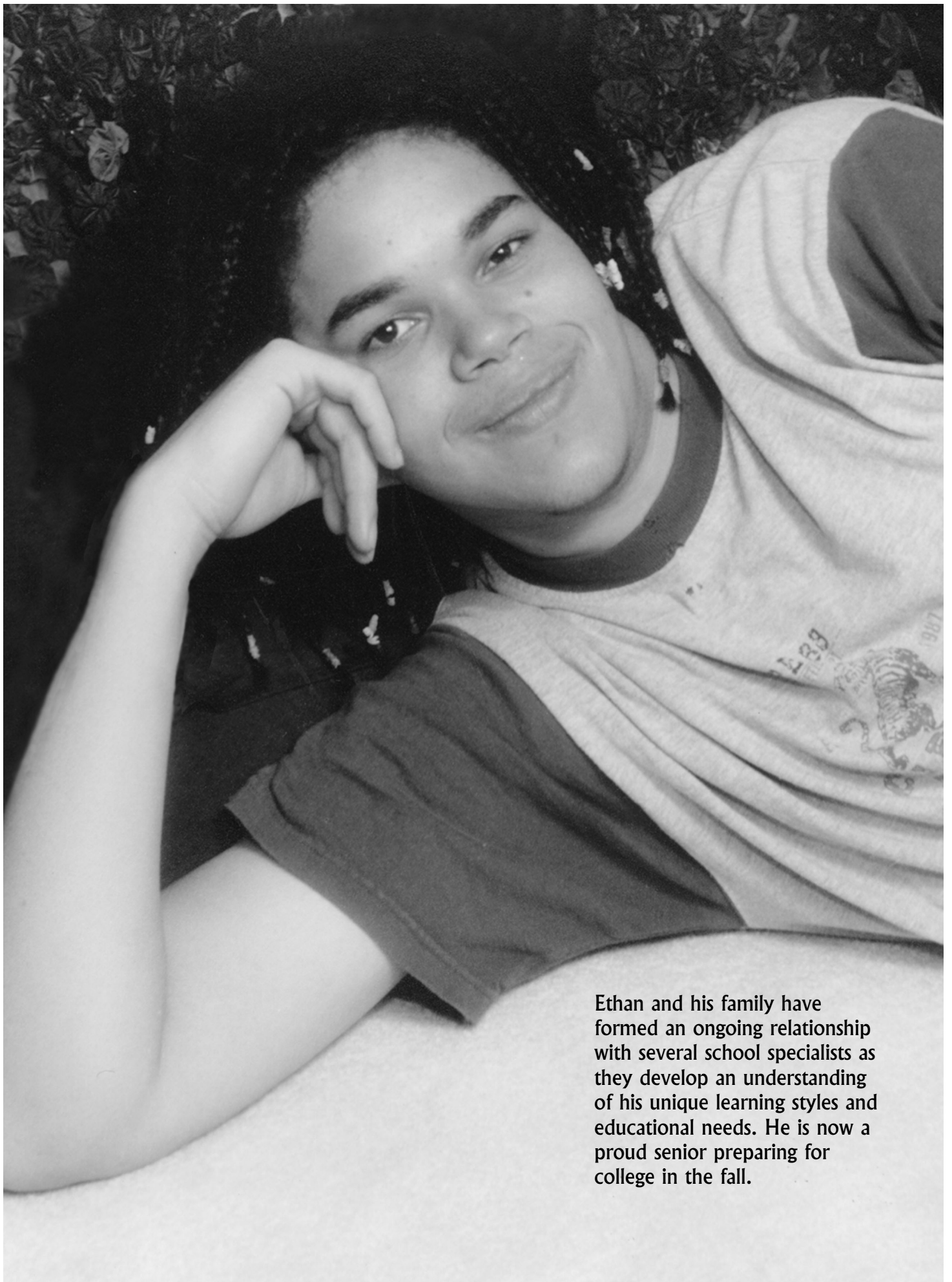
Layered upon boys' physical and biological nature is enormous social pressure to conform to a narrow definition of masculinity, a pressure often applied by teasing or bullying. This social pressure, frequently in the form of homophobia and perpetuated by the shortage of positive adult male role models in many boys' lives, makes it challenging for boys to develop a healthy sense of male identity.

Together these social and biological factors inhibit the ability of boys to form and maintain relationships. Yet, research shows that relationships form the foundation for social and academic learning.

Schools must address all of these factors if they want to make education more welcoming and effective for boys. This report explores some promising approaches for doing that including:

- Efforts to encourage boys' feeling of connection to school.
- Classroom approaches that cater to boys' strengths.
- Policies and programs intended to improve boys' behavior.
- Programs that encourage men to participate more in boys' lives.

In his book *Real Boys*, William Pollack (1998) writes that, "Boys will thrive at school if there is a pervasive sense that they are welcome, that they are liked, and that who they *really* are—and how they *really* enjoy learning—will be embraced in a genuine way by their teachers" (p. 248).



Ethan and his family have formed an ongoing relationship with several school specialists as they develop an understanding of his unique learning styles and educational needs. He is now a proud senior preparing for college in the fall.

Needs Assessment

How bad is the problem for boys in public school? Statistics from Portland Public Schools and national surveys indicate that they are struggling. Boys account for the majority of discipline and academic problems, and their success rate in high school and higher education is rapidly declining. In addition, boys are more often involved in violence, crime, alcohol, and drug use than girls. They also have a higher incidence of many mental health problems, which likely contributes to their academic woes. Local and national statistics indicate that this is a multi-faceted problem in need of a broad-based intervention strategy.

Boys' Academic Progress

According to Portland Public Schools' data for the 1999-2000 school year:

- Eighty-eight percent of male high-school seniors graduated, compared with 94 percent of female seniors. For individual high schools, the difference between male and female rates was as high as 22 percent.
- Boys received 70 percent of middle-school discipline referrals.
- Boys received 73 percent of high-school discipline referrals.
- Boys represented about 67 percent of students receiving special education services.

Portland statistics are not unrepresentative. National statistics look startlingly similar:

- Boys constitute up to 76 percent of special education classes.

Snyder, Huffman, and Geddes 1997

- Boys receive 71 percent of all school suspensions.

Pollack 1998

- More boys than girls report dropping out of school because of suspension or expulsion.

U.S. Department of Justice 1999

- Eighth-grade boys are 50 percent more likely than girls to be held back a grade.

Pollack 1998

- For the last 13 years, girls have significantly outscored boys on tests of reading and writing.

U.S. Department of Education 1997

- Boys now represent the minority of college graduates. Although boys received about 57 percent of the bachelor's degrees awarded by U.S. colleges and universities in 1970, by 1996 that percent had dropped to just under 50 percent. The National Center for Education Statistics predicts that by 2008 the proportion will drop further to about 42 percent and that, if the trend continues, the last male to be awarded a bachelor's degree will receive it in the spring of 2067.

Mortenson 1998

- Of students describing themselves as "alienated" in a 1998 survey of 1,195 students conducted by the Horatio Alger Association, 70 percent were male.

Kleinfeld 1999

Boys and Crime

- Boys represented 93 percent of juvenile homicide offenders between 1980 and 1997.

U.S. Department of Justice 1999

- One fourth of boys aged 16 to 17 reported that they had initiated at least one serious violent crime, compared with five percent of girls the same age.

Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention 1998

- Boys were involved in 74 percent of person, property, and public-order cases handle by the courts in 1996, and in 86 percent of drug law violations.

U.S. Department of Justice 1999

- Males accounted for 86 percent of juveniles in residential placement in 1997.

U.S. Department of Justice 1999

Boys and School Safety

According to the “Indicators of School Crime and Safety” survey published in 2000, and conducted by the U.S. Department of Justice over the years 1993, 1995 and 1997:

- Boys were more likely than girls to report being injured or threatened with a weapon on school property. Additionally, boys were more likely than girls to have brought a weapon to school.
- Boys were more likely to have been in a fight on school property. In 1997, for example, 46 percent of boys said they had been in a fight within the last 12 months, and 20 percent said they had been in a fight on school property. In contrast, only about 26 percent of girls reported that they had been in a fight, and nine percent said that they had been in a fight on school property.
- Boys were more likely than girls to have been bullied in sixth and seventh grades.
- Boys were more likely than girls to report being victims of theft or deliberate property damage on school property.

Boys' Health, Mental Health and Substance Abuse

- Obstetrical complications, including spontaneous abortion and birth trauma, are almost twice as common among male fetuses as female fetuses.
Nass 1999
- Dyslexia and autism are four times more common among males than females.
Nass 1999
- Boys are more apt than girls to display virtually every neuro-developmental and psychiatric disorder of childhood.
Nass 1999
- Boys account for 80 percent of youth suicides.
U.S. Department of Justice 1999
- Boys have a far higher rate of Attention Deficit Disorder than girls with male to female ratios ranging from 4:1 to 9:1 depending on the setting.
American Psychiatric Association 1994
- Boys have a far higher rate of Conduct Disorder and Expressive Learning Disorders.
American Psychiatric Association, 1994
- Mental Retardation is fifty percent more common in boys than girls.
American Psychiatric Association 1994
- Young men represent 76 percent of binge drinkers.
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 1997
- In surveys from 1993 and 1997, boys were more likely than girls to report using alcohol on and off school property.
U.S. Bureau of Justice 2000
- In surveys from 1993, 1995 and 1997, boys were more likely than girls to report marijuana use on and off school property.
U.S. Bureau of Justice 2000
- Boys were more likely than girls to report that drugs were offered, sold, or given to them on school property.
U.S. Bureau of Justice 2000

Boys and Assets

The Search Institute, a nationally recognized leader in the field of positive youth development, created the framework of developmental assets. In this framework, forty assets represent a common core of developmental building blocks identified as crucial to the success of children. Examples of assets include family support, interpersonal competence, and sense of purpose. The framework provides a way to assess the health and well being of middle and high-school-aged youth.

The Search Institute states that, “Ideally, all youth would experience at least 31 of 40 assets” (2001, website). However, in national surveys of almost 100,000 young people, only five percent of boys and ten percent of girls experienced more than 30 assets. Further, only 30 percent of boys and 45 percent of girls reported experiencing more than 21 assets.

Locally, in 1997, the Search Institute surveyed more than 10,000 Multnomah County youth. “Time for Success,” a Search Institute report on this survey (1997), found “striking differences in the support that girls and boys experience” (p. 15). Following is a sample of the results of that survey that diverged most by gender.

Commitment to Learning

- Fifty-five percent of boys, compared with 68 percent of girls, reported that they are motivated to do well in school.
- Forty-four percent of boys, compared with 54 percent of girls, reported doing at least one hour of homework every day.
- Twenty-seven percent of boys, compared with 36 percent of girls, reported reading for pleasure at least three or more hours per week.

Positive Values

- Forty-two percent of boys, compared with 59 percent of girls, said they value caring for others.
- Forty-seven percent of boys, compared with 64 percent of girls, indicated that they value promoting equality.
- Sixty-four percent of boys reported acting on their convictions and standing up for their beliefs, compared with 76 percent of girls.
- Thirty-two percent of boys reported that they seek nonviolent methods to resolve conflicts, compared with 76 percent of girls.

Youth Feel Empowered and Valued by the Community

- Forty-seven percent of boys reported offering at least one hour of community service per week, compared with 58 percent of girls.

Constructive Use of Time

- Eighteen percent of boys, compared with 25 percent of girls, said that they spent at least three hours per week in a creative activity such as music, theater, or art.

Positive Identity

Interestingly, although males report fewer assets than females, they perceive themselves more positively.

- Fifty-six percent of boys reported having high self-esteem, compared with 45 percent of girls.
- Fifty-nine percent of boys reported that their life has a sense of purpose, compared with 50 percent of girls.

Boys and Biology

Before looking at ways to support boys in schools, developmental and biological differences that make boys unique must be considered. In this section, biological factors, such as hormones and brain structure, that predispose boys and young men toward certain learning and relationship styles will be considered.

A boy's learning is not determined solely by his genes. However, to a greater or lesser degree, all boys have certain traits and tendencies that the environment then influences through such factors as socialization, culturalization, and the realities of socioeconomic status. As Doreen Kimura (1999) says in *Sex and Cognition*, "Genetic predispositions cannot operate in a vacuum, and environments must have a genetic code to work on. In other words, there can be no explanation that rules out either environment or genetic influences" (p. 4).

In recent years, researchers have learned a lot about genetic influences that shape boys. For several decades it was fashionable to argue that any differences between boys and girls were socially conditioned. Today's theorists argue that gender-specific brain development and hormones such as testosterone predispose boys to certain personality traits and learning styles that differ from those of girls. Simply put, although both boys and girls tend to thrive in a visual, hands-on, active learning environment, girls find greater ease in the more traditional, verbal-learning style common to most school settings.

This traditional setting puts boys at a disadvantage. As Pierce Howard (2000) writes in *The Owner's Manual for the Brain*, "The typical school curriculum from kindergarten through adult education is biased toward the female learner with a predominance of oral and verbal methods and a minimum of visual and hands-on methods. In this environment, the female Talker finds it easier to excel than the male Doer" (p. 235).

Hormones

One factor that leads boys toward "doing" over "talking" is their higher level of testosterone. Boys' testosterone levels rise sharply between the ages of eleven and thirteen. By age fourteen, testosterone levels peak at about an 800 percent increase over the levels found in toddlers. The effect of this dramatic hormonal shift varies from boy to boy. However, researchers have pinpointed some overall trends. Eli Newberger (1999), in *The Men They Will Become*, describes some of the major effects of testosterone this way:

The effect of testosterone can be seen in various behavior patterns characteristic of boys: the search for activities, from sports to sex, in which the body builds up physical tension and then releases the tension climactically; relatively short attention spans as the boy moves

from one activity or focus to another; and the tendency to explore the problem-solving tasks in any situation—often neglecting to explore the accompanying emotional situation—and to lose interest and patience if the problem can't be solved fairly quickly . . . (p. 44)

Testosterone also contributes to the more competitive nature of many boys in other tasks. Obviously, all of these tendencies have important implications for classroom settings.

In addition to having higher testosterone levels than girls, boys also have lower levels of the aggression-inhibiting neurotransmitter serotonin. Researchers believe that, together, these differences help explain why boys show higher a tendency toward action, impulsiveness, and even aggression. Although it is important to note that this tendency does not mandate, *or excuse*, hurtful, abusive, or violent behavior; boys often enjoy a rougher, more competitive play style than girls.

Some malign testosterone as the cause of all that is bad about being male. In fact, testosterone benefits boys and men when channeled constructively. It generates vitality, physical strength, and agility. It can even contribute to a boy's desire to better himself.

The effects of hormones on behavior are real. The boy with a high level of testosterone needs firm limits more than most children do. At the same time, he also feels a strong need to be treated fairly. That can be a difficult line for parents and teachers to walk. Both must understand and consider the importance of channeling such energy in positive directions, if they hope to improve boys' achievement in schools.

Boys' Brains

Not only do boys have a unique balance of hormones, they also have a unique brain construction that seems to shape how they learn and relate. Although brain development experts are just beginning to understand some of the differences between the male and female brain, what they have found suggests an explanation of gender differences often apparent in the classroom.

For example, researchers find that the corpus callosum, a bundle of nerves connecting the left and right hemispheres of the brain, is larger in girls. This provides girls with better communication between the two sides of the brain. This means that the right side of the brain, working with spatial relationships, and the left side of the brain, involved with language, work together more efficiently in a girl's brain than in a boy's brain. Many researchers believe that this efficiency improves girls' aptitude for language-related skills, and that it contributes to their greater comfort with complex social and emotional communication. Research has specifically shown that girls have a higher aptitude for sensing emotional responses in others. This is a significant issue, because the issue of empathy development is central to many violence

prevention programs (Begley 1995).

Although boys have a smaller corpus callosum than girls, they have a more enriched right hemisphere. Many researchers believe that this is the reason that boys tend to excel at spatial skills. For example, boys show a much greater interest in spatial tasks, such as manipulating objects like blocks to see how they take up space. This spatial orientation probably contributes to boys' greater need for more physical space and movement.

In *The Wonder of Boys*, Michael Gurien (1997) describes implications of the brain differences between boys and girls in this way:

The boy's brain tries to recreate itself in the outside worlds by creating and playing games—like basketball and football, etc.—that fill large spaces and challenge the male brain to hone its skills at moving objects through space. The girl's brain tries to recreate itself in the outside worlds by creating situations and playing game—like house, doll life, imagined community life—that use lots of verbal skills, require lots of one on one communication between actors and involve overtly complex emotional behavior . . . (p.16)

It is important not to over-emphasize brain differences. Experts stress that the differences are slight for most people; that they only produce behavioral tendencies; that the tendencies don't apply to every person; and that, most importantly, such small differences should not be used as an excuse to apply limitations to either sex. In the big picture, there are many more similarities of neuro-cognitive abilities between boys and girls than differences.

Nonetheless, teachers should be well educated about these tendencies, because they can be significant factors in better understanding both boys and girls in their learning environment. As William Pollack (1998) writes in *Real Boys*:

Fortunately, some educators “get it.” Some educators understand that boys learn differently than girls and that if boys' unique needs are properly addressed, boys will be able to catch up in areas like reading and writing and rediscover their confidence as learners . . . (p. 248)

How Boys are Socialized

Nurture goes hand-in-hand with nature in influencing boys' behaviors and personalities. From early childhood, the media, popular culture, schools, and often even families barrage boys with a narrow, one-dimensional image of masculinity, devoid of traits that might be construed as feminine.

Pollack (1998) refers to the process by which boys are pushed to distance themselves from feminine traits as the "boy code." This process starts early, leading many young boys to separate too soon from the maternal attachments critical for healthy development. Then, the boy code of popular culture tells boys that to be a "real man" they must be unemotional, athletic, aggressive, tough, cool, and not care too much. Boys and young men who step outside this narrow definition of masculinity may be teased and ridiculed.

Boys that are called hurtful names that challenge their masculinity—names like girl, mama's boy, or fag—may redouble their efforts at appearing tough to "prove" their manliness. Many are willing to fight over being called such names. The interesting result of such reactive, antisocial behaviors is that boys are then rewarded for their toughness. Research suggests that peers perceive boys' antisocial behaviors as positive attempts toward a masculine self-image. In contrast, antisocial girls become marginalized (Adler, Kless, and Adler 1992).

Teasing is a significant socializing pressure for boys and a major factor for schools to consider in efforts to serve boys better. One of the driving forces behind this teasing is homophobia, which, as described here, is more than simply a "fear of homosexuality." Rather, as it plays out in the lives of many boys, homophobia represents disdain for any trait or action that may appear feminine. In a keynote address at a Wellesley College conference on gender equity, Michael Thompson describes homophobia as a "force stronger than gravity in the lives of adolescent males" (Flood and Shaffer 2000).

Schools must support boys to resist this force. As Craig Flood and Susan Shaffer (2000) assert, "School safety is, in part, dependent on our ability to create safe and supportive school communities in which boys can explore and construct alternative views of masculinity." Schools can do this by encouraging a wider array of masculine identities and by taking an active stand against teasing and homophobic comments. Many authorities believe that, to be successful, such an effort must involve adult men; boys become the men they look to as models.

The boy code perpetuates teasing and bullying in another way. It tells young men to devalue relationships. This, in turn, leads to boys who are disconnected from family, friends, and mentors, and who fail to develop empathy for others. Lacking empathy, boys and young men are enabled to hurt people with whom they feel no connection. The end result of this reluctance to form relationships is a subclass of boys who wander school hallways feeling disconnected from the school community and distant from adults and other students at school.

Relationships and connection to school are central to a student's success. One of the challenges that schools confront is to find ways to develop relationships with boys who feel forced to appear indifferent. In *I Don't Want To Talk About It*, Terrance Real (1997) writes, "If traditional socialization takes aim at girls' voices, it takes aim at boys' hearts" (p. 146). Schools must create safe places to allow boys, in ways that fit their communication styles, to develop connections and be real with each other.

In addition to contributing to a climate of violence and detached young men, the boy code sells an anti-intellectual stance. In research on popularity in elementary schools, Adler, Kless, and Adler (1992) found that "boys were accorded popularity and respect for distancing themselves from deference to authority and investment in academic effort." In another study, of suspended high school students, researchers found that boys who were failing mathematics were more disconnected from school. They concluded that the boys were withdrawing from school to protect their egos from the embarrassment of failure, a form of self-handicapping. For these boys, it was better not to try, than to try and fail (Hay 2000). This pressure to preserve an image of superiority, even if it means failing at school and causing trouble, in part explains the lack of effort that many educators see in their male students.

Vanquishing the boy code begins with educating boys and girls about the socialization processes to which they are subjected. In an example from across the Pacific, the Australian Parliamentary Inquiry on Boys' Education proposed that public schools include gender relations in their core subject matter (Connell 1996). Such a curriculum could not only expose boys to the limitations of the boy code, but could also allow them to see the potential for a broader, more well-rounded, and self-actualized identity. From that, we might hope to see boys and young men who are less violent, more connected to school, and more engaged in academics.

Boys and Culture

The third layer affecting boys' development is culture. In fact, what is socially defined as masculine varies from culture to culture, especially when culture is defined to include ethnicity, race, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation. For example, the challenges of a young, heterosexual, African-American boy of low socioeconomic status are likely to differ significantly from the challenges of a homosexual Asian-American boy in a foreign-language community.

Obviously, the topic of culture and its intersection with gender is expansive and complex. As stated in the introduction, it is beyond the scope of this paper. This section can only briefly introduce a few ways in which cultural factors influence a boy's success in education. It also provides a list of resources that the reader may find helpful in exploring aspects of this important topic.

Cultural values and community expectations influence the way a boy approaches education. The ways that a boy's community has historically interacted with schools may be very influential. For example, a boy may be skeptical about the usefulness of school if many men in his community did not succeed in school; or if they did succeed, but were unable to gain in occupational status based on the level of their education due to racial or socioeconomic prejudices. Additionally, both individually experienced racism and institutionally embedded racism will affect the role education plays for boys. If a boy's experience at school is an extension of the prejudice and discrimination he feels in the larger world, a young boy may feel alienated from school or question its value altogether.

Extensive research by psychologist Claude Steele (1998, 1999) demonstrates that prejudice-fueled stereotypes have a strong influence on boys' academic performance. For example, if African-American boys are told that, in general, African-American boys do poorly on a particular test, their performance tends to mirror that expectation. If the same boys are told that research finds no cultural bias in the test, their performance tends to be much higher. Steele's research has significant implications for education. The reader is encouraged to investigate his recommendations for dealing with this issue (1999).

A boy's ethnic and racial background also influences his development of a positive sense of identity. Interventions tailored to increase a boy's sense of cultural identity may improve his academic success and strengthen his relationships.

Another critical cultural issue is sexual orientation. The isolation and lack of community support that boys questioning their sexual identity may feel are important. In addition to isolation, these youth also face the very real threat of physical and psychological violence.

Indeed, the intersection of gender with race, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation is complex. Craig Flood, of the Gender and Diversities Institute says, "The trick in considering gender equity is not to ignore the other major factors in anyone's life while also acknowledging

the extent to which gender expectations transcend those variables to some degree” (Education Development Center’s on-line discussion group).

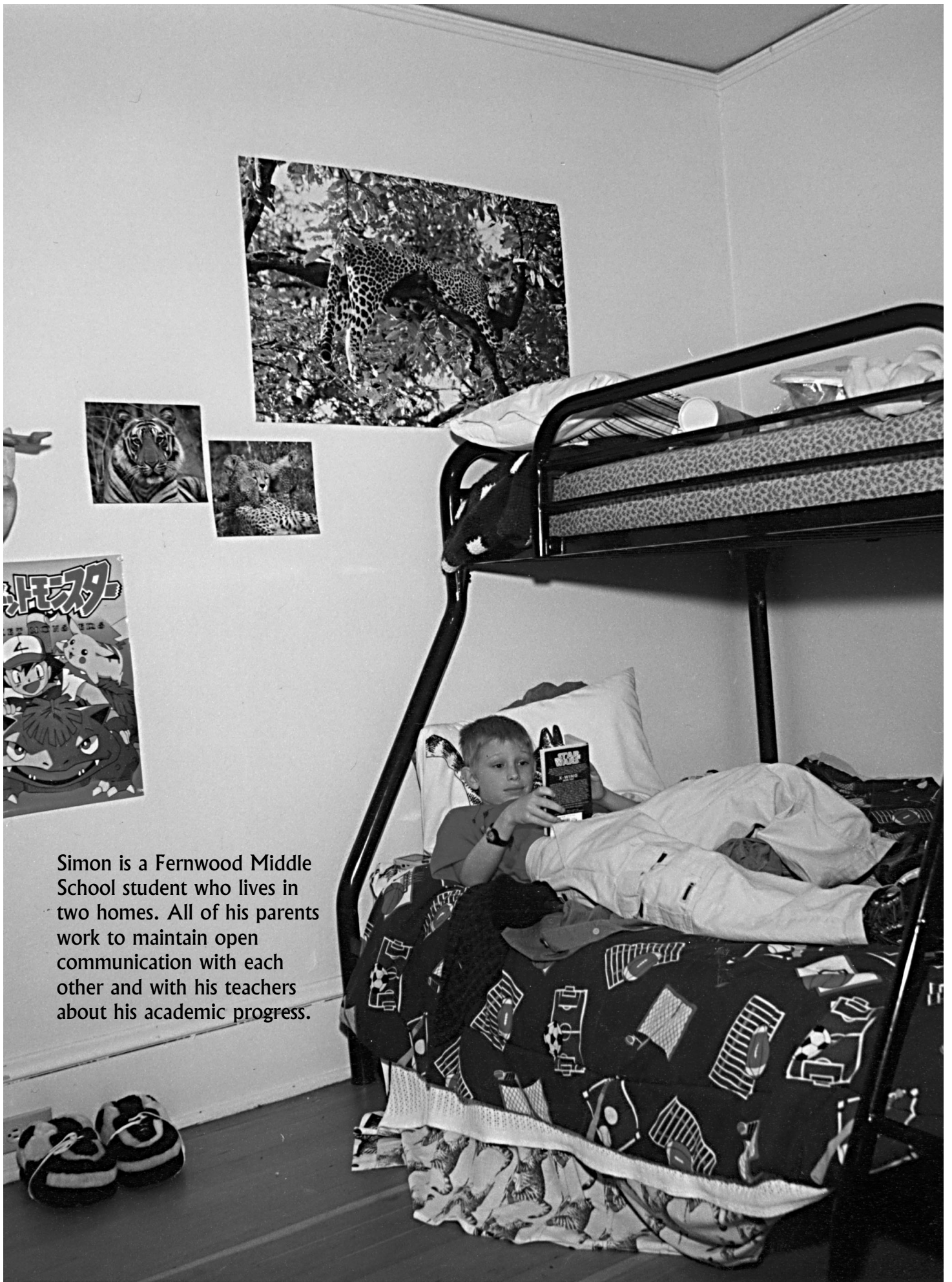
Numerous publications have addressed the influence of culture on education. The following resources should stimulate thought for those interested in tailoring culturally specific programs for boys:

- As early as 1988, Portland Public Schools produced a report entitled, “Increasing the Achievement of Black Male Students.” It lays out data supporting the challenges of young black males in Portland Public Schools, and discusses the connections between poverty and academic achievement. The report advocates multicultural education, rites of passage, mentoring programs, community involvement, and high academic standards. This is still excellent and relevant reading.
- From Australia comes Rob and Pam Gilbert’s *Masculinity Goes to School* (1998), which examines how societal definitions of masculinity influence boys’ experience in school. The reading is mostly philosophical, but offers a few practical suggestions; and does a good job of exploring the intersection of race, class, and sexual orientation with gender.
- *Why Boys Don’t Talk and Why We Care*, by Susan Morris Shaffer and Linda Perlman Gordon (2000), contains a thoughtful section focusing on boys of color.
- *Gender Issues in Education*, by Herbert and Suzanne Grossman (1994), examines gender equity in the classroom. In addition to offering classroom strategies, it provides self-quizzes that could be used to generate teacher dialogue about class, gender, and race.
- *Beating The Odds: Raising Academically Successful African Americans*, by Freeman Hrabowski (1998), investigates the factors that help African-American males succeed in college, emphasizing familial influences.
- The California Department of Education has produced a series of workbooks designed for adolescent boys from varying cultural backgrounds. The series includes titles such as *Visions Program: Career Guidance and Life Management for African American Males*; *Encuentros: Hombre a Hombre*, for Latino males; and *Generations* for Native-American males. (For more information about this series, call 800-995-4099.)
- The video *Tough Guise*, by Media Education Foundation, features violence prevention educator Jackson Katz. It examines the relationship between popular culture and masculine identity, focusing on how media equates masculinity with violence. It also provocatively explores the connection between race and gender. (For more information, call 800-897-0089.)

- Existing culturally specific programs for boys and young men have led the way in using rites-of-passage models. Locally, Bridge Builders in Portland, Oregon, is an excellent example of a culturally based rites-of-passage program for young African-American men. It focuses on four areas: spirituality, scholarship, entrepreneurship, and community-building. (For more information, call Kevin Fuller at 503-305-2960 x 9.)
- In Houston, Texas, the Minority Male Initiative, a product of the Houston Independent School District, combines a life-skills class with a mentoring program that matches adult minority men with minority students. The program is designed in such a way that the mentoring meetings support lessons from the life-skills class. (For more information, call Gail Revis at 713-892-6800.)

Strategies

This section outlines four main strategies that schools can follow to better support boys. In overview, the strategies address ways to connect boys to schools, to create boy-centered learning opportunities, to address boys' behavior problems, and to involve more men as role models and mentors. All of these strategies build on an understanding of the biological, social, and cultural issues influencing the development of boys in order to capitalize on their unique strengths and learning styles.



Simon is a Fernwood Middle School student who lives in two homes. All of his parents work to maintain open communication with each other and with his teachers about his academic progress.

Keeping Boys Connected to Schools

A large national longitudinal study of adolescent health, the Add Health Project, found that students who feel connected to school have better mental health and are less likely to engage in risky behavior. In addition, the study linked students' relationships within the school environment to their academic progress, attendance, attitudes, motivation, and post-high-school success (Oregon Department Of Education 2000). Over and over again, other research also shows that students with a strong connection to school—those who feel close to teachers and fellow classmates, and who feel “part” of the school—are more successful both in school and after graduation.

Although all students benefit from a strong connection to school, building the relationships critical to that connection can be more difficult with boys for reasons already discussed. Boys often put on a façade, acting as if people do not matter to them. Unfortunately, many adults allow boys to drift away because they can't see beyond this false front. They presume that boys are as self-reliant as they appear. Nothing could be further from the truth. Connecting boys to school begins with recognizing that even boys hunger for meaningful relationships with adults who like and understand them.

A striking example of this hunger comes from a *Chicago Sun Times* article (2000) about Luke Woodham, who killed his mother and two students in Pearl, Mississippi, when he was 16 years old. The article quotes him as saying, “I think adults should bond more with their students ...Talk to them...It doesn't have to be about anything, just talk to them.” When asked how he would have responded if someone had tried to talk with *him*, Woodham replied, “Well, it would have took some time before I'd opened up. If we kept talking...I would have...said everything that was going on.”

Many young people feel unsafe being personally vulnerable with others in school. Boys especially often withdraw and close up within the fast pace of school days and in response to a cultural environment that does not promote or support open displays of male affection. When schools do create safe places for boys to develop relationships, the boys can flourish. An excellent local example in Portland, Oregon, is Marshall High School's School-Based Health Center. A young men's group held in the center after school hours maintains consistent attendance, attracting boys who might otherwise be disenfranchised from school. The clinic's success is due, in part, to its welcoming environment that includes the presence of both male and female staff willing to actively listen to students, the availability of snacks, and opportunities for positive activities.

Once boys have safe places to communicate, they need adults that know how to communicate with them. Pollack (1998) in his book *Real Boys* and Shaffer and Gordon (2000) in *Why Boys Don't Talk and Why We Care* provide excellent ideas for adults interested in forging

relationships with boys. First and foremost, they emphasize that boys feel most comfortable when communication is subtle and casual. Here are some further recommendations:

- Allow for movement in conversations with boys. Consider walking, shooting baskets, or engaging in another activity with them in order to decrease the emphasis on the communication itself.
- Hold personal conversations with boys in a safe place, away from other students, and be conscious of the risks that boys face in showing emotion. Their vulnerability to shame and ridicule for being emotionally open with others is real.
- Allow boys a way to step back from a charged situation and then return. Frequently boys and young men need time to process their feelings, in part because of brain development that makes them slower at identifying feelings and finding words to express them.

Efforts to bond students to school through relationship-building must not be kept separate from what happens in the classroom, in athletics, or in other school-sponsored events. The necessity of bonding and attachment to learning is well documented. Especially in the early grades, the brain needs relationships to learn and grow. Throughout childhood the power of emotions in relational experience promotes learning intensity, desire, motivation, and action. In his groundbreaking work, *The Growth of the Mind*, developmental psychologist Stanley Greenspan (1999) suggests that relationships are central to all learning.

The Search Institute's asset model provides further support for the central importance of relationships in a child's success. Its *Great Places to Learn* (1999) gives much practical advice on sustaining relationships from the asset-building model. Locally, Multnomah County and the Prevention Program of Portland Public Schools have begun working together to promote asset building in Portland Public Schools.

In one example, Sellwood Middle School promoted school bonding through a "Boys' Night Out" event at the school. One hundred and twenty-five students and 25 volunteer fathers spent a night at the school playing sports, eating, participating in carnival events, and taking a midnight bowling field trip. The boys and fathers loved it. By "doing" with each other, they built a sense of connection and belonging. An earlier "Girls' Night Out" was equally successful; showing that the active techniques more necessary for communicating with boys are also powerful tools for enriching communication and bonding with girls.

In many schools, sports have traditionally offered boys an active and socially approved opportunity to bond with their school and with other teammates. For those involved with athletics, the National Institute of Sports (NIS) has established a credentialing process for supporters interested in promoting positive mental health through athletics. (For more information, call NIS at 877-840-0505.) However, if sports are overemphasized, or if sports provide the only boy-friendly opportunity for boys to connect to school, boys who are not

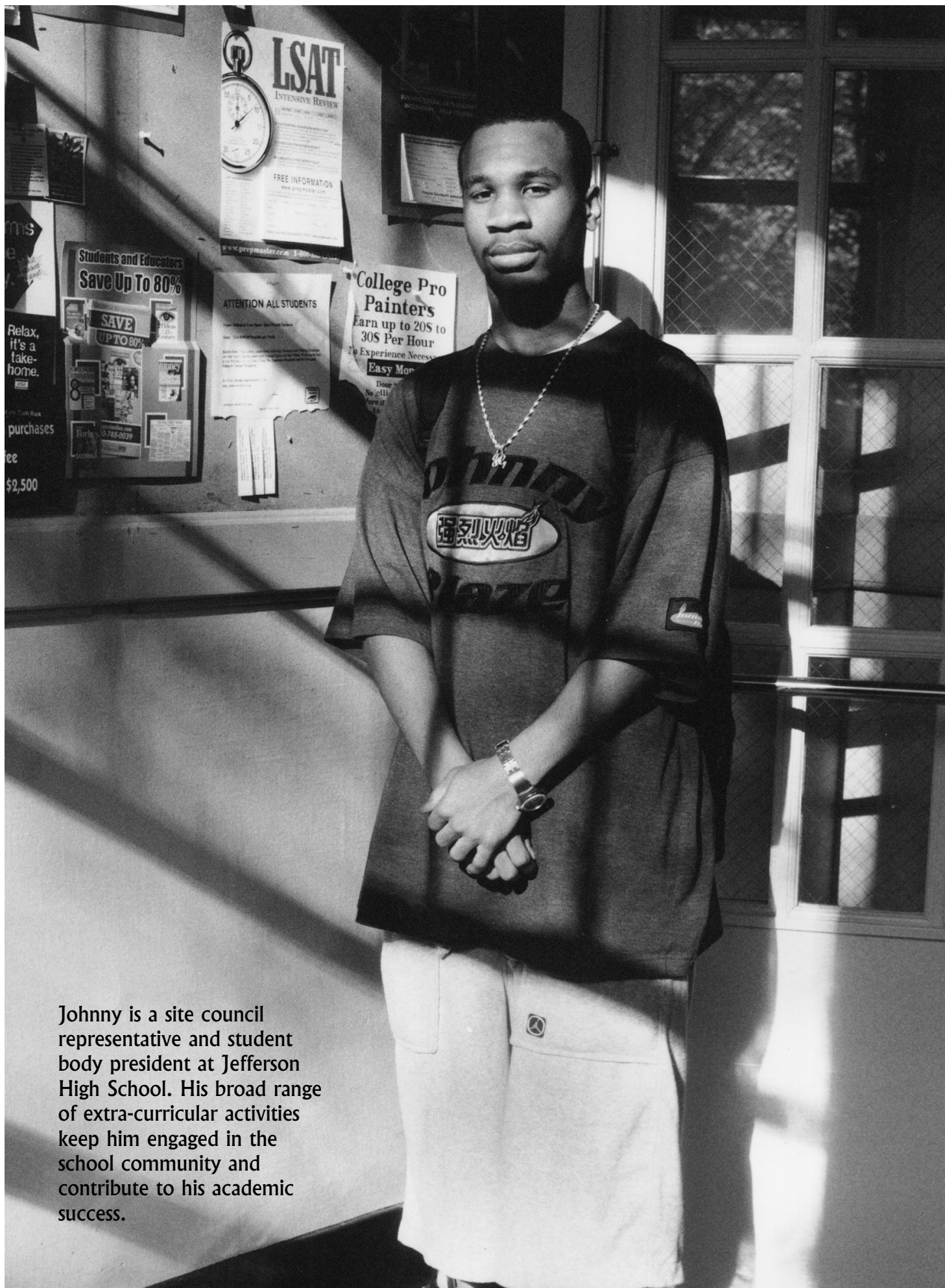
athletically gifted or inclined may experience fewer opportunities to bond with school. All boys, even the most athletic, need boy-friendly activities that make them feel that they are a welcome and important part of school culture through a variety of social activities.

Chess, band, outdoor clubs, and computer clubs are other activities that many boys enjoy, and that are often boy-friendly. Some schools have recognized that boy-friendly art activities are an excellent way to allow boys to explore a less traditionally valued part of their identity. An excellent example of a boy-friendly art club is a pottery club started for boys in an elementary school in Salem, Oregon. It's called the "Mud Club," and boys in the club are allowed to throw clay against the wall.

Any school could benefit from a review of the breadth of opportunities for extra-curricular activities that promote school bonding for both its male and female students. Some schools, seeking to augment these activities, have gone another step and created rites-of-passage opportunities to help their students form bonds with each other and their school. These programs are frequently held away from school, and may involve intellectual, personal, and/or physical challenges. For example, Jesuit High School's "Encounter" for eleventh graders is an activity that draws the participation of nearly 70 percent of eligible students. The event takes place over a three-day weekend at a retreat site. It includes activities, enhanced by discussion, intended to promote participants' self-understanding and sense of purpose. Much of the experience is in same-sex, small groups led by students and adult volunteers who have already experienced the process.

Opportunities for students to get off the school campus and see each other in unfamiliar settings also promote bonding. A very successful part of the Portland Public School middle school experience is the week of Outdoor School bonding that sixth graders experience with their classmates.

Developing a school climate that fosters connection for all students is critical to a school's academic success and to the happiness and success of its students. Boys pose particular challenges when it comes to developing relationships, but schools are discovering innovative ways to surmount the challenges.



Johnny is a site council representative and student body president at Jefferson High School. His broad range of extra-curricular activities keep him engaged in the school community and contribute to his academic success.

Boys and Learning

Along with helping boys form stronger relationships at school, teachers and administrators can help boys perform better in the classroom by addressing their unique learning and physical needs. Above all, schools must address boys' activity levels inside the classroom and the challenges that boys face with reading and writing.

Accommodating the physical activity level of boys can be challenging. Picture a first-grade boy falling out of his chair. Funny? Yes, but also disruptive for a teacher trying to keep order in a classroom. And that captures the conflict: Tightly scheduled school days that allow very little physical activity clash with restless and rambunctious boys.

The trick to overcoming this conflict is to allow for movement within the structure of the school day, even within lessons that don't immediately present themselves as "active." A teacher at the all-boys Belmont Hill School in Belmont, Massachusetts, for example, holds "walk-around" math quizzes, during which the boys move to different parts of the classroom to complete their work. Boys at Belmont Hill also get morning breaks and participate in a rigorous athletic program. Belmont Hill's headmaster, Richard Melvin, praises the active learning approach, adding that, "reducing daily activity for boys is almost criminal ... It's ignoring who boys are" (Newcomb 2000). Allowing boys to move during the school day "seems to help boys not only stimulate their brains but manage and relieve impulsive behaviors," writes Michael Gurien (2001) in *Boys and Girls Learn Differently*. It has even been suggested that fewer boys would be diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder if the school day were more active.

In a recent article, Diane Hulse, head of the middle school of an all-boys collegiate school in New York, describes another approach that achieves the same result: her school focuses on group learning. "Boys can be very competitive with each other, and we want them to develop alternative learning strategies where they're mutually supportive," she said. Using this technique, teachers offer mini-lessons during class to keep the pace quick, and then give boys the opportunity to move around, or build things, as part of the learning process. A classroom modeled on this approach allows boys the advantages of more physical activity, a pace more compatible with their attention spans, and offers more of the relationship-building experience that many boys need (Newcomb 2000).

Reading and Running

Although girls possess a biological advantage for language learning that may partially contribute to their higher reading and writing test scores, a more active classroom has the potential to allow boys to diffuse enough energy to listen better and focus more successfully on language learning. For example, reading does not always need to be a quiet, solitary experience devoid of action. An English teacher in Portland, Oregon, asks her students to march in place while reading poetry. She reports that *all* of her students are more interested and involved in

her lessons. Other teachers have learned that younger students are better able to concentrate on stories if they're allowed to draw while someone reads. Even subtle movement can absorb distracting energy and enable improved focus. Many counselors have found that boys listen better if they're allowed to handle non-disruptive objects.

Once boys are better able to concentrate in the classroom, they need engaging learning material. For many boys, that means literature with "intriguing plots, fast paced action and characters who not only catch [a boy's] interest but who mirror the life that he is living," writes Ohio University's Sam Gil (1999) in an article in the *ALAN Review*. He adds that, according to research, "boys' reading ability improves when they're introduced to Young Adult literature such as S.E. Hinton's *The Outsider*, Chris Crutcher's *Ironman*, or *Night* by Elie Weisel." Gill recommends several other titles and many libraries have lists of recommended books by age and gender.

Another way to encourage boys to read is to debunk the myth that reading is not a masculine activity. Boys need male role models that read. An Australian program, initiated by educator Deborah Mulligan, called "Real Men Read" offers male role models to its students by inviting fathers, or other significant men, into classrooms to read to students from a book or a magazine that they enjoyed as a child. After reading, the man leads a discussion about reading for enjoyment, and the importance of reading for functioning in the world. This program has been a great success, with most fathers being more than willing to move out of their comfort zone and read to a class of 30 adolescents. Additionally, teachers in the program note that these men have had another impact on the lives of the students; they often bring fresh perspectives to support current classroom lessons. (Education Development Center's on-line discussion group).

Writing Wrongs

Just as boys need to be able to read stories that engage them, they need to be able to write about topics that they enjoy. In a fascinating article in the March 2000 issue of *Language Arts*, Thomas Newkirk challenges teachers to reconsider how they evaluate boys' writing. He states that topics that attract many boys often conflict with their teachers' concept of appropriate subject matter, particularly when the writing involves violent themes. Newkirk suggests that teachers open a dialogue around the presence of violence in boys' writing and consider refining their understanding of when it should be cause for alarm.

He also advocates that teachers recognize cartooning as an important art form and narrative medium, and he encourages them to become familiar with other narrative styles of writing that boys like. Newkirk believes that any hope of engaging more boys in literature and writing depends on acknowledging the "cultural materials" that boys bring into the classroom, including an affection for parody, an interest in sports, and an interest in cartoons and video games. He adds: "The most serious mistake is viewing these preferences as pathologies, as anti-social ways of being that must be modified, or, if that is not possible, banned" (Newkirk 2000).

Boys and Behavior

Any efforts to improve boys' academic achievement must also stress social skill development and impulse control strategies, and must send the message that teasing and bullying are inappropriate and unacceptable. Boys who misbehave are disruptive to classroom learning and consume considerable school resources. (Recall that boys receive 70 percent of middle and high school discipline referrals and are much less likely than girls to use nonviolent methods to resolve their conflicts.) Misbehavior such as teasing and bullying harms efforts to create the climate of school bonding so necessary to successful learning. Fortunately, school administrators and the public alike are beginning to recognize bullying and teasing as a public health issue; recent school shootings all too frequently involve a disenfranchised, frequently-teased young man with access to a weapon. Even boys themselves are concerned. In *Real Boys*, William Pollack (1998) notes, "Of all the things boys across America are talking about, teasing, bullying, and the need to fit in figure at the top of the list" (p. 106).

Boys misbehave for a variety of reasons, including social pressure to conform to a tough masculine image and to project an "I-don't-care" attitude as a defense against poor classroom performance. Boys also engage in bullying, teasing, and other negative behaviors simply because they have, as a group, a significantly lower level of social competence than girls. For example, the Search Institute's national asset research finds that only 26 percent of boys report having the "interpersonal competence asset" which includes empathy, sensitivity, and friendship skills. In contrast, 60 percent of girls report having this asset (Starkman, Scales, and Roberts 1999).

Innovative teaching strategies, like those mentioned in the previous section, have the potential to reduce the number of boys who act out in school in reaction to performing poorly in the classroom by making the classroom more boy-friendly and academically inviting. There is also some evidence to suggest that single-sex classrooms improve behavior for both boys and girls (Pollard 1999), although the academic results for this approach are mixed.

Some boys misbehave in order to gain social status and friends, and although a certain degree of competitive talk and physical posturing is normal for boys, it can also be unhealthy. As discussed earlier, social pressure to conform to a narrow definition of masculinity often fuels excessive homophobic and misogynous teasing that is harmful to boys trying to develop a positive sense of male self. In recognition of the problem of teasing and bullying, many schools are responding by instituting policies and programs to limit this behavior. Because boys often *can* gain social status and friends through misbehavior, one of the best ways to change this behavior is through peer modeling that makes such behavior unpopular. In an example of a peer education model in Portland, Oregon, a local grass roots organization named Full Esteem Ahead brings respected high school students to talk to middle school students about the impact of teasing and other forms of relational aggression. (For more information, contact Kathy Masarie at 503-296-6748.) Other classroom activities can encourage boys to

address the challenge of being strong without being aggressive. A helpful tool to lead such a discussion is the video “Real Strength: Boys Talk About Life.” The video contains brief monologues of boys honestly sharing their personal stories about teasing, fitting in, expressing emotions, and sexual decisions. (For more information, contact Family Health Productions at 978-282-9970.)

Programs to combat teasing and bullying should also include parents, many of whom find it challenging to raise caring and respectful young men able to survive the playgrounds of elementary school and the hallways of middle school. Schools can assist these parents by teaching them methods to help their sons handle teasing and by enforcing school policies to limit these behaviors. Parents can help their child by taking the teasing seriously in a way that avoids shaming him, and by explaining the psychology of bullying behaviors to the child and emphasizing that these behaviors do not reflect on him. Parents can also help their child develop allies, and help him find something in which he can excel and through which he can gain increased self-esteem and positive recognition.

In addition to actively pursuing policies that do not tolerate verbal or physical violence, improving the boy-friendliness of classrooms, and providing a diverse set of opportunities for students to bond to school, schools can also take advantage of comprehensive curriculum addressing student behavior. Especially in the early grades, social skill development is crucial for all students. In a practical local effort to increase the social skills of elementary school children, Portland’s Abernethy School uses adult volunteers to teach playground rules and to model pro-social skills to students while they play with them. In a district-wide example, Portland Public Schools has invested in the Second Step curriculum, a nationally acclaimed violence prevention model that works to enhance social skills such as empathy development that would particularly benefit boys. As yet, no gender-specific research on programs like Second Step, or a similar program called Reconnecting Youth, assesses their successfulness for boys, although such research may be critical to design programs that can tackle problems with gender-specific causes. However, given boys’ lack of social skills across the board, a broad, skill-based approach to improving student behavior looks promising.

An important focus for any social skills program aimed at boys should be the development of self-control techniques. Boys are not only more active than girls; frequently the more active they are, the more impulsive they are. Teaching about, and rewarding boys for using, self control in early elementary grades can set the stage for good behavior in future years - years in which distractions and temptations become greater. Helping boys channel their impulses may mean allowing for some kind of physical outlet. Boys often express emotions with quick bursts of physical energy requiring physical space. They need training to respectfully use the space and honor boundaries. Teaching boys how to use time-outs as a method to regain self-control is also essential, because boys may easily become overwhelmed with strong feelings and need more time to process them.

The staff at Portland State University's Upward Bound Program understand the importance of building meaningful relationships with high school students and their families. Teachers Mark and Dontà have strengthened Johnny's educational and social success through academic guidance and mentorship.



Involving Men

Boys need more positive male role models. Unfortunately, for many boys in many settings, men have been in short supply. In fact, women have historically led the movement to help boys, with little assistance from their male counterparts. In contrast, girls are improving their academic success and expanding their gender roles in large part because of strong women leaders willing to act as role models and advocates. It will take similar leadership from men to help boys improve their academic success, and expand their gender roles toward broader, more inclusive definitions of masculinity.

The challenge is getting men to participate in this effort. Several factors deter men from joining efforts to alter boys' culture. For one, men themselves grew up under the boy code, and many cannot see its harm. Some men even value their experiences within the toughening boy culture, believing that it "helped them become a man." Still others are threatened by the idea of shifting gender roles. Finally, some men feel that they lack the relationship skills needed to act as a mentor. Men themselves lack models of other men fulfilling these roles.

Another factor contributing to the lack of fathers' involvement in schools is that some men, and particularly men of color, report feeling unwelcome in schools. In discussion groups to prepare this document, diverse representatives from Portland's youth-serving community noted that schools tend to be selective about the type of men they want in the schools. One participant stated, "We say we want men more involved in schools, but what schools are really saying is they want a certain class of men." Society often makes negative assumptions about the man who is available to come to school during school hours, or even about the man who is attracted to serving youth. Yet many youth don't have contact with either a biological or stepfather and are in dire need of father figures.

Just as schools must examine whether their culture is supportive of men volunteering in students' classrooms and activities, men must examine their lives to discover whether they are adequately contributing to their children and their schools. Eli Newberger (1999) writes, "The kind of adjustments that need to be made in the lives of boys to nurture them toward good character in their adult life are coherent with—sometimes identical with—the adjustments that will make men more highly aware and nurturing fathers and role models" (p. 31).

Fortunately, a national effort to educate men about their importance in the lives of children, strongly supported by research, is encouraging more men to respond to the call to become active in boys' lives. In community meetings to help plan this report, strong, motivated, and articulate men spoke of their desire to make a difference for today's young men. Men like these do make a difference. Research on fathers is particularly telling. *Child Trends Research Brief* (www.childtrends.org) shares these examples of the critical role that fathers play in their children's lives:

- In one study, preschool children whose fathers provided 40 percent or more of the family's child care had higher scores on assessments of cognitive development, had more sense of mastery over their environments, and exhibited more empathy than those children whose fathers were less involved.

- Higher levels of father involvement in activities with their children, including meals, outings, and helping with homework are associated with fewer behavior problems, higher levels of sociability, and a high level of school performance among children and adolescents.
- Several studies have documented a positive relationship between fathers providing child support and the well being of school-age children.

In the national public health drive to disseminate this kind of information to fathers, schools are in a central position to help. They can get the word out through newsletters, parenting workshops, and health classes. Schools can access tools like the CD ROM produced by the U. S. Department of Education, entitled “Father’s Involvement in Children’s Learning,” which contains video clips of a national conference on fathering, up-to-date research, and innovative strategies to better include fathers in their children’s education.

Activities like Sellwood’s “Boys’ Night Out,” and programs like “Real Men Read,” described in earlier sections of this report, are excellent ways to get fathers involved in schools. Projects like the “Minority Male Initiative,” detailed in the “Keeping Boys Connected” section, can connect young men with adult male role models. Another important resource for boys is the men already working in schools. How can they become more involved in helping boys succeed?

One idea comes from Upstate New York. Sponsored by the Capital Area School Development Association, the “Men Helping Boys” project gathered men from dozens of area schools to reflect on the challenges they faced growing up in order to increase their empathy for the challenges that today’s boys and young men face. Motivated by their enhanced empathy, the men went on to create programs targeted at helping boys at the schools in which they worked. Results ranged from an effort to promote leadership among middle-school boys, to a program to bring more positive male role models into schools, to a writing program that helps boys reflect on their efforts to become thoughtful, responsible young men. (For more information and reports on specific programs, contact the Capital Area Student Development Association, Husted Hall 211, University at Albany, 135 Western Avenue, Albany, NY 12222.)

Programs to educate male teachers about the limitations of the boy code that often confine boys’ culture would fold nicely into teacher education. In an article entitled, “Schooling and the Formation of Male Students’ Gender Identities,” Robert Smith (1995) argues for training male social studies teachers on these issues. Working from the assumption that “male social studies teachers may be less likely to reinforce limiting gender definitions in their teaching,” Smith encourages these future teachers to reflect on their own gender identities in order to broaden their understanding of masculinity and model this for their students.

Adult men who provide models of respectful masculinity are key to helping boys succeed in schools. It has been said that, “Small boys learn to become large men in the presence of large men who care about small boys.”

Summary of Strategies

Strategy 1: Increasing Boys' Connection to School

- Create safe places for boys to form relationships with others, including boys' discussion groups.
- Improve the communication skills of school staff so they can better work with boys.
- Create boy-centered social events.
- Develop a broad base of boy-friendly, co-curricular activities other than sports.
- Support coaches to make athletics a healthy experience for boys who participate in sports.
- Explore the potential of rites-of-passage activities.

Strategy 2: Improving Boys' Academic Performance

- Incorporate movement into learning activities.
- Emphasize cooperative learning approaches.
- Capitalize on literature that appeals to young men.
- Invite adult men into classes to model that it is acceptable for men to read.
- Consider new ways to evaluate boys' writing that take into account their interests and tastes.

Strategy 3: Addressing Boys' Behavioral Problems

- Make the reduction of teasing and bullying an administrative priority.
- Challenge the peer norm that teasing is acceptable.
- Educate parents to help their sons better deal with teasing and bullying.
- Implement skill-based violence prevention curricula.
- Help all boys improve their social skills.
- Emphasize the development of self-control to help boys curb impulsive behavior.

Strategy 4: Providing Boys with More Positive Adult Male Role Models

- Motivate men to lead the effort to help boys challenge limiting concepts of masculinity.
- Educate families about the critical role that men play in their children's lives.
- Invite men to participate more in their children's education.
- Create volunteer opportunities that men find attractive.
- Utilize mentors as role models.
- Educate male teachers about the role they can play in constructing gender identity.

Conclusion

Although gender research is complex and ongoing, it's clear that both nature and nurture influence boys' behaviors, personalities, and learning styles. As we have seen, biological factors lead boys as a group to be more active, competitive, aggressive, and spatially oriented than girls and less developed in language skills and emotional competencies. Social pressures further reinforce these tendencies in boys. They often discourage boys from forming strong relationships, encourage an air of nonchalance toward school, and promote negative peer relationships. It is critical that Portland Public Schools, in joining the growing national movement to create environments that better support boys, examine boys' difficulties through the lens of all of these factors. As shown in examples throughout this document, addressing boys' problems at school not only helps boys, but also helps schools better serve all students.

For too long our tendency has been to look negatively upon boys. Through many anger management, pregnancy prevention, and violence prevention programs we have spent countless resources telling boys what not to do and showing them images of the men we don't want them to become. It is time to shift our focus to better understanding boys, searching for their strengths, and showing them the possibilities of becoming great men.

That is the theme of the four main strategies for helping boys succeed in school that have been covered in the preceding pages. These strategies focus on increasing boys' connections to school; improving their academic performance; addressing behavioral problems; and engaging men in boys' programs. As a review, a brief outline on the preceding page lists the major ideas covered for implementing each strategy. Another cornerstone of showing boys their strengths is allowing them opportunities to learn about the influences affecting their own development through classroom discussion on gender issues.

If these findings are shared with boys themselves; as well as with school administrators, classroom teachers, and counselors; discussion can begin, not end, here. Research on what works for boys will only become richer as the real experts, all of you, share your experiences and ideas about how to apply some of this material in your work.

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