

The Literacy Gap

One of the most startling findings in national assessments of student achievement is how far behind boys are in reading and writing. Though the problem is even more severe among traditionally underserved minorities, this is a trend that cuts through racial, ethnic, and class divisions, and can even be seen in other countries.

- On national reading assessments, the average score for boys in fourth grade is five points behind girls. That gap increases to approximately 10 points by eighth grade, and widens even more in high school, leaving twelfth-grade boys about 12 points behind girls in reading skills tests.
- On recent fourth grade reading tests, the average score for African-American students was 197 for boys and 205 for girls, an eight-point differential. By eighth grade, African-American girls score an average 11 points higher than boys on reading tests.
- Hispanic boys score about seven points below Hispanic girls in fourth grade reading assessments, and are approximately ten points behind girls by eighth grade.
- In national writing assessments, boys score (on average) 17 points lower than girls in fourth grade (with African-American boys about 16 points behind African-American girls, and Hispanic boys scoring about 15 points lower than Hispanic girls). The average gap increases to 21 points in eighth grade (approximately 20 points for African-American boys and 17 points for Hispanic boys), and by twelfth grade, boys average 24 points lower than girls on tests of writing skills (about 21 points for African-American boys, and about 22 points for Hispanic boys).
- In 2002 reading assessments, among twelfth-grade students with a parent who graduated from college, 23% of white boys scored “below basic” (the minimal level of reading literacy) compared to 7% of white girls—a 16-point difference. For African-Americans with a college-graduate parent, the “below basic” number for boys was 43% compared to 33% for girls, while for Hispanics (with a college-graduate parent), the “below basic” score was 34% for boys versus 19% for girls.
- In 2002 writing assessments, among twelfth-grade students with a parent who graduated from college, 25% of white boys scored “below basic” (the minimal level of basic writing proficiency) compared to 6% of white girls—a 19-point difference. For African-Americans with a college-graduate parent, the “below basic” writing percentage for boys was 45% compared to 24% for girls, and for Hispanics (with a college-graduate parent), the writing “below basic” score was 39% for boys versus 17% for girls.
- The US is not the only country experiencing a widening gap between girls’ and boys’ literacy proficiency. A 2000 international assessment of reading ability in 15 year-olds found girls outscoring boys by an average 32 points in Canada, 29 points in France, 35 points in Germany, 30 points in Japan, 26 points in the UK, and 29 points in the US.
- In response to the alarming downward trends in boys’ academic performance, many countries—including Canada, Australia, and Great Britain—have initiated national, publicly-funded efforts to boost boys’ achievement. The US, however, has not.