

EDUCATION DAILY

The education community's independent daily news service

VOLUME 41, ISSUE 66

APRIL 7, 2008

Writing gender gap worrisome, stakeholders say

By Stephen Sawchuk

With recent data showing no overall change in the achievement gap between girls and boys in writing during the past decade, scholars are debating yet again why Johnny can't write.

According to 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress data released last week, girls scored 20 points higher than boys in math on the exam, while in 12th grade, girls scored about 18 points higher (*see chart*). In both grades, the gap has remained more or less consistent since 1998 — the first year the National Assessment Governing Board, which sets NAEP policy, administered a NAEP writing exam.

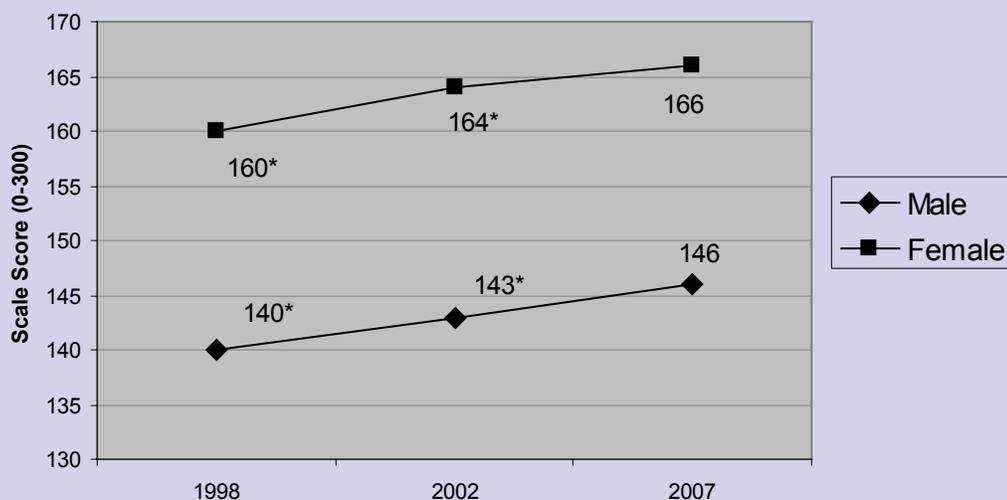
NAGB data show that the gaps between boys and girls in writing exceed those on other NAEP subject exams — even in math and science, where boys generally have the advantage. Statistically, boys are much farther behind girls in writing than girls are behind boys in math and science, according to the data.

That, experts said, is worrisome, because businesses and higher education stakeholders name the ability to write well as a crucial skill for success in the workforce and in college.

While the reasons for the writing gap are not entirely clear, teachers and policy experts named a variety of possible factors. These include educators' tendency to give writing assignments that don't adequately engage boys' interests, a reluctance to allow boys to explore controversial subject matter, and lower expectations for boys based on the assumption that they do not possess an aptitude for writing equal to girls'.

"These days, I seldom — if ever — hear the message that math and science do not matter for girls," said Amanda Avallone, a middle school English teacher in Boulder, Colo., and NAGB member. "Yet, I do still encounter the myth that many boys won't really need to write very much or very well once they leave school."

Trend in 8th grade NAEP writing scores and score gaps by gender



* denotes figure statistically different from 2007

Source: National Center for Education Statistics.

Authentic prompts

The best way to engage boys is to ensure that they are given “authentic” writing prompts that require them to take ownership of their writing, said Mary Buckelew, associate director of the Pennsylvania Writing and Literature Project, a National Writing Project site.

Buckelew, who instructed high schoolers for 18 years, recalled teaching a successful unit on persuasive writing in which students wrote letters to the school administration about controversial issues within the school community, such as certain dress restrictions.

But in some instances, boys are actively discouraged from working on the topics that most interest them, said Dianne Piché, a former Title I writing tutor and current executive director of the Citizens’ Commission on Civil Rights.

“It’s not that boys don’t have stories to write, but what they’re interested in is suppressed,” she said. “When the content matches their interests — whether it’s explosions, natural disasters or bodily functions, not that I’m stereotyping — you see a lot more enthusiasm on the behalf of these students.”

Some of the hesitancy of teachers to encourage writing on similar topics could be because of

renewed concerns about school safety, she opined.

“I think we’ve gone so far with zero-tolerance policies that when boys want to write a story with pirates and sword-fighting and someone getting killed, all of a sudden it’s as though they’ve crossed a line,” she said.

An additional challenge for instructors is that most writing is still taught in the context of classic literature, which may not engage all students. Schools should expose students to a rich variety of fictional, factual and nonfiction texts, Buckelew said.

But it’s still possible to create authentic writing prompts that engage students and cover literature content standards, she added.

Teaching Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, she said, could begin by having students draw connections to other texts that explore themes of friendships, power and loyalty, write about those themes in a personal context, and then work back to the play.

“You might ask them, ‘What does loyalty mean to you? Why would you not be loyal to a friend? What would they do?’” Buckelew described. “And then you could bring it back to Brutus and Caesar.”