

# FAIRFIELD CITIZEN NEWS [www.fairfieldcitizen-news.com](http://www.fairfieldcitizen-news.com)

## Bridging the gender gap in academic achievement

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The answer could

be found

on the playground

Boys will be boys. They will rough-house, roll in the dirt and, within the last few decades, be surpassed in academic achievement by girls.

For many women who have worked so hard for decades to be considered equal to men in the workplace and society in general, this revelation is vindication, a cause for celebration. Indeed, it is.

At the same time, though, it is cause for concern. One must answer the question, why is that boys are beginning to fall behind in school?

Science has shown that boys learn differently than girls and leading experts believe this is the reason girls are out-learning boys in classrooms around the country. The modern, heavily structured classroom in which standardized tests are the measure of proficiency is well suited to girls' learning habits, but not necessarily for boys, who are, generally speaking, much more hands-on learners and full of energy.

"The kids that need the most movement are overwhelmingly boys," said Peg Tyre, an award-winning journalist who authored The New York

Times best-selling book, *The Trouble With Boys -- A Surprising Report Card on Our Sons, Their Problems at School & What Parents and Educators Must Do*.

Nationally, Tyre noted, girls are getting better grades, scoring higher on tests and graduating colleges and universities in higher numbers than their male counterparts. And, according to standardized test results from 2009, Fairfield boys are in the same sinking boat.

Girls in grade 3 scored higher than boys on the Connecticut

Mastery Test in reading and writing; boys ranked higher in math. The same is true at the state level. Girls in grade 4 and 5, in both Fairfield and for all of Connecticut, scored higher than boys in all three categories. The trend continues in sixth, seventh and eighth grade. And it dates to at least 2006, the farthest back the scores are available online at [www.ctreports.com](http://www.ctreports.com)

The Fairfield Public School system is well aware of this data and is constantly using it to inform changes to curriculum and instructional methods.

Noting that the gap in Fairfield is minimal, Anna Cutaia-Leonard, the school district's director of elementary education, said, "We're addressing it on a school-by-school basis and through professional development for teachers."

Cutaia-Leonard said the district not only reviews data comparing girls' and boys' performance, but for an array of subgroups, including ethnicity, socio-economic status and for special needs students. "Whenever you look at data it should be used to inform instruction in the classroom," she added.

Before one criticizes Tyre's work or accuses her of

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trying to push girls back behind, it's worth noting that she considers herself a feminist.

"I'm all about our high performing girls, and seeing them doing well," she said.

Yet she is concerned by the statistics that show boys are not performing as well as girls, particularly in reading and writing. "People say boys will catch up," she said. "Well, when do they catch up? They are not catching up."

She hopes to break the "radio silence" on this subject, perhaps by launching a national campaign that promotes reading and writing for boys.

A Spencer Fellow at Columbia, Tyre is now studying success. "What, beyond IQ, makes kids successful and how do we enhance that?" she said is the concentration of her latest work, which is still in its infancy.

Tyre's research for *The Trouble with Boys* led her to the conclusion that it isn't in middle school or even at the elementary level that boys begin to fall behind. It is, experts say, at the formative years of a child's development -- ages 3 to 5 -- the preschool years, when the foundation for learning is set in stone. "We've got to teach them young -- that school is cool," said Margee Ready, co-director of St. Paul's Nursery School on Old Post Road in Fairfield.

"I don't think boys are behind," she added. "They just learn in a different way."

### Play-based education

Last week, a 4-year-old boy pretended to talk on a cell phone while he cruised through his classroom at St. Paul's on a bicycle. Nearby, his classmates constructed castles and other structures with building blocks. On the other side of the room, boys

and girls quietly let their imaginations run wild, painting on construction paper. They played together and independently.

This may seem like all fun and games. And that is exactly the point.

These children are establishing a solid foundation for cognitive development and sharpening both fine and gross motor skills, among other key educational platforms, but, more importantly, they are learning that school is cool -- that it is fun.

As Ready puts it, "Play is children's work."

Vanderblue said, "We can tell you that in every playground there is an extensive amount of learning taking place."

The two speak from experience. Vanderblue graduated from Bergen College in Norway with a degree in early childhood education and a minor in history and English literature. Ready came to St. Paul's after graduating from Wheelock College in Boston with a degree in early childhood education.

St. Paul's Nursery School had humble beginnings. In 1969, Aileen Ginty and Tove Vanderblue started the program with just six 4-year-old children. Ready came on board in 1974. The nursery school has since grown to include 160 students, ages 3 to 5, with a staff of 16 teachers, including Ready and Vanderblue.

Keenly aware of children's needs, St. Paul's has created a daily schedule that rotates between activities that require children to sit still and listen, such as reading time, to other activities that allow them to release their energy, such as climbing on the playground and raking leaves. "They love to rake leaves," Ready said. "They love this time of year."

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"We alter our day so that they have the opportunity to expend that energy," Vanderblue said.

"Children need to be active, especially boys," Ready added.

In their decades of experience, the two have documented how and what their young students learn. It is summarized in a six-page report called "The Power of Play: What Do Children Learn When They Play?"

Take this example: children are given different colored plastic chain links, which they can connect in any way they please. In the process, the children are learning colors, honing fine motor skills and learning patterns. "They think they're playing but really we're teaching them patterns," Vanderblue said.

How about this one: setting up dominos for the highly anticipated collapse involves fine motor skills and teaches the children cause-and-effect.

They children also love to paint. "We have very open-ended art," Ready said. "It's all child-oriented, process-oriented."

"We paint with everything from feathers to marbles," Vanderblue added.

"We have as much fun as the children," Ready admitted.

The report is shared with parents of incoming children at St. Paul's. Their response typically is, according to Ready, "Oh yeah, I guess they are learning when they're playing."

So what does all this have to do with boys and the declining test results?

Both Vanderblue and Ready are of the opinion that, when it comes to academics, earlier is not necessarily better -- "We feel there should be a little more play in kindergarten," Vanderblue said. Yet there is such a push from both schools and parents to have students taking on more and more, younger and younger. "It's difficult because public schools are teaching to tests -- standardized tests," said Ready. "They're under the gun to teach to the scores."

Certainly, the students at St. Paul's are exposed to books and other tools that will set the groundwork for future growth, but the focus is more on learning social and emotional skills. "If that is in place, then the academics come much more easily," Ready said.

"In preparing children for the next step, it's giving them what they need now," said Vanderblue.

And the feedback from kindergarten teachers reinforces their approach, with many praising St. Paul's for how well-prepared its students are. Vanderblue and Ready said they often hear, "Whatever you're doing, you're doing it right."

Aside from their sincere belief in "The Power of Play," Vanderblue and Ready credit much of their success to St. Paul's professional staff. "They all genuinely love children. I really feel like we're a family here," Ready said.

"I really think it's our staff that plays a huge part of the children being excited to be here," Vanderblue added.

Another key element to consider in this equation is parents. "I think it's important for the parents to be on board," Ready said. "We want children to want to be here."

You don't have to sell Jarrid Hall on the value of

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play-based education utilized at St. Paul's. Hall, chairman of the board at the school, has his two children enrolled -- Austin, 5, and Grace, 4.

A resident of Fairfield for three years, along with his wife, Sylvia, Hall's epiphany came last year when he heard a speech by Tyre.

"She was just a phenomenal speaker," Hall said. "It really just resonated."

"After listening to Peg speak a year ago it became clear how simple influences can have an enormous impact on a child's view of education and how they approach life -- all starting at a pre-school age," he added.

"What have I gained from reading Peg's book, attending her presentation on the *The Trouble with Boys* and talking with her over the past few months is this: the incredible influence a parent has on a child's perception and engagement of education and learning in general."

Tyre's recommendation to Hall, he said, was: "Make reading cool."

Hall, vice president of corporate retail at GE Capital in Danbury, has endeavored to do just that. So the family spends quite a bit of time reading -- "Pirate Pete was big for a while," -- and playing -- "Austin loves cars, so we play with a lot of cars. And Grace loves to play with Polly Pockets."

"Play is so important," Hall said. "It's so important for parents to understand the science '! It's more important to teach them how to live."

Hall is quick to note that he is not an educator or scientist. "I'm just a dad," he said. "I'm trying."

Still, since hearing Tyre at Fairfield Country Day

School, Hall has made it his mission to get more dads involved with their children, particularly their sons, so that they learn at an early age that reading is cool and school can be fun -- the belief is that the work now will pay dividends later as the boys grow up.

"Our engagement really does make a difference," Hall said.

"[Austin] actually walks around with my *Economist* magazine now," he added, with a laugh.

To further his efforts of educating the community and getting more dads involved, Hall asked Tyre to come back to talk with the community, and she agreed. Tyre will speak at 7:30 p.m. on Wednesday, Nov. 18, at Roger Ludlowe Middle School on Unquowa Road. She is expected to once again discuss the extensive research that led to the publication of her book, and to take it one more step and discuss her latest research -- gauging success.

In addition to St. Paul's, Tyre's visit is sponsored by several nursery schools in town, including Presbyterian, Methodist, Trinity Parish, Southport Congregational and Greenfield Hill -- the nursery schools are non-denominational, their names and locations are more a result of the available space, Ready said.

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