

# Boys in School Fact Sheet

## Learning Disabilities



Society for the Psychological  
Study of Men and Masculinities

### THINGS TO KNOW

When students do not acquire the requisite knowledge to build on and advance their learning, they progress more slowly through school curricula than the norm and fall increasingly behind their peers. This phenomenon of compounding educational delay over time is known as the “cumulative deficit hypothesis<sup>[1]</sup>.” The importance of such a cumulative deficit is tied to the following facts:

- students who lag in their educations are more likely to drop out of school;
- students who drop out of school often experience a lifetime of lower incomes, increased job instability, and an increased likelihood of incarceration<sup>[2]</sup>;
- students with learning difficulties are best identified and remediated during the early educational grades (i.e., Kindergarten through grade 4).

When parents or teachers identify students as having serious academic difficulty, they frequently refer them for a possible diagnosis of Learning Disabilities (LDs). LDs comprise a broad spectrum of educational difficulties, including disabled reading, math, and written expression. LDs may occur alongside developmental disabilities such as attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism, intellectual disabilities, and others.

#### *Referral Rates*

- As early as preschool and throughout the K-12 educational experience, boys are referred, diagnosed, and provided special education services more frequently than girls, with boys diagnosed with a learning disability at rates that range from 5:1 to 9:1, as compared to girls.<sup>[3]</sup>
- The National Center for Education Statistics revealed that during the 2018-2019 academic year 18% of male students between 6 to 21 years received special education services under IDEA, compared to 10% of female students<sup>[4]</sup>.

#### *Frustrated Learners*

- As with any child, boys with a learning disability may experience an interpersonal mismatch with their teacher(s) and/or learn differently than other students. These cultural or interpersonal differences can compound educational learning difficulties and exacerbate boys’ learning-related frustration.
- Boys (and girls) diagnosed with a learning disability often have difficulty acquiring new content, completing assignments, and succeeding in school, all of which leads to frustration and increases the likelihood of misbehavior in the classroom.
- These collective and compounding negative experiences contribute to students’ decreased academic engagement, which results in poorer grades, poorer performance on standardized tests, and lower levels of participation in classroom activities, and decreased enrollment in advanced placement and honors courses.
- Along with delayed educational progress, boys’ (mis-)behavior is typically noted by teachers as acting-out behaviors in response to frustration with the learning process, frequent failure, and/or teacher pedagogical or management practices<sup>[5,6]</sup>. The combination of (undiagnosed) learning difficulties and focus on student misbehavior contributes to an increased rate of suspension and expulsion for boys, particularly boys of color<sup>[7]</sup>.

These educational and behavioral problems are compounded for boys of color who, on average, perform less well educationally than their White counterparts, leading to an overrepresentation of boys of color in special education, even after accounting for demographic differences (e.g., social class/SES/parents’ educational achievement<sup>[8,9,10]</sup>).

## THINGS TO DO

We strongly encourage boys, parents, teachers, school psychologists, administrators, and other interested parties to consider the “why” of boys’ academic difficulties and the possibility (or likelihood) that the “why” reflects an unaddressed or improperly addressed learning difficulty. Specifically, we encourage:

- *boys* to share their struggling educational experiences with their parents, and we encourage parents to listen attentively when boys say schoolwork is perceived as difficult or boring. Educational boredom may flag academic content that is not easily comprehended by the student or indicate a more serious learning issue. Concerned parents should reach out to teachers to better understand their child’s academic performance and experiences.
- *parents* to ask boys for a detailed description of difficulties experienced in school, including understanding written material, completing written assignments, and managing organizational skills (especially at the middle and high school levels).
- *parents* of boys who have an Individual Educational Plan (IEP) to obtain a clear grasp of how their son’s challenges are to be addressed by the school and how proposed interventions relate to their son’s difficulties.
- *school staff* to consider how students perceive them and consider how students’ perceptions enhance or interfere with content acquisition and fulfilling teachers’ educational goals. Quality student-teacher relationships are extremely important during Middle and High School years because boys produce greater effort and investment in schoolwork when their teachers are passionate about academic content, tolerant of minor misbehavior, and evince care toward their students<sup>[11]</sup>. Schools should support efforts to improve student-teacher relationships through relational education and mentoring<sup>[12,13]</sup>.
- *teachers* to be aware of academic and behavioral indicators of potential learning problems and consult with school psychologists to identify appropriate evidence-based interventions. If targeted interventions do not resolve the student’s difficulties, a comprehensive psychoeducational evaluation should be considered to explore underlying causes for the student’s difficulties. Such detailed assessments identify students’ cognitive and academic strengths and weakness; identified strengths can be further built upon and also used to help remediate relative weaknesses.
- *teachers* to attend targeted professional development opportunities and adjust teaching practices to provide individualized instruction, address student dispositions and learning behaviors, and recognize common issues faced by boys.<sup>[14]</sup>
- *teachers and administrators* to provide alternative educational paths for students (e.g., vocational education) to facilitate awareness and advancement into trades and other skilled fields, rather than assuming that most students are college bound.
- *administrators* to recruit and hire more male educators (e.g., teachers, counselors, psychologists), in particular, male educators of color. Providing more male educators of color, especially at the elementary levels, is essential because a greater student-teacher demographic match in grades 3, 4, and 5 can significantly reduce the probability of Black male students from dropping out of high school<sup>[15]</sup>.
- *legislators, board members, and school superintendents* to provide adequate funding for comprehensive and evidence-based psychoeducational assessments and interventions for all students who are struggling academically.

### TASK FORCE ON BOYS IN SCHOOL

Society for the Psychological Study  
of Men and Masculinities  
Division 51 of the American Psychological  
Association

Fact sheet developed by  
Lea A. Theodore, Ph.D., Joseph D. Nelson,  
Ph.D., and Andrew P. Smiler, PhD. with  
support from Task Force and Advisory  
Committee members.

The goal of the Task Force on Boys in School (TFBS) is to provide critical information to schools and their constituents to more effectively support the educational and social-emotional needs of a diversity of boys. While we advocate for the unique needs of boys, TFBS recognizes that all students deserve adequate school supports to optimize their success in and beyond the classroom. This Fact Sheet highlights what we know about behavioral challenges and disciplinary practices some boys experience in school. To learn more about this topic, and to access references and other fact sheets, please visit our webpage at <https://www.division51.net/taskforce-on-boys-in-school>.

## References and Resources

- [1] Jensen, A. R. (1974). Cumulative deficit: A testable hypothesis? *Developmental Psychology*, *10*(6), 996-1019.
- [2] Technical Assistance Center for Disproportionality in Special Education: <https://TACD.org>
- [3] Fletcher, J. M., Lyon, G. R., Fuchs, L. S., & Barnes, M. A. (2007). *Learning Disabilities: From Identification to Intervention*. The Guilford Press.
- [4] National Center for Education Statistics (“[Students with Disabilities](#),” Updated May 2020)
- [5] Fletcher, J. M., Lyon, G. R., Fuchs, L. S., & Barnes, M. A. (2007). *Learning Disabilities: From Identification to Intervention*. The Guilford Press.;
- [6] Little & McLennan, 2010; Mash, E. J., & Barkley, R. A., (2014). *Child Psychopathology (3rd ed.)*. The Guilford Press.
- [7] Children’s AID NYC. <http://www.childrensaidnyc.org/>
- [8] Howard, T. (2013). *Black Male(d): Peril and promise in the education of African-American Males*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- [9] Noguera, P., Hurtado, A., & Fergus, E. (2011). *Invisible No More: Understanding the disenfranchisement of Latino boys and men*. New York: Routledge.
- [10] Schott Foundation for Public Education. (2010). *Given half a chance: The Schott 50 state report on public education and Black males*. Cambridge, MA: Schott Foundation for Public Education.
- [11] Reichert, M. C., & Nelson, J. D. (2018). I Want to Learn from You. In N. Way, A. Ali, C. Gilligan, & P. Noguera (Eds.), *The Crisis of Connection: Roots, Consequences, and Solutions* (pp. 344-360). New York University Press.
- [12] Reichert, M., & Hawley, R. (2014). *I Can Learn From You: Boys as relational learners*. Harvard Education Press.
- [13] Nelson, J.D. (2016). Relational Teaching with Black Boys: Strategies for learning at a single-sex middle school for boys of color. *Teachers College Record*. *118*(6). pp. 1-30.
- [14] Harvey, S. P., Lambourne, K. L., Greene, J. I., Gibson, C. A., Lee, J., & Donnelly, J. E. (2018). The Effects of Physical Activity on Learning Behaviors in Elementary School Children: a Randomized Controlled Trial. *Contemporary School Psychology*, *22*, 303-312.
- [15] Gershenson, S., Hart, C. M. D., Lindsay, C. A., & Papageorge, N. W. (2017). *The long-run impacts of same-race teachers*. IZA Institute of Labor Economics. IZA DP No. 10630