

The war against boys
Christina Hoff Summers

The academics' notion of fairness destroys education for boys, leaving nobody better off

Christina Hoff Sommers book is refutation of a number of studies put out by supposed experts at prestigious universities, Harvard chief among them. The gist of the study is that America's youth are beset by crises and that invasive programs crafted by the experts need to be put in place in schools around the nation.

As I write this review, Nassim Nicholas Taleb has come up with the perfect label for such people: The Intellectual Yet Idiots. He writes "What we have been seeing worldwide, from India to the UK to the US, is the rebellion against the inner circle of no-skin-in-the-game policymaking "clerks" and journalists-insiders, that class of paternalistic semi-intellectual experts with some Ivy league, Oxford-Cambridge, or similar label-driven education who are telling the rest of us 1) what to do, 2) what to eat, 3) how to speak, 4) how to think... and 5) who to vote for."

These academics make careers for themselves by inventing crises, then putting themselves forth as indispensable founts of wisdom on how to confront the crisis. This is how academic careers are built. Presuming to tell other people how to run their lives and governments of course has a long history. Karl Marx posited that people would thrive under communism. It caused untold misery. Diane Ravitch has written in many books, the best known being [[ASIN:0684844176 Left Back: A Century of Failed School Reform]] about the idiotic fads that sweep through education.

I, the reviewer, and have an ax to grind. Sommers book is copyrighted 2001, the year my son graduated from high school. My daughters graduated in 2002 and 2007. All three children were affected by the nonsense that Sommers describes so well. Although I sat on the boards of my children's schools in the 80s and 90s, I was no more than amused by the uproar over the issues that Sommers addresses. I did not know how deadly they would be – how fearful the consequences would be for my own children. I became better acquainted with the problems as a substitute teacher shortly thereafter, then I entered the University of Maryland graduate school of education in 2003. There the stench was overwhelming. It was too late to do anything to save my own children, all three of whom are leading blighted lives, no doubt due in some measure to the hubris and careerism of the intellectual yet idiots that Sommers identifies.

The chapter titles are:

Where the boys are

Reeducating the nation's boys

Guy's and dolls

Carol Gilligan and the incredible shrinking girl

Gilligan's Island

Save the males

Why Johnny can't, like, read and write

The moral life of boys
War and peace

Along the line she takes on some particularly dangerous adversaries, among them Carol Gilligan, Mary Pipher and Myra and David Sadker. Pipher is the author of the best-selling "Finding Ophelia" which my ex-wife absorbed with fascination and horror when it came out in the early 90s. The Sadkers made a lot of money lecturing to schools such as St. Patrick's Episcopal Day school, where I was a board member, on the plight of put upon, abused and overlooked girls in the schools.

The fact of the matter, as Sommers points out in her first chapter, is that girls at that time were performing better than boys at all levels of education and in almost all subjects. Girls sit quietly in class and behave. Teachers call on girls more often than boys, despite claims to the contrary. Both the girls and the boys agree that the teachers like girls more. Female students far outnumber male students in the University, and the imbalance continues to grow.

Her second chapter, "Reeducating The Nation's Boys" is about the effort to teach boys to be more like girls. There has been a long-standing effort in academia to deny that there are any fundamental differences between the sexes. The dominant theory among progressives is that gender is a social construct. Based on that theory, educators concluded that boys' behavior that they did not approve of was some form of aberration. If boys are playing with sticks, punching each other on the shoulder, getting into fights, inattentive in class, more interested in machines than people and so on, it cannot be that they are different. No! It is a sign that they are somehow victims of a defective patriarchy that is not allowing them to be their true selves. The researchers arrogantly assume that all of recorded history must be wrong, that they must be right, and something has to be done to make little boys comfortable playing with dolls.

That's the third chapter – Guys and Dolls. The academics proceeded to make sure that there weren't any places where boys could be boys within school. They eliminated the game of tag – it was too rough. They have eliminated competition. They eliminated books with martial themes, adventures that might interest boys from the curriculum. They expel boys for flirting with and kissing little girls. And then they wonder why boys seem to be bored in school.

Carol Gilligan is Sommers' pet academic fraud. She is at Harvard, but in the School of Education. I will testify from my own experience in the University of Maryland School of Education that the standards are much lower than in other departments. Gilligan had shown a genius for self-promotion in several areas, all on the basis of irreproducible studies involving small samples and producing incredible, mind-boggling results. Gilligan found allies in agenda driven organizations such as the American Association of University women. Together they forced change on the system through the national education bureaucracy and the education schools, which were quite politicized and did not ask tough questions about the validity of the research. This resulted in rather radical

changes in the way education was delivered. It was especially prejudicial to boys, and there was no advocate to question the efficacy or the need for such changes.

As stated above, I was witness to these changes in St. Patrick's Episcopal Day School. The headmaster was an earnest young man, pleasant but not anything of a scientist. He would've been ill prepared to refute these findings and could have been expected to go along with whatever feminists were pushing them on him. Among the fads that swept schools at this time was the self-esteem movement. As I write this, my 34-year-old son has not talked to me for five years. Every conversation we had seem to challenge his self-esteem. Rather than prepare him for the world, school sheltered him from the harsh reality that there will be expectations placed upon him and he will be judged harshly if he cannot fulfill them.

Public schools must have a one-size-fits-all policy because they serve a diverse public. Sommers points out that single-sex education works well many places in England and in some private schools in America. She cites the two with which I am familiar in Maryland, the Heights school and Landon school for boys. Both have excellent academic reputations and can succeed because they are private. I will add that as a substitute teacher I also taught at Georgetown Visitation School for Girls and my observation was that those were the most polite and academically inclined young ladies I saw anyplace in the Washington area. Same sex education has great benefits – but organizations such as the American Association of University Women, with their political agendas, absolutely will not entertain the idea of segregating students by sex – at least, not male students.

Although it is not her main theme, Sommers also points out that different educational approaches work better with different racial groups. A strict, no nonsense approach works in the predominantly black Harwood school in Baltimore. In my own reading, I observed that the same is true of the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) that has been implemented in several different jurisdictions. As a teacher, my sense is that the differences between Chinese and Black students are about as profound as the difference between boys and girls, and that there are probably significant advantages to be gained by employing teaching strategies that are attuned to the kids being taught.

Sommers' chapter on moral education tells the sad story of what happened after the courts concluded that the schools had no business attempting to teach the kids morality. The kids have no limits. She goes into some detail on the horrifying shootings in Littleton, Colorado and elsewhere, and the stories of wanton abuse exemplified by the Spur Posse sexual abuse. She concludes that the children were simply not taught how to behave. The courts took away the teachers ability to discipline miscreants, and they get misbehavior. [\[\[ASIN:0674011791 Judging School Discipline\]\]](#) describes this problem very well.

Sommers' conclusion is a little bit limited. A society perpetuates itself, obviously, through its youth. If the schooling that children receive does not prepare them to earn a living, or even more significantly, does not prepare them to live in civil harmony with a

person of the opposite sex and form a family, that society is doomed. That is what we see in modern American society. Young men and women are not given a moral foundation to form satisfying lives, professionally, singly, and most particularly as families.

Some young people overcome the odds and succeed, but not nearly enough to replace themselves, either in numbers or in kind. That huge social crisis is having economic consequences as I write. The baby boomers are more numerous than the taxpayers paying their Social Security. Such a society cannot last.

Sommers' book was regarded as somewhat conservative when it came out. Society's attention has moved on from school shootings – we may now finally have enough police in the schools that at least we don't see the problem – to fair play for gays, transsexuals, and the increasing numbers of immigrants with decidedly different cultures. Though she may have been shouting into the wind, it remains a five-star effort.