

Education Select Committee Inquiry into Boys' Engagement and Attainment in Education

Written evidence submission from the Association of School and College Leaders

A. Introduction

1. The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) is a trade union and professional association representing over 25,000 education system leaders, heads, principals, deputies, vice-principals, assistant heads, business leaders and other senior staff of state-funded and independent schools and colleges throughout the UK. ASCL members are responsible for the education of more than four million children and young people across primary, secondary, post-16 and specialist education. This places the association in a strong position to consider this issue from the viewpoint of the leaders of schools and colleges of all types.
2. We welcome the Committee's inquiry into this important issue. We hope that this response will prove useful.

B. Responses to your questions

Why do boys consistently underperform in academic assessment compared to girls throughout the primary and secondary phases of education?

3. It is important not to generalise about the performance of boys and girls, or to focus only on averages. Many boys achieve great success in academic assessment, attaining well and demonstrating consistent engagement in school and college. It is important, therefore, that the inquiry examines in more granular detail which specific *groups* of boys underperform when compared with specific *groups* of girls, and considers the external factors that may contribute to this.
4. It is also important to be cognisant of research which suggests that different approaches may be more or less successful with boys or girls in general, without either assuming that this will be the case for every boy or girl, or inadvertently perpetuating stereotypes. Our submission to this inquiry is offered in the context of these caveats.
5. National average data clearly shows that underperformance gaps start as far back as the early years and pre-school. Published data from November 2023 shows that, in the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP), more girls than boys had a good level of development, with the gap widening slightly compared with a year earlier (by 0.4 percentage points).¹
6. Other respondents to the inquiry will bring more expertise on the differences in speech and oral language development between boys and girls from birth, and how this might impact on reading. We simply observe that this gap is clear from an early age. Children's performance in the 2023 Phonics Screening Check (PSC), taken by children

¹ [Early years foundation stage profile results, Academic year 2022/23 – Explore education statistics – GOV.UK \(explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/explore-education-statistics)

in Year 1, increased in comparison to 2022 for both boys and girls, but more girls met standard, with the gender attainment gap at 7%.²

7. This literacy gap persists through primary school. At the end of Key Stage 1 in 2023, more girls met the expected standard than boys in reading and writing. However, and in line with previous years, more boys reached the expected standard than girls in maths.³
8. Further recent national statistics support this different picture in maths. 2022/23 Multiplication Tables Check data shows that the percentage of eligible pupils who achieved the most common score of 25 (full marks) was 28% for girls and 31% for boys.⁴
9. End of Key Stage 2 national data from 2023 shows girls continuing the pattern of outperforming boys at the expected standard in all subjects except for mathematics, where boys performed slightly better (1 percentage point difference). It is in writing where the biggest attainment gap between boys and girls remains, at 13 percentage points.⁵
10. We would suggest, therefore, that the inquiry should consider why the gender gap is wider in literacy than in maths, where it is often flipped.
11. It is also important to consider the relationship between gender attainment gaps and medical diagnoses. For example, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is more commonly diagnosed in boys than girls.⁶
12. Gaps might also be linked the under-representation of men in teaching at primary level, where 86% of teachers are female.⁷
13. At Post-16 and FE, there are more options for learners to pursue their own interests, meaning they can excel at different subjects. It is therefore more difficult, and probably less useful, to directly compare male and female achievement at this age. It is, however, important to consider the reasons why some subjects, academic routes and career choices remain so stubbornly gendered when young people are able to exercise choice.

What steps are schools currently taking to improve academic outcomes for boys?

14. Schools and colleges are implementing a wide variety of strategies to improve academic outcomes. It's important to note that, while some of these strategies are directly targeted at boys, many are aimed at raising outcomes for all, with boys benefiting from this, as the following examples demonstrate.

² [Key stage 1 and phonics screening check attainment, Academic year 2022/23 – Explore education statistics – GOV.UK \(explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/explore-education-statistics/service/gov-uk)

³ [Key stage 1 and phonics screening check attainment, Academic year 2022/23 – Explore education statistics – GOV.UK \(explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/explore-education-statistics/service/gov-uk)

⁴ [Multiplication tables check attainment, Academic year 2022/23 – Explore education statistics – GOV.UK \(explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/explore-education-statistics/service/gov-uk)

⁵ [Key stage 2 attainment, Academic year 2022/23 – Explore education statistics – GOV.UK \(explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/explore-education-statistics/service/gov-uk)

⁶ <https://bestpractice.bmj.com/topics/en-gb/142>

⁷ [Outline 3 reasons why girls tend to achieve more highly than boys in education \(6 MARKS\) | MyTutor](#)

15. At reception year, schools have invested time and resources into the effective teaching of phonics, based on schemes validated by the government in April 2021.⁸
16. Digital packages, which many primary schools have invested in, can help motivate boys (as well as girls) with homework, whilst also engaging parents to support their child more effectively at home.
17. Primary schools have put emphasis on curriculum development to improve writing skills, with a particular eye on boys' attainment. Significant work has gone into curriculum design at primary to make it more 'boy-friendly', and to help boys to see the relevance of their learning. Leaders make the performance of boys a key focus, not only in their data tracking, but within their broad culture.
18. Primary schools use their [PE and Sport premium](#) to motivate and engage all pupils and encourage higher levels of attendance through a range of sporting activities, coach-led initiatives and programmes. More primary schools are establishing the Forest School principles of 'play, exploration and supported risk taking to develop[s] confidence and self-esteem through learner inspired, hands-on experiences in a natural setting'.⁹ Both of these examples inspire all children, but are likely to motivate and engage boys' learning especially, through play and through opportunities to celebrate sporting achievement.
19. Secondary schools use their library and librarian or literacy coordinator to support literacy needs, with whole-school strategies in place across all subject specialisms. A focus on boy-friendly books might be seen in the school library, with text or topic choices in some subjects chosen specifically to engage boys.
20. Across all schools there is a significant focus on attendance and persistent absenteeism. Children and young people need to be in school to learn.
21. As schools report escalating behavioural challenges¹⁰ across all sectors, especially post-pandemic, a focus on effective behaviour management to ensure all pupils are motivated and engaged is seen as crucial in ensuring better academic outcomes for boys.
22. Some schools at primary and secondary implement the [Well School](#) principles to place as much emphasis on wellbeing as they do on academic performance in helping children and young people become more effective learners. This can help reduce anxiety and mental health issues in boys and young men.
23. At Post-16 and FE, many students are provided with varied learning environments (outdoors, hands-on activities, games, experiments), using different teaching methods to engage students in different ways.

⁸ [Choosing a phonics teaching programme - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

⁹ [What is Forest School? | Forest School Association](#)

¹⁰ [Behaviour in schools: is it getting worse? | Tes](#)

What steps should the Department for Education be taking to improve academic outcomes for boys?

24. Provide greater funding for innovative classrooms, outdoor play areas and playing fields, to motivate and inspire all boys to enjoy school and more consistently engage with all aspects of the curriculum.
25. Encourage more male teachers to enter the teaching profession at primary level.
26. Invest in local communities, particularly in areas of poverty and deprivation, to provide greater opportunities for boys and young men to take part in a range of activities and sport that could help to develop and demonstrate academic confidence in the classroom.
27. Investment more heavily in STEM subjects, especially at primary level, by providing schools with greater funding to upskill teachers through organisations like STEM Learning.
28. Continue to fund and extend access to [behaviour hubs](#) to ensure all schools can access what they need to “ensure good behaviour, routines and structures in school support all pupils’ engagement in education, and their mental health and wellbeing.”

How do boys learn best and how can this be integrated into future learning and assessment reforms?

29. As mentioned in paragraph 4, it is problematic to suggest there is any single way in which all boys ‘learn best’. Boys are, of course, individuals, and will respond in different ways. Some of the suggestions below would, in our view, enable *all* pupils to learn better, and should be implemented for that reason. Others may be particularly effective for some boys.
30. Boys – and all children – learn best when it is possible to remove negative peer pressure.
31. Boys – and again, all children – will achieve better when all learning barriers can be removed from assessment, or when adaptations and adjustments are made to support an assessment.
32. Research suggests girls naturally favour coursework, as they often pay more attention to detail, take care of how their work is presented and are better at meeting deadlines. There is evidence to show that the gender gap in achievement increased significantly when the first iterations GCSEs (which involved coursework) were introduced.¹¹
33. However, boys are not always motivated to complete work at home, including reading large texts or chunks of texts, or to start an early and consistent programme of revision. Explicitly teaching boys how to do this, and finding ways to keep them on track and motivated, is likely to improve attainment, especially at the end of secondary.

¹¹ <https://www.mytutor.co.uk/answers/31504/A-Level/Sociology/Outline-3-reasons-why-girls-tend-to-achieve-more-highly-than-boys-in-education-6-MARKS/>

What can be done to improve male pupils' engagement with the school system?

34. Encourage higher male recruitment at primary (see earlier point), as well as more diversity in general, so that boys have strong role models and can 'see themselves' in their teachers.
35. Provide funding to support a greater emphasis on the teaching of STEM at primary (see earlier point).
36. Continue to fund the Primary PE and Sport premium so that schools can plan and deliver motivational activities to inspire boys' engagement with school.
37. Review the current school performance and accountability measures, which encourage and reward a narrow curriculum at Key Stage 4. A broader curriculum which includes and values both academic and vocational qualifications is likely to improve some the engagement (and, in some cases, behaviour) of many boys at secondary. (See also paragraph 39 below.)
38. Focus on effective approaches to motivating boys in teacher and leader professional development, at all stages.

How can the UK improve the progression of boys into higher education?

39. Examine the impact of new courses and education routes. Summer 2023 saw the second cohort of T level students receive their grades. Shockingly, only around 1000 students were given grades, because about a third of the students who started the course dropped out at some point over the two years.
40. Of the 1000 students who received T level grades, only 9 students attained the highest grade, of which only one was a boy. In this example, with the dropout rate so high and highest grades hard to achieve, it is hardly surprising that that the progression of boys into higher education is not better.
41. ASCL is deeply concerned that that many successful vocational routes into higher education, particularly Applied General Qualifications, are being systematically defunded by the government. This will make it much harder for many young people – particularly boys, those with special educational needs, and those from disadvantaged backgrounds – to progress into higher education. We would strongly encourage the inquiry to consider the impact of this, in our view, misguided policy on boys and other groups of young people.

What can be done to reduce the exclusion and suspension rates of boys from school?

42. There is evidence that 'girls tend to achieve more highly than boys as they are often favoured by the teachers, as they are more cooperative and typically work silently with little fuss, these positive labels given to girls may form self-fulfilling prophecies, similarly when teachers label boys as a nuisance, it can form a negative self-fulfilling prophecy for them.'¹² This can lead to poorer behaviour amongst boys in some settings and a rise in the boys' exclusions and suspension rates.

¹² [Outline 3 reasons why girls tend to achieve more highly than boys in education \(6 MARKS\) | MyTutor](#)

43. As per previous points, the government must continue to fund behaviour hubs alongside community groups and sporting opportunities.
44. We would also encourage the inquiry to consider the impact of broader government policies, including those which impact on family income, housing and health, on the wellbeing, behaviour and attainment of children and young people.

Should different approaches be taken within the classroom to improve male pupil outcomes?

45. Destination measures data shows women carers, young people with disabilities, disadvantaged young people and those from certain cultural backgrounds are more likely to do less well than boys and become Not in Education Employment or Training (NEET).¹³
46. The government should therefore support and invest in education to ensure that all teachers feel fully equipped in being able to deliver high quality, impactful lesson for *all* learners, including boys.
47. ASCL has made previous relevant recommendations related to assessment and curriculum in our The Forgotten Third report and in The ASCL Blueprint: A Great Education for Every Child.

What are the wider social implications of boys' underperformance and under engagement with education?

48. These are myriad. They include:
 - lack of confidence
 - boys and men becoming more isolated from peers and society
 - links to suicide and mental health
 - unemployment and the implications on the welfare state
 - involvement in crime
49. These undesirable consequences too often become embedded and multi-generational. It is essential that they are taken seriously.

C. Conclusion

50. ASCL welcomes this important inquiry.
51. We would be happy to expand on any of the points we have made here, and to assist the inquiry in any way that would be helpful.

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¹³ [Key stage 4 destination measures, Academic year 2021/22 – Explore education statistics – GOV.UK \(explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/explore-education-statistics) [Statistics: destinations of key stage 4 and 5 students - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/statistics/destinations-of-key-stage-4-and-5-students)