

“Orenda”: To nurture the Spirit

A Commentary on Education, Youth & Parenting

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What’s Wrong With Our Boys?

If you have a daughter and a son, like I do, the odds are your daughter will have a higher GPA in school, and is more likely to go on to college and earn a degree in four years or less compared to your son. Here in America women now outpace men in college enrollment by a ratio of 1.4 to 1, and that gap has been widening for decades. At some colleges, the ratio of males to females has gotten so low that colleges like Southwestern University here in Georgetown, and Mary Hardin Baylor in Belton, started or rebooted dead football programs to attract more males to campus. Some admission departments are so concerned that they are exploring the idea of “affirmative action” for males. As one male student said when learning his college had a male to female ratio of 1 to 2, “that’s awesome!”

If you only have daughters you still be concerned. What does this do to the odds your high achieving daughter is likely to find suitable dates with the opposite sex? The latest smart phone dating app is not going to fix this problem. With far fewer good paying manufacturing jobs, oil rig gigs, or other jobs that don’t require a professional degree, we are going to see a lot more males underemployed and hanging around your street corner in the years to come.

I know some of my readers will think I’m “crying wolf” because we still have gender wage disparities in some careers, and men still occupy most of the CEO corner offices and high level jobs in the STEM related fields. Well, that is changing rapidly and that is a good thing for our daughters.

In the recent book [The Rise of Women](#), Columbia University author and researcher Thomas DiPrete states that, “young men are overly optimistic about their ability to earn a livable salary, even though they’re less educated than women”. We now live in a rapidly changing world where the single most important asset is your mind and not your muscles. We automate almost everything now. Robots now do what men and women use to do on the assembly line. More and more workers are needed who can figure out and operate complex systems. Unfortunately many of our boys are totally unprepared for this shift. They don’t even know what’s going to hit them when they graduate from high school.

With these trends in mind, my vision for our Orenda charter schools was to make sure our boys are just as college and career ready as our girls. Based on GPA’s and our college admission rates, I’m happy to report we are significantly better at this than most other schools, but we still need to do better. When we look at our school data we always break it down by gender, along with several other factors, and clearly we are doing something right for those boys who stay through to graduation. However, we still lose too many boys that are struggling academically, especially in grades 8, 9, and 10, to other school transfers.

I believe the following ingredients must be present in our schools to achieve high rates of academic success with boys, as well as girls. First, and most importantly, the school culture must maintain high

expectations. Don't give boys any other option but rigor and excellence. The problem with many large schools is that they offer multiple academic tracks a boy can take and too often boys will take the easy road and follow their peers into mediocrity. At our college prep campuses everybody must take a minimum of four Advanced Placement classes and at least one AP Exam for college credit before they can receive a diploma. At our Tech campus many of our male students take dual enrollment classes for college credit while in high school, and we've had some accelerate through the required course work to graduate early.

We need all our faculty and parents to appreciate, celebrate and accommodate the unique challenges of educating boys. Of course, not all boys are the same, and what I'm about to write is true for some girls as well. Boys need to be allowed to move, a lot. My sister has taught English her entire career in both middle and high school. I have seen her in action. She loves teaching boys and is an advocate for all male classrooms (unlikely to happen so she adapts). What is beautiful to watch in her classrooms is how much body movement goes on her classrooms as she allows and encourages her boys, and girls, to pace, play and compete, yes compete, while studying Shakespeare. She makes sure her male students have fun while learning. Her STAAR test scores are consistently exceptional.

If we didn't expect our boys to sit still for so many hours a day in daycare centers, and later in our school classrooms, would we have so many of them on Ritalin, and other ADHD medications? I'm not a physician, and I'm not suggesting these medications are not sometimes medically appropriate, but I've raised a "hyper-active" boy, served as CEO of children and adolescent behavioral health treatment centers, and I do my research. I'm totally convinced by the evidence that we have too many boys on these medications when what would work better for many of them is for the adults who are supervising, teaching, or coaching them, to accommodate their natural need and desire for space, movement, play and competition. This can be inconvenient for the adults as it is easier to "drug em up" than to get on the floor and play with them, or create a lesson plan that incorporates movement, competition and fun.

Boys need meaningful relationships and to feel like they belong. Belonging is one of the four key values in our "Circle of Courage" philosophy of education and raising good children. It begins in the home of course. Where are the Fathers? Hopefully each one of our male students has a Father who is involved and active in parenting their son, along with their mother. Divorce is no excuse. Fathers, spend quality time with your son.

As our boys walk into our schools, they should feel accepted for being a boy and they should be encouraged and free to share all their emotions. We know many of our boys are insecure about their abilities and that keeps many of them less engaged in school or acting out. As a parent, teacher, coach or instructor, we need to praise our boys, tell them we love them and that we expect great things from them because we know they are capable.

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The word “orenda” was used by the Native American Iroquois meaning “life-force” or “spirit”, although this could be too simple an English translation. As possessed by the greatest spirits, orenda could be a mighty, even deifying force. Among humans it was the force of healing.