The Trouble with Boys: A Surprising Report Card on Our Sons, Their Problems at School, and What Parents and Educators Must Do

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In The Trouble with Boys: A Surprising Report Card on Our Sons, Their Problems at School, and What Parents and Educators Must Do, author Peg Tyre advocates for struggling male students. Tyre, an investigative reporter and former staff writer for Newsweek, not only researched her topic extensively but also interviewed hundreds of teachers, parents, and administrators. Her goal was "to look at the boy problem fairly, clearly, and compassionately" (p. 13). Tyre's discoveries inspired a book aptly described on its cover as a "manifesto for change." Packed with thought-provoking commentary and detailed case studies, her discussions of the "boy problem" also report innovative techniques that some educators are using to address it. By reading her illuminating book, a school counselor can gain valuable insights about male students and can learn strategies to help them succeed in school.

Tyre acknowledges that many readers will find it challenging to see boys as a disadvantaged population, especially considering the long history of discrimination against female students. She therefore presents an impressive amount of quantitative data to support her hypothesis that in the current decade boys are experiencing academic challenges at every educational level. School counselors, who play an important role in academic development and dropout prevention, will find Tyre's statistics alarming. She reports that just 65% of boys finish high school in comparison to 72% of girls and that only 44% of students who take Advanced Placement classes in high school are male. The author explains that the disparity between male and female students crosses racial and socioeconomic boundaries and can be found "in poor neighborhoods, in elite schools that serve the very rich, and in many middle-class suburban schools" (p. 23). This disturbing trend suggests that school counselors are likely to find boys performing poorly wherever they work.

The Trouble with Boys examines specific issues that affect male students from preschool to college and includes much information that will be useful to school counselors. One of Tyre's strongest arguments is that preschools and elementary schools should provide ample opportunities for free play and movement. Tyre notes that many schools have eliminated recess or offer it for only 15 minutes a day. As a result, naturally active boys spend most of the day sitting, listening, and writing. Tyre tells the stories of young boys whose frequent movement in class caused teachers to label them "incorrigible" or to recommend medication. She emphasizes the negative impact that these responses can have on a boy's self-confidence and desire to attend school. The strategies she offers for creating a "boy-friendly" learning environment include daily physical activity and kindergarten classes that focus primarily on social and emotional development. Acknowledging that this approach will be a hard sell for schools trying to raise students' reading and math scores, Tyre reports that interacting successfully with peers during recess can lead to higher scores on standardized tests. She also presents a case study of a third-grade teacher who combines reading and math instruction with hands-on activities such as block building. Elementary school counselors will find this information helpful as they consult with teachers and plan classroom guidance lessons.
High school counselors will appreciate the chapter called "College: Where the Boys Aren't," which points out that only 43% of undergraduate college students are male. Tyre lists the reasons colleges admit more female applicants: Girls typically have higher grade point averages and, with the exception of sports, participate in more extracurricular activities. Also, although boys tend to score slightly higher than girls on the SAT, far fewer boys take the test. The book quotes a college advisor who acknowledges her male students' intelligence but says, "Many of these kids felt ... that they just didn't need to apply themselves in high school" (p. 261). Tyre neglects to mention school counselors' involvement in helping students prepare for college, but school counselors will nevertheless recognize that they can help reverse this trend of underachievement by motivating male students to succeed in rigorous classes, participate in clubs and student organizations, and take the SAT.

A thoughtful, perceptive chapter entitled "Boys Alone" focuses on the isolation that many boys experience. Tyre argues that girls are expected to form strong relationships with peers and share feelings with each other, but our culture assumes that boys should be "physically tough, independent, self-sufficient, and stoic" (p. 242). Research nevertheless shows that boys benefit from having close relationships with both peers and adults. Tyre offers a powerful case study about Octavius, a teenager who was on the verge of dropping out until a graduation coach named Kelli started working with him. Kelli met regularly with Octavius and encouraged him to attend school, take an extra course to improve his achievement test scores, and work part-time to support his young daughter. By the time Tyre interviewed Octavius, he was on track to receive his high school diploma and planned to enroll at a technical college. His story is especially inspiring to school counselors because it shows the positive impact of building relationships with male students.

Many educators will disagree with some of Tyre's proposals. For example, in a chapter called "Less Bronte, More Bond," the author explains that teachers often perceive boys' favorite literature as silly or crass, and she believes that they should reconsider their boundaries in order to engage male students. Reading and writing are areas where boys are increasingly lagging behind girls: She cites a 2004 study indicating that the deficit between boys' and girls' average reading scores increases with time, growing from 5 points in elementary school to 14 points in high school. Tyre explains that after years of observing that girls are better readers, many boys perceive reading as a "feminine activity" and conclude that "men don't read" (p. 143). She therefore suggests that teachers allow male students to bring their favorite literature to school, which may include sports books, graphic novels, books of facts such as the Guinness Book of World Records, and even comic books. Tyre also thinks that teachers should invite an adult male who will be perceived as masculine, such as a police officer, to read to students. Although not everyone will agree with some of her ideas in this chapter, she provides solid evidence and practical recommendations that school counselors can discuss with teachers.

In other chapters, some of Tyre's statements about issues that affect male students are also controversial. One such issue is video games, which are undeniably popular among boys of every age. While acknowledging public fears about violence in the games and admitting that overuse can lead to aggression, Tyre argues that in moderation they engage boys and could even be used for instruction. In another chapter she discusses whether boys would perform better if schools taught core subjects such as English and math in single-sex classrooms while allowing electives to be coed. Some readers may question the practicality of these chapters as most schools have not yet implemented video game-based learning or created single-sex classrooms. Furthermore, when discussing these topics, Tyre gives limited data to support her ideas. Unless future research shows that these practices are effective, school counselors are not very likely to encounter them.
Because Tyre wrote The Trouble with Boys for a broad audience of parents and educators, her book does not recommend specific interventions for school counselors. Nevertheless, the book will give school counselors a better understanding of their male students' needs. An elementary school counselor will learn how to create a "boy-friendly" room for classroom guidance lessons. A high school counselor will learn ways to motivate male students as they prepare for postsecondary education or employment. The book also will encourage school counselors at every level to advocate for male students labeled "troubled," "lazy," or "incorrigible" by faculty or parents.

Peg Tyre's book is balanced and wise in perspective, engaging in style, and above all, rich in content. It is intelligently written and generally persuasive. Even though her book is controversial in places, it is being read by many parents and teachers, as evidenced by its having been on the New York Times bestseller list. School counselors will want to know what The Trouble with Boys has to say.

Stephen Kennedy is a school counselor at Northeast Guilford High School, McLeansville, NC. He can be reached via e-mail at kenneferences@gsnc.com.