

Must Jill Come Tumbling After?

By Delaine Eastin, California superintendent of public instruction, 1995-2003

When we observe the Taliban burning down girls' schools, we intuitively sense what's at work. Cultures that stubbornly refuse to harness half their brainpower also happen to be the poorest places on earth. The two are directly connected. Now go to Los Angeles or New York. Early marriage, early motherhood, single motherhood, divorce—these don't burn down girls' schools, they burn down girls' dreams. The net effect on our society is tragically similar to what has been wrought in a third-world country.

Today the education of our children, particularly our girls, is not positioning our nation to lead the world in terms of our democracy or our economy. In science and mathematics education today, some nations do a better job for girls than does the United States. Within a few years, Indian and Chinese children may well be better positioned as scientists, mathematicians, and engineers than our children.

Despite some progress, we know there is less access to math and science for girls. And while more young women are getting college degrees in some of the sciences, they remain flat in engineering, computer science, and mathematics. Why? "Study after study has shown that adults, both teachers and parents, underestimate the intelligence of girls," observe education scholars Myra and David Sadker in their 1994 book *Failing at Fairness*.¹ "Teachers' beliefs that boys are smarter in mathematics and science begin in the earliest school years, at the very time when girls are getting better grades and equal scores on standardized tests."

Nor has this situation improved markedly since then. The American Association of University Women provides some important data in its series of studies on gender equity in schools in the 1990s. It

points out girls make up a small percentage of students in computer science classes and that the gender gap widens between 8th and 11th grade. To the extent that girls enter computer courses, they are more likely to take clerical courses, and less likely to enroll in advanced science and graphics courses. And to the extent that vocational and technical educational training exists in high schools, there is an institutionalization of sexist cultural norms that tends to stereotype by gender.²

Forty years ago it was assumed that more men participated in sports because women were uninterested. With the passage of Title IX of the Education Act of 1972, the number of women in high school sports grew 904 percent.³ It turns out the girls were interested, as Barbara Richardson and Pamela Sandoval note in their 2007 study “Impact of Education on Gender Equity in Employment.”⁴ What other things are we that sure of that just aren’t so?

Today’s children must be educated to the reality that virtually all of them will work 30 to 40 years outside the home—and there will be scant opportunities to go back later and try it again unless they have a good education foundation, argue Richardson and Sandoval. They’re right, of course. Every child must know it’s now or never. Education is the best path to liberty and justice for all. Jack and Jill must ascend the path on the same footing or America will stumble.

Education is the best path to liberty and justice for all.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Myra Sadker and David Sadker, *Failing at Fairness: How Our Schools Cheat Girls* (New York: Touchstone, 1994).
- 2 American Association of University Women, “Tech Savvy: Educating Girls in the New Computer Age” (2000), available at <http://www.aauw.org/research/upload/techsavvy.pdf>.
- 3 Women’s Sports Foundation, “2008 Statistics – Gender Equity in High School and College Athletics: Most Recent Participation and Budget Statistics” (2008), available at <http://www.womenssportsfoundation.org/Content/Articles/Issues/General/123/2008-Statistics--Gender%20Equity-in-High-School-and-College-Athletics-Most-Recent-Participation--Budge.aspx>.
- 4 Barbara Richardson and Pamela Sandoval, “Impact of Education on Gender Equity in Employment.” In Susan Klein, ed., *Handbook for Achieving Gender Equity Through Education*, Second Edition (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2007).