'Echoes of Disparity'

Issues Brief on Boys' Education in Australia

April 2025

Catholic Schools NSW

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Australia is facing a growing crisis in boys' education, with boys struggling in literacy and over-represented among the most academically vulnerable school students. This trend is driving negative outcomes for young men in higher educational attainment, employment participation, and other stages of life.

- While gender gaps in schooling are often framed around the average differences between boys and girls, the more pressing concern lies in the over-representation of boys among the lowest performing students. NAPLAN data reveals boys are twice as likely as girls to score in the lowest performance bands in the literacy domains. Even in numeracy, where boys traditionally outperform girls on average, the lowest performers are equally likely to be boys.

- International assessments like PISA, PIRLS, and TIMSS reveal similar trends, with boys over-represented among the low-achieving students in reading, and similarly represented in mathematics and science. Global comparisons indicate that the challenges facing boys are not unique to Australia; similar disparities are seen in comparable countries.

- The causes underlying the gender gap in education remain debated, with proposed factors including biological differences, behavioral issues, and cultural stereotypes. However, posited causes include many that are addressable by policy; in particular, analysts suggest Australia's highly disruptive classrooms by world standards are more likely to disadvantage boys' learning.

- More broadly, disparities in the presence of disabilities are likely to exacerbate the gender gaps. Boys are more likely than girls to be classified with a disability, and the gap widens for more serious disabilities. For example, in NSW Catholic schools, boys make up 50% of students, but 59% of students with disability.

- Despite the scale of the problem, the educational underperformance of boys has not received commensurate policy attention. Government monitoring and reporting often focuses on areas where girls lag, while overlooking even wider disparities to the detriment of boys. While it is important to address gender gaps that disadvantage girls, such as in Mathematics and certain STEM subjects, these do not preclude complementary efforts to close other gender gaps that negatively affect boys.

- This paper reviews current trends in gender gaps within Australian schools, emphasising the specific difficulties boys encounter, and assessing public discourse on the causes and policy responses to this pressing social justice issue.

CONTENTS

PREFACE: '30 YEARS OF PUBLIC POLICY DENIAL'

> *In recent decades greater attention has been given to addressing past inequities which had worked to the disadvantage of girls and women in education, the workplace and the broader community. While some of these inequities still exist, many parents, teachers, academics and community workers have expressed concern that, particularly in the area of education, boys are not coping with the changes as well as girls. The evidence seems to support these concerns.*[1]

The text above was written in 2002 but could have aptly applied to any point in the last thirty years. This history of public policy on boys' education is one of ongoing neglect, with periodic bouts of media attention failing to produce any sustained outcomes in public policy.

The text above came from a rare moment of policy attention in 2002, when a bipartisan committee in federal parliament – whose members included Brendan Nelson, Julia Gillard, and the current Prime Minister, Anthony Albanese – published their report, *Boys: Getting It Right*, which "*…unanimously recommended that governments begin programs to assist boys, especially in literacy."*[2] Despite its bipartisan backing, many of its recommendations never made it to implementation, and today there exist few if any such programs targeting boys' literacy.

Even the report's ostensibly 'gender-neutral' recommendations usually failed to progress. For example, although it advised "*pre-service training in teaching literacy should involve … explicit, intensive, structured phonics as an essential element in early and remedial literacy instruction*" (Recommendation #8), this never came to pass, and 21 years later, the *Strong Beginnings: Report of the Teacher Education Expert Panel* (July 2023) was having to make the precise same recommendation.[3] The report's aftermath saw policy discourse return to a quagmire of ideological quarrels, where even the premises of boys' disadvantages were contested in ideological disputes, dismissed as "*tales of victimisation*"[4] or maintaining an "*intellectual gender hierarchy*".[5]

Since 2002, there have been no follow-up parliamentary inquiries into boys' education, either at the federal or state levels. The four trends that formed the catalyst for the original inquiry – namely, gender gaps in primary-level literacy benchmarks, secondary-level tertiary entrance scores, retention rates, and higher education participation – are all as salient now as they were twenty years ago.

INTRODUCTION: 'TAILS, NOT AVERAGES'

Australia's school system faces many challenges, but not all have received the attention their severity deserves. Leading this pack of overlooked crises is the educational underperformance of boys, and particularly their over-representation among the most academically vulnerable students. As one researcher put it, the persistent underperformance of boys in our school system is **the social justice issue that nobody is talking about**.[6]

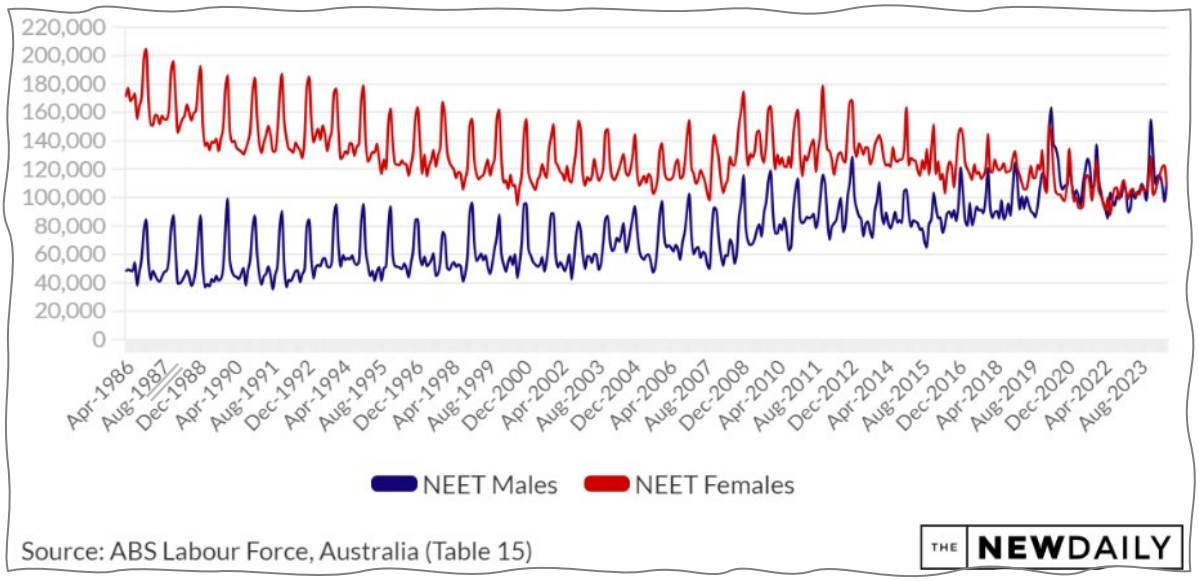
Problems for boys in school can have flow-on effects further in life. The *Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development* (OECD) warn:

> Boys who lag behind and lack basic proficiency in reading may face **difficulties in gaining access to further education, desirable positions in the labour market and full personal development**.... boys are significantly more likely than girls to be disengaged from school, get lower marks, repeat grades, and play video games in their free time.[7]

In recent years, the share of young men who have dropped out of the labour force has been rising, and for the first time, exceeds that of young women.[8] As demographer Simon Kuestenmacher notes, unemployment among young people (aged 15-24) is markedly worse for men (141,000 or 11.3 per cent) than for women (95,000 or 8.2 per cent).[9]

Young men outnumber young women among those *Not in Employment, Education, or Training.*

Population aged 15-24 who are neither in full-time education nor in the labour force by gender, 1986-2024 (Source: Kuestenmacher, 2024.)



Similar trends are seen in the US, UK, and other states.[10] [11] Furthermore, at a time when ever more jobs require a university degree (the Universities Accord estimates 55% of 25-35-year-olds will need a degree by 2050[12]), the gender gap in university attainment has never been wider; men now make up only 43% of university enrolments.[13] It is not unreasonable to assume that many of these issues - employment, university attainment, and others - can be traced back to disparities in school.

Crucially, the pool of academically underperforming school students, who will make up the bulk of those falling out of the labour force, contains far more boys than girls. This critical statistic is often

disguised in simplistic comparisons between the 'average boy' and the 'average girl', where this gender gap appears much smaller, but this focus on averages masks problems at the tail.

As the OECD is at pains to point out:

> It is important to consider performance differences at these extremes because variability in student performance (as measured by the standard deviation) is greater among boys than girls in all subjects measured by PISA on average across OECD countries and in most countries/economies… **Among the 10% weakest-performing students, girls outperformed boys on average across OECD countries**.[14]

This mirrors broader patterns in society, where the direction of gender disparities varies by the point on the totem pole; 78% of Australian CEOs are men,[15] and the average male earns 21.8% more than the average female;[16] yet equally, men make up 92% of Australia's prison population,[17] 75% of suicide deaths,[18] and more than two in three drug- or alcohol-related deaths[19] – successes for men at the top offer no relief to the misfortunes of those men at the bottom.

Pointing out concerning trends for boys does not diminish challenges facing girls. Policy analysis is not a zero-sum game. There are gender-specific problems facing both boys and girls in Australian schools, and policy responses must consider both. As summarised by the NSW *Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation* (CESE):

> … there is evidence internationally that 'new' gender gaps are emerging: boys are more likely to be **disengaged from school** than girls, have **low skills** and **poor academic achievement**, and to **leave school early**; whereas girls are more likely than boys to have less **self-confidence** when it comes to science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects and are **underrepresented in maths, physical sciences and computing in higher education**.[20]

Nevertheless, among the most academically vulnerable students, there are wider disparities to the detriment of boys, and this warrants policy reflection. As such, this report presents an updated summary of the latest data on the challenges facing boys in Australian schools.

GENDER GAPS IN NAPLAN

The 'gender gap' in schooling is evident in many areas but is most comprehensively illustrated in NAPLAN results.

National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy ('NAPLAN') is an annual assessment administered on a census basis and delivered in school years 3, 5, 7 and 9 for literacy and numeracy; specifically, five domains: *Reading*, *Writing*, *Spelling*, *Grammar & Punctuation*, and *Numeracy*. National reporting of NAPLAN's results by its administrator, the *Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority* (ACARA), includes breakdowns for various subgroups: indigeneity, language background, parental occupation and education, geographical remoteness, and gender.

Substantial differences in NAPLAN results are seen across all these groups, including gender. Boys and girls show different patterns of results in average achievement, and in their representation among the top and bottom performers. These gender gaps are shown to have important flow-on effects further in study; for example, Semo *et al.* (2024) found:

> Just two factors are associated with achieving a high ATAR: Year 9 NAPLAN performance and gender – students with higher NAPLAN scores are almost twice as likely to achieve an ATAR score of 90 or above; and female students are also almost twice as likely as males to achieve ATAR scores of 90 or above.[21]

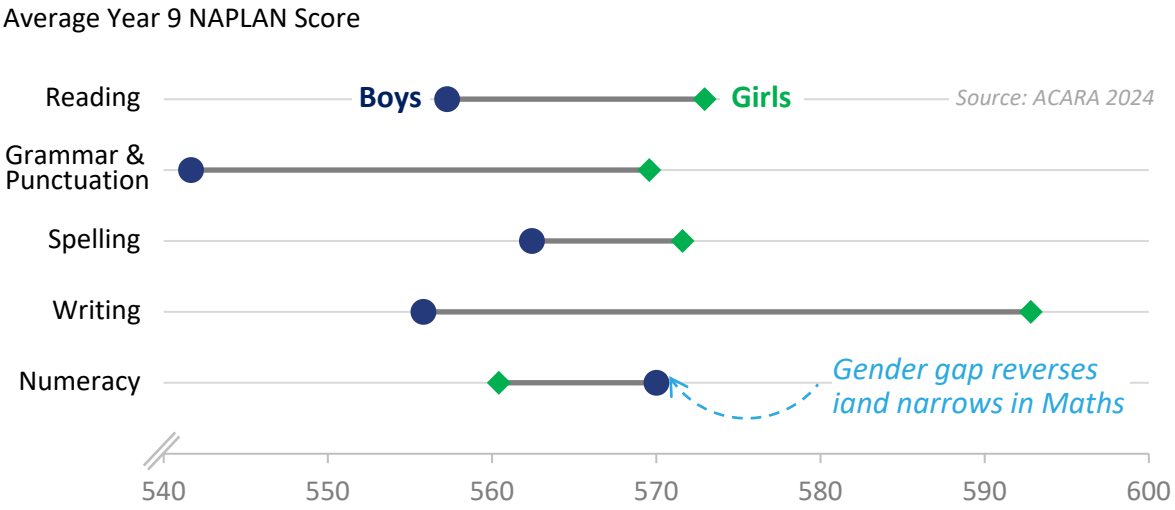
Since NAPLAN testing began in 2008, a greater percentage of boys than girls have failed to meet the national minimum standard across all the cohorts tested (Years 3, 5, 7 and 9) in four out of the five tested domains: reading, writing, grammar and punctuation, and spelling.

AVERAGE ACHIEVEMENT

Girls achieve higher average scores than boys in all 16 of NAPLAN's *literacy* assessments, and boys achieve higher average scores than girls in all 4 of NAPLAN's *numeracy* assessments.[22] Notably, by the time students reach Year 9, the 'numeracy gap' (in favour of boys) is usually smaller than the 'literacy gap' (in favour of girls).

As summarised in Thomas *et al.* (2023), *"…the average Year 9 boy scored between approximately 10 months and 24 months of equivalent learning behind the average girl depending on the aspect of literacy tested…"*[23]

Average achievement is higher among girls than boys in every NAPLAN domain, except *Numeracy*.



In *Writing* and *Grammar & Punctuation*, the gender gap widens in the shift from primary to secondary schooling.

Table 1: Average NAPLAN score by gender, domain, year in NAPLAN 2024

Average score: Girls, Boys (Gap)

Year	Reading	Writing	Spelling	Grammar & Punctuation	Numeracy
Year 3	412, 396 **(-16)**	426, 406 **(-20)**	403, 399 **(-4)**	415, 403 **(-13)**	396, 412 **(+16)**
Year 5	499, 486 **(-13)**	495, 475 **(-20)**	490, 483 **(-8)**	507, 490 **(-17)**	480, 498 **(+18)**
Year 7	543, 527 **(-16)**	556, 525 **(-32)**	546, 534 **(-12)**	548, 526 **(-23)**	533, 547 **(+14)**
Year 9	573, 557 **(-16)**	593, 556 **(-37)**	572, 562 **(-9)**	570, 542 **(-28)**	560, 570 **(+10)**

While these differences in averages are already substantial, they actually underestimate the size of the problem, which is only fully revealed when exploring the 'tail' of performance.

'THE TAIL': LOWEST BANDS

From an equity point of view, focusing on the *lowest performers* is more important than focusing on the *average performer*. These students at the tail end are most at risk and merit prioritised attention.

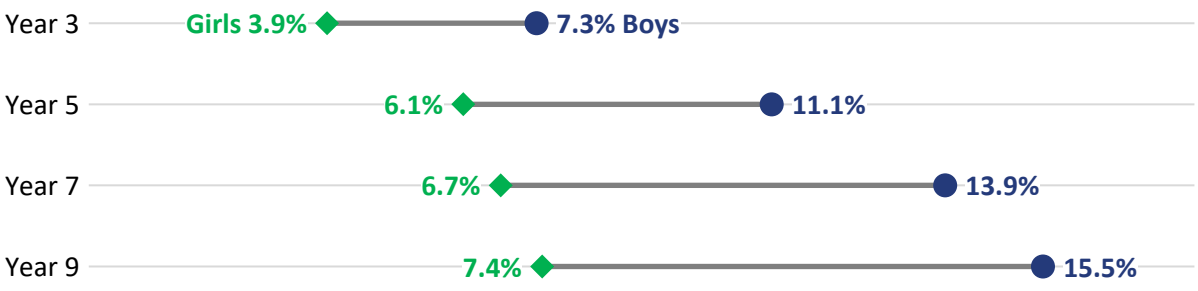
More specifically, *average score* is a less useful metric than the *share of students in the lowest bands*. ACARA categorise NAPLAN scores using four groupings: *Exceeding* (the highest band), *Strong, Developing*, and *Needs Additional Support* (the lowest band). Observing students in the lowest band shows an even bleaker picture for boys in Australian schools.

In literacy assessments, boys are over-represented in the lowest bands, being around twice as likely as girls to need additional support. As Thomas *et al.* (2024) point out, the 'gender gap' against boys widens over time,[24] with a particular surge during the transition from primary to secondary school:

> While gender gaps for the four tested aspects of literacy widened across the years of NAPLAN testing, a noticeable increase occurred between Years 5 and 7, pointing to **the transition from primary to secondary school as the key stage of schooling when boys as a group were most outpaced by girls**.

More boys than girls fall behind, and the gap widens with boys' disengagement in the middle years.

"Needs Additional Support" (lowest band) in NAPLAN Writing



Source: ACARA 2024

Thomas *et al.* (2024) further summarise:[25]

> …on average, males outperform females in numeracy and females outperform males in literacy (i.e. reading and writing) tests, it also shows that **the gaps are not equal**. The literacy gaps are considerably wider, particularly for writing. Female literacy performance does not appear to be affected in the transition from primary to secondary school, while many more males struggle to meet the increased literacy demands of the secondary years.

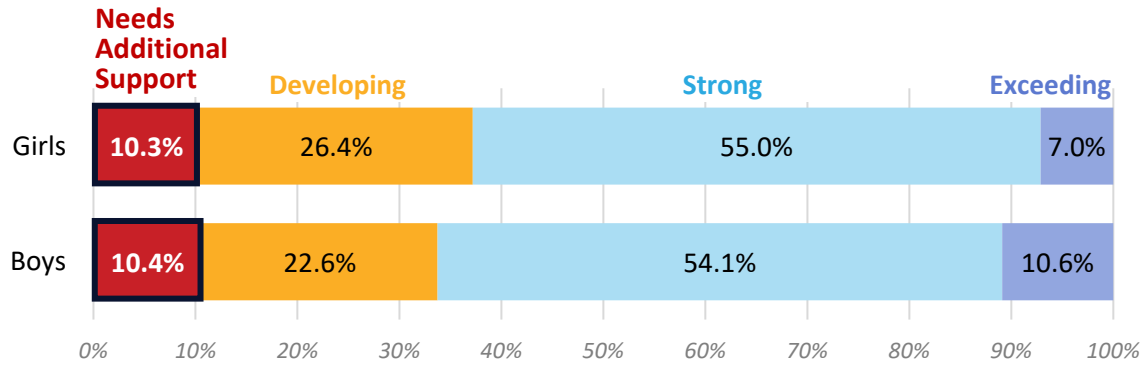
Even in *Numeracy*, although boys achieve higher average scores than girls, they make up equal shares of low performers by Year 9. Worryingly, much of this low performance can be traced back six years earlier to Year 3; Getenet (2024) found early achievement in *Numeracy* is highly predictive of later achievement, and that this effect was larger for boys:

> …the predictive value of prior numeracy achievement is higher and more significant for male students than for female students. This highlights **the need for targeted support and interventions to improve the numeracy skills of male students struggling in this area**.[26]

Thus, it would be a mistake to assume the academic problems facing boys are restricted to literacy alone.

Even in *Numeracy*, boys are equally likely to need additional support.

Year 9 Numeracy NAPLAN 2024



In every NAPLAN literacy domain, boys are more likely than girls to need additional support.

Table 2: % Needs Additional Support by gender, domain, year in NAPLAN 2024

"% Needs Additional Support": Girls, Boys **(Gap)**

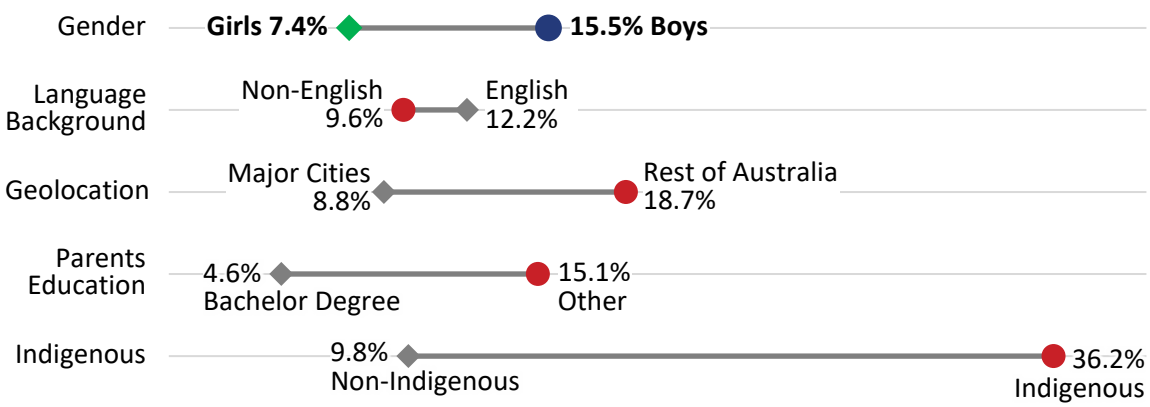
Year	Reading	Writing	Spelling	Grammar & Punctuation	Numeracy
Year 3	9.5, 12.9 **(3.4)**	3.9, 7.3 **(3.4)**	10, 12.3 **(2.3)**	14.3, 17.9 **(3.5)**	10.5, 8.8 **(-1.7)**
Year 5	6.8, 10.5 **(3.8)**	6.1, 11.1 **(5.0)**	7.9, 11.0 **(3.1)**	7.9, 12.7 **(4.8)**	9.1, 8.0 **(-1.1)**
Year 7	7.5, 12.8 **(5.4)**	6.7, 13.9 **(7.2)**	5.9, 9.7 **(3.8)**	9.5, 16.7 **(7.2)**	9.4, 9.2 **(-0.2)**
Year 9	8.1, 13.9 **(5.8)**	7.4, 15.5 **(8.2)**	5.1, 8.6 **(3.5)**	10.2, 18.8 **(8.6)**	10.3, 10.4 **(0.1)**

Compared to other equity cohorts, the gender gap in NAPLAN results is significant. It is wider than the gap between students from English and non-English speaking backgrounds, and comparable to the gap between students living in major cities and those in the rest of Australia.

This comparison is worth noting given the policy attention that such other disparities can attract, in particular, government funding. The 'Gonski' funding model of Australian schools includes extra funds for students with disability, indigenous students, socio-educationally disadvantaged students, and students with low-English proficiency; additional loadings are given for small or geographically remote schools.[27] Clearly, there are many determinants of academic outcomes, and while gender is not the largest, it is substantial, and comparable to many of these other factors that attract additional funding.

The gender gap remains significant in the context of other equity gaps.

"Needs Additional Support" in NAPLAN Year 9 Writing

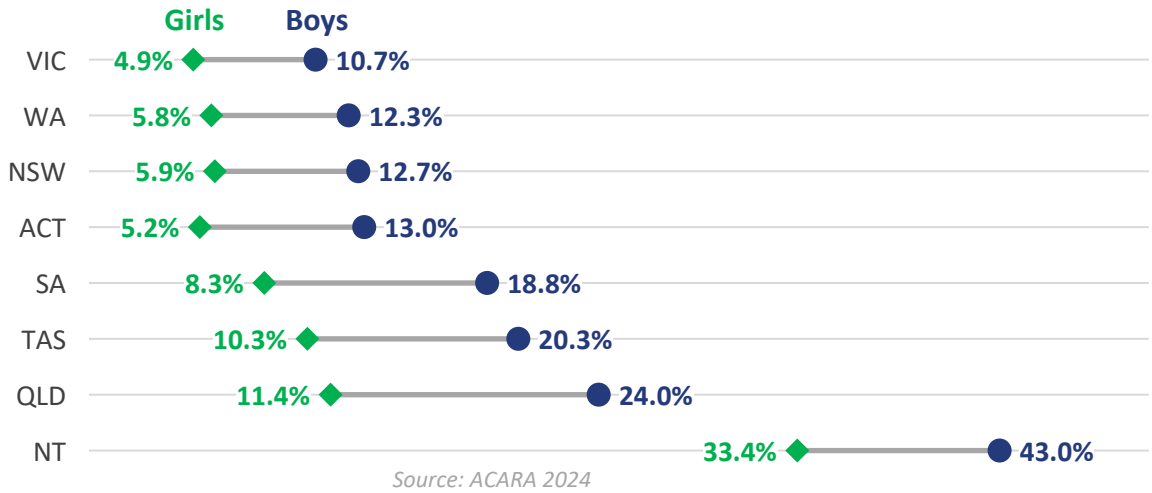


Source: ACARA 2024

The gender gap is visible across all states and territories, where boys are usually around twice as likely as girls to need additional support in literacy assessments. This ratio is typically highest in the ACT, where, for example, boys are 2.5x more likely than girls to need additional support in Year 9 *Writing*. By contrast, this ratio is the smallest in the Northern Territory, at only 1.3x, despite the larger absolute differences.

Across the states, boys are consistently more than twice as likely as girls to need additional support in Year 9 *Writing*.

"Needs Additional Support" in NAPLAN Year 9 Writing



Source: ACARA 2024

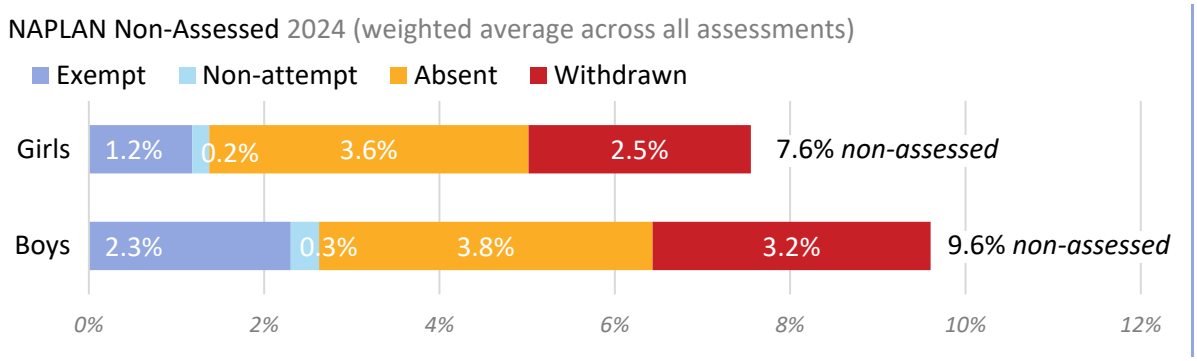
Overall, analysis of NAPLAN's lowest performers reveals a far bleaker picture for boys than is visible through a simple comparison of averages.

PARTICIPATION

There is additional evidence that NAPLAN statistics may even be *underestimating* the gender gap.

Boys are 94% more likely than girls to be exempted from participating in NAPLAN, and 76% more likely to be withdrawn.[28] Assessment rates are lower for boys than for girls in all twenty NAPLAN assessments, including the *Numeracy* tests. Overall, boys are 27% more likely than girls to be non-assessed.

Boys are less likely to be assessed in NAPLAN.



If these non-assessed students are likely to score lower than average, which is a reasonable assumption[29], then the higher non-assessment rate for boys is artificially narrowing the gender gap in available statistics.

This disparity sits within a wider trend where NAPLAN participation has been declining over time. The risks from this trend have been noted by the *Australian Education Research Organisation* (AERO):[30]

> *Participation rates among students from priority equity groups are much lower, and declining faster, than average. This poses **a significant challenge for measuring and monitoring the equity gaps** in Australian education systems.*

GENDER GAPS IN INTERNATIONAL ASSESSMENTS

Australia's gender gaps in school achievement are seen not only in local NAPLAN assessments, but also in international assessments. These international assessments – *PISA*, *PIRLS*, and *TIMSS* – reveal that the challenges facing boys are not unique to Australia; similar disparities are seen in comparable countries.

Australian schoolkids are typically benchmarked using three major international assessments.

Table 3: Major international assessments of school-aged children

Test	Sponsor	Frequency	Age / Grade	Domain(s)
Programme for International Student Assessment (**PISA**)	*Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development* (**OECD**)	Every three years (latest 2022)	15 year olds	Reading, Science, Mathematics
Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (**PIRLS**)	*International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement* (**IEA**)	Every five years (latest 2021)	9-10 year olds	Reading
Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (**TIMSS**)		Every four years (latest 2023)	Grade 4, Grade 8	Science, Mathematics

Similar to *NAPLAN*, *PISA* and *PIRLS* show boys, on average, significantly underperform compared to girls in *Reading*. Also, similar to NAPLAN, PISA shows that the gap favouring girls in Reading is much wider (twice as large) than that favouring boys in *Mathematics*. While *PISA* shows boys and girls performing similarly well in *Science*, the latest *TIMSS* showed a gap in favour of boys that is wider than the international average (*TIMSS* also shows a wider-than-usual average gap in favour of boys in *Mathematics*, however, this picture changes when looking at the lower 'tail' of performance).

Australia's gender gaps in school achievements are generally similar to those of other countries.

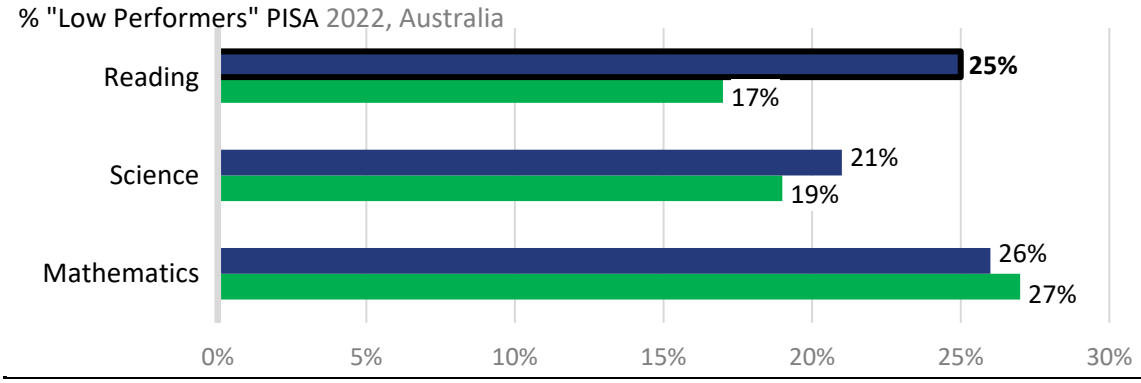
Table 4: International comparisons of Australian School Gender Gaps

Test	Domains	Year	Age / Grade	Comparison group	Comparison	Gap Rank	*Gap compared (Boys vs Girls)*
PISA	Reading	2022	15yo	OECD avg.	**Similar**	48/73	*-22 vs -24pts*
PISA	Mathematics	2022	15yo	OECD avg.	**Similar**	17/73	*+11 vs +9ts*
PISA	Science	2022	15yo	OECD avg.	**Similar**	53/73	*+2 vs 0pts*
PIRLS	Reading	2021	Year 4	57 countries	**Similar**	24/57	*+17 vs +18pts*
TIMSS	Mathematics	2023	Year 4	58 countries	**Wider**	2/58	*+23 vs +10pts*
TIMSS	Mathematics	2023	Year 8	44 countries	**Wider**	12/44	*+13 vs +6pts*
TIMSS	Science	2023	Year 4	58 countries	**Wider**	6/58	*+10 vs -1pts*
TIMSS	Science	2023	Year 8	44 countries	**Wider**	4/44	*+13 vs -3pts*

Crucially, international assessments confirm that boys are over-represented among students struggling academically, even in *Mathematics*, traditionally considered the strongest domain for boys. As noted by the OECD:

> **In all three PISA domains, including Mathematics, the weakest-performing (10th percentile) girls outperformed the weakest performing boys.** [31]

Boys are over-represented among low performers in Reading, and similarly represented to girls in Mathematics.

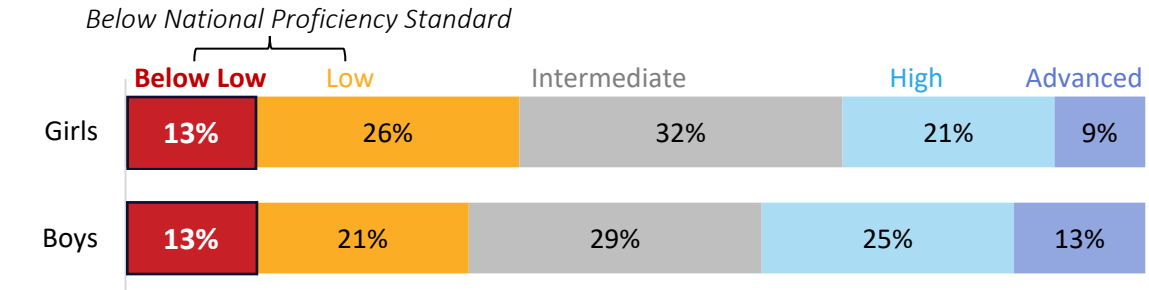


Even in *TIMSS*, although more boys than girls achieve high scores in *Mathematics* and *Science*, boys and girls are similarly likely to achieve lower scores. In all four tests, similar shares of boys and girls were in the lowest scoring band, *Below Low*: [32]

- Year 4 Mathematics: 8% Boys, 10% Girls
- Year 8 Mathematics: 13% Boys, 13% Girls
- Year 4 Science: 5% Boys, 5% Girls
- Year 8 Science: 11% Boys, 12% Girls

Once again, the tail ends of performance show a very different story to the averages.

Although boys are over-represented in Maths top performers, they are more equally represented among lower scorers.



Thus, international assessments confirm *NAPLAN* trends; that there is a persistent literacy gap disfavouring boys, which is wider than the numeracy gap disfavouring girls, and that boys are similarly- or over-represented among the lowest performers, even in their strongest domain of *Mathematics*.

CAUSES OF THE GENDER GAP

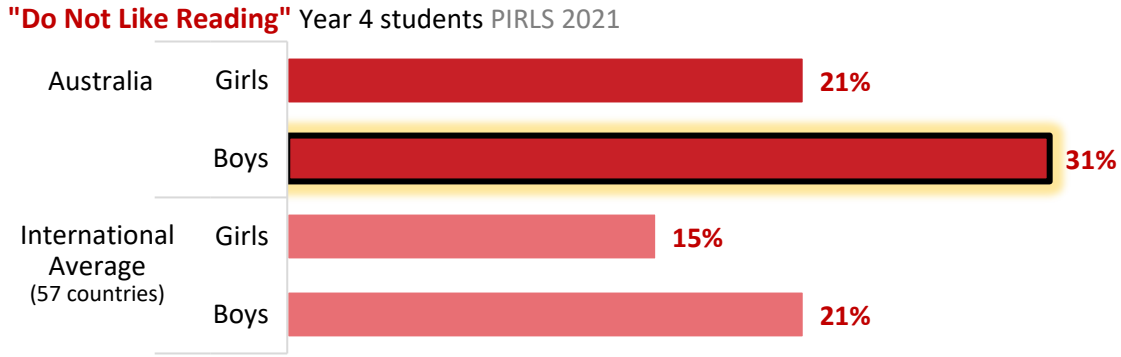
INNATE CAUSES

There is no consensus on the underlying causes of gender gaps in schooling that exist across countries, although many theories have been put forward. Among those suggested by researchers include biological differences, behavioural issues, different hobbies and interests (e.g. lower enthusiasm for reading), and even the effects of cultural stereotypes. As summarised by Thomas *et al.* (2023): [33]

- "… boys' general slower rate of biological maturation (Dwyer, 1973)."
- "… boys are more likely to have attention and behaviour disorders, to find it more challenging to stay focused on tasks, and to require more physical activity than girls (Legewie & DiPrete, 2012)."
- "… girls were far more likely to read for enjoyment and for longer periods of time each day (Schleicher, 2019, p. 32)."

Each of these theories can find data points in its favour. For example, the international *PIRLS* survey found that far more Australian boys than girls disliked reading, and at higher rates than international averages. [34]

The gap in reading enjoyment between boys and girls is wider in Australia than in other countries.



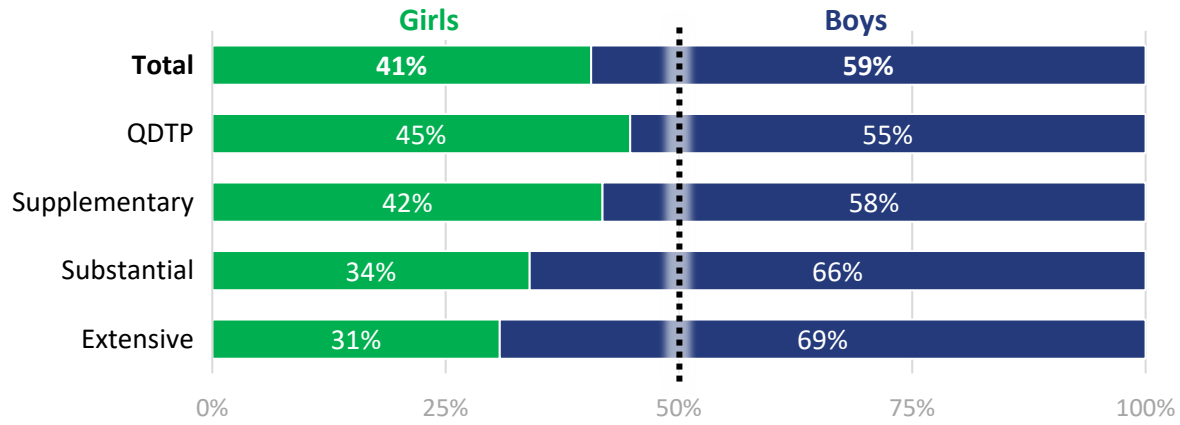
Similarly, on cultural expectations, Hartley & Sutton (2013) found evidence of a "*stereotype threat.*" Informing boys "*that boys tend to do worse than girls at school*" hindered their performance on a reading, writing, and math test, compared to a control group. [35] This might partially explain the enduring popularity of boys-only school environments; a prior report from *The Kathleen Burrow Research Institute* (2023) found enrolments in boys' schools have remained steady, and that on average they show a modest academic advantage, both before and after accounting for socio-educational background. [36]

Finally, data shows boys are over-represented in learning-related disabilities. Analysis of the *Nationally Consistent Collection of Data* (NCCD) [37] *on school students with disability* datasets for NSW Catholic schools shows clear gender-based patterns, which can also be expected to be found across the rest of the Australian school student population.

While boys make up 50% of NSW Catholic school students, they make up 59% of the sector's students with disability. Moreover, the higher the *Level of Adjustment* (a proxy for the disability's severity), the higher the proportion of boys; boys make up 69% of the highest level of adjustment, *Extensive*. This broadly aligns with disparities seen overseas; for example, in England, boys make up around 65% of students with special educational needs. [38]

Boys are more likely than girls to be classified with a disability, and the gap widens for more serious disabilities.

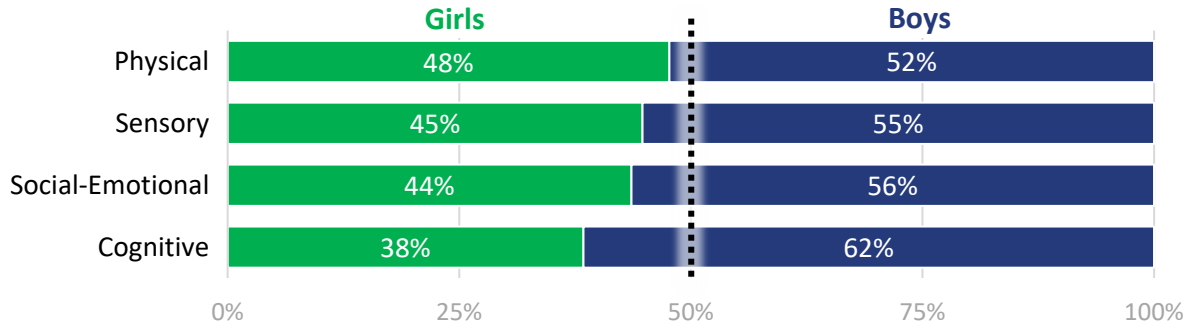
Gender share of students with disability, by Level of Adjustment, in NSW Catholic Schools, 2023



In terms of disability category, the proportion of boys is particularly high for *Cognitive* (62%) and *Socio-Emotional* (56%).

Boys are more likely than girls to be classified with cognitive or socio-emotional disabilities.

Gender share of students with disability, by Category, in NSW Catholic Schools, 2023



These patterns likely drive at least some of the substantial gender gaps seen in NAPLAN results. However, it should be noted that many students with disability will have been exempted from participating in the assessments, and thus will not appear in the NAPLAN results.

Still, notwithstanding the above data points on hobbies, stereotypes, and disabilities, most researchers conclude that the underlying causes of the gender gap remain contested and require further research.[39] As summarised by Cobb-Clark & Moschion (2017):[40]

> Despite the multitude of explanations put forward for the gender gap in educational achievement it is fair to say that **the literature has been better at documenting its existence than explaining its source**. There is mixed empirical support for many plausible explanations of the gender gap and little to no support for others.

POLICY-RELATED CAUSES

Nevertheless, while there are clearly innate factors at play, many researchers believe these gender gaps can be exacerbated or alleviated by particular education policies and practices.

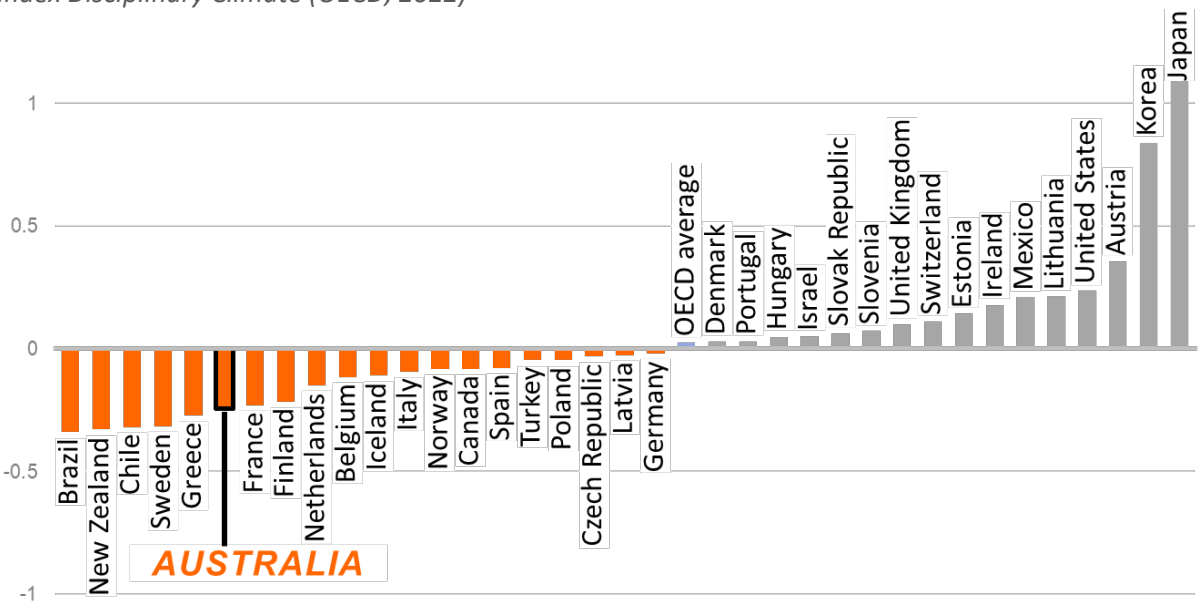
Fahey (2022) notes, "*Boys seem to be disproportionately impacted by two of the things that we know impact upon students' learning negatively … **Inquiry learning and so-called innovative classrooms**…*"[41] He argues that "*boys are … consistently overrepresented in poor behaviour metrics across the country*" and that these two prevalent yet low-evidence practices compound the problem.[42]

This aligns with international data showing Australia is far below the OECD average when it comes to student-reported disruption in their classrooms.[43] As the OECD notes:

> …**about 25% of students in Australia reported that they cannot work well in most or all lessons** (OECD average: 23%); 33% of students do not listen to what the teacher says (OECD average: 30%); 40% of students get distracted using digital devices (OECD average: 30%); and 37% get distracted by other students who are using digital devices (OECD average: 25%).

Australia has highly disrupted classrooms by world standards.

Index Disciplinary Climate (OECD, 2022)



Jha & Kelleher (2006)[44] noted the interaction of gender differences with socio-economic factors, finding:

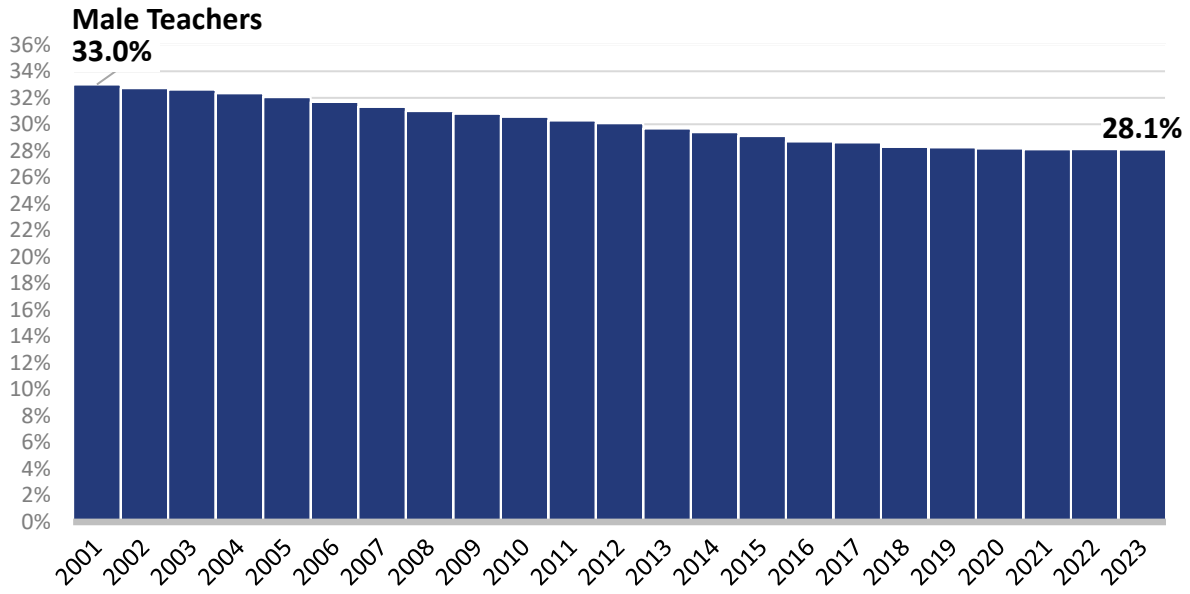
> … **socio-economic status compounds the difference between boys and girls in terms of their reading literacy**, with boys from low socio-economic backgrounds found to be almost twice as likely to be in the lowest quarter of reading literacy results than girls from similar backgrounds.

Buckingham's 2004 paper, *Boys Education: Research and Rhetoric*, posited three underlying trends driving these gender gaps: boys' greater vulnerability to the disadvantages of low socio-economic backgrounds, a shift away from exams (where boys traditionally perform better than in 'take-home' assessments), and falling shares of male teachers.[45] This last data point remains relevant today; the male share of teachers is at a record low, having declined across the previous two decades. Male

teachers comprise 28.1% of school teaching staff, down from 29.7% one decade ago, and 32.6% two decades ago.[46] Men comprise 17.9% of primary teachers, and 38.6% of secondary teachers.

The presence of male teachers is now at a record low.

Male share of FTE teaching staff over time, 2001-2023



Overall, there is general agreement that deficits in boys' educational outcomes can be traced beyond innate gender differences and into the policy-affected sphere, even if the precise policies and effect sizes remain subject to debate.

POLICY RESPONSES TO THE GENDER GAP

While research on the causes of the gender gap has advanced, policy responses remain nascent. A recurring and substantiated critique of current policy discourse is that, when gender gaps in education are addressed, the focus tends to be exclusively on areas where girls are disadvantaged, while ignoring areas where boys are falling behind.

For example, the Commonwealth Government's *STEM Equity Monitor*[47] NAPLAN dashboard shows only one domain, *Numeracy*, ignoring the other four domains in literacy where the gender gaps are much wider, but to the detriment of boys. Its NAPLAN commentary focuses exclusively on gender gaps at the top band of performance (*"Exceeding"*), ignoring the fact that in the bottom band ("*Needs Additional Support*") both boys and girls are equally represented – and obviously at much greater need of intervention.[48]

Government monitoring of gender gaps in schooling remains mixed. ACARA includes gender breakdowns in their NAPLAN reporting[49] and commentary,[50] and the national *Measurement Framework for Schooling in Australia*[51] requires tracking results by gender. However, much government reporting ignores the subject. For example, the NSW Department of Education's *Annual Report*[52] mentions achievement gaps by indigenous status, socio-economic status, disability, geolocation, and language background – but not gender.

Similarly, as Fahey (2022)[53] noted:

> …a recent Productivity Commission report considering which 'equity groups' need extra attention from policymakers papered over boys' illiteracy.[54] And a recent analysis[55] from the Australian Education Research Organisation rightly highlighted long-term deficits in students' writing ability but the highly unequal outcomes of boys didn't rate a mention.

Outside of government, think tank *The Grattan Institute's* single foray into exploring gender gaps was to warn of "*The maths puzzle we need to solve: our girls trail the boys*",[56] once again ignoring the much wider gender gaps in NAPLAN's literacy domains. Similarly, there are scholarships to boost girls' participation in Maths,[57] but no corresponding incentives to raise boys' aspirations in the humanities. Raising girls' participation and attainment in STEM is an important goal in its own right, but it need not come at the expense of equivalent efforts to help boys struggling in literacy.

Nevertheless, public commentary is growing regarding boys' underachievement in schooling,[58] [59] [60] and a small yet advanced stream of policy discourse exists on ways to close the gap. For example, Fahey (2022) proposes shifting away from inquiry-based learning toward more direct instruction, and from "innovative classrooms" to more conventional arrangements, in order to facilitate classroom discipline and more ordered learning environments for boys.[61] Encouragingly, this year, the issue of classroom management has gained parliamentary and research attention, with a Senate inquiry, and the government's education research office publishing a series of resources for teachers on classroom management.[62] [63]

Less recently, Buckingham (2004)[64] proposed six 'action areas' in response; these again included more focus on school discipline and direct instruction, but also spanned other subjects, such as expanded incentives, enhanced monitoring of gender gaps in literacy, a greater presence of men in schools, and adjustments to school structure and classroom composition (including consideration of single-sex classes). Below the policy level, there is an established and growing field of strategies for teaching boys.[65] [66] [67] [68] [69] [70]

Still, while policy ideas abound, policy attention is lacking. It has been over two decades since the last parliamentary review into boys' education in 2002.[71] Overall, a greater focus on analytical discourse, policy interventions, and even parliamentary attention would be timely in addressing the critical situation for boys in school.

CONCLUSION

All schoolkids deserve the attention and resources needed to achieve their full potential, but a particular priority must go to those struggling academically, the proverbial 'lower tail' of performance. Here, boys are over-represented compared to girls, especially in literacy. Even in their strongest domain of mathematics, boys are equally as likely as girls to be among the lowest scorers. While boys are over-represented among struggling students, they are under-represented in policy attention. Notwithstanding some recent contributions in public and expert discourse, government reports and educational monitoring tools often overlook the challenges faced by boys. A more balanced response is needed to address gender gaps in education. This need not preclude and definitely should not lessen complementary efforts to address the disparities facing girls, such as in Mathematics and STEM. Both boys and girls face distinct challenges in the education system, and deserve distinct policy attention, yet currently, half of this bargain is not being honoured.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX I: GENDER GAPS IN HSC RESULTS

As the end-of-schooling credential of Australia's largest state, NSW's HSC results offer a useful window into the gender gaps, and confirms that differences seen across Years 3, 5, 7, and 9 in NAPLAN continue through to Year 12 in the HSC.

As summarised in the *Universities Admissions Centre's* (UAC) latest report, as in previous years, **female students outperformed male students in the majority of courses and had a higher median ATAR**.[72]

The average girl's ATAR was 71.9, higher than the average boy's at 70.0. Among the HSC's high performers, boys were under-represented in most categories. Girls are more likely than boys to receive an ATAR above 90, although this gap has narrowed over the last five years.

More significantly, boys were less likely to advance their studies far enough to be awarded the HSC or be eligible for an ATAR. Despite making up 52% of the state's HSC-aged population, boys made up only 48% of those awarded the HSC, and 46% of those eligible for an ATAR.[73]

Once again, the gender gap is starkest at the bottom tail, rather than in the middle or at the top.

Boys are under-represented among HSC high performers.

Table 5: 2023 HSC Gender Split, by measure (all sectors)[74]

MEASURE	GIRLS	BOYS	TOTAL
FIRST IN COURSE	57%	43%	136
TOP ACHIEVERS	58%	42%	780
ALL ROUNDERS	48%	52%	1,420
DISTINGUISHED ACHIEVERS	55%	45%	18,516
HSC AWARDED	52%	48%	67,234
ATAR-ELIGIBLE	54%	46%	55,523
ATAR > 90	53%	47%	9,716
ATAR 99.95	24%	75%	49
MEDIAN ATAR	71.90	70.00	71.05

Girls make up a larger share of high ATARs than boys, except in the very top percentiles.

Table 6: % of students receiving ATARs on or above specified values who were female, 2019-2023[75]

ATAR	% female 2019	% female 2020	% female 2021	% female 2022	% female 2023
99.00	47.2	45.1	47.3	41.8	40.6
98.00	52.6	47.9	49.5	46.2	42.3
95.00	55.8	51.7	52.8	51.2	49.2
90.00	57.7	54.3	55.5	54.8	52.6
80.00	56.9	56.1	57.1	56.2	55.0
70.00	57.2	56.4	56.8	56.1	55.3
60.00	53.0	56.1	56.1	55.4	54.9
50.00	54.8	55.4	55.4	54.7	54.5
40.00	48.4	55.0	54.8	54.3	54.2
30.00	46.5	54.5	54.5	54.2	53.9
Total cohort	54.1	54.4	54.3	54.0	53.8

APPENDIX II: NAPLAN GENDER GAPS OVER TIME

Recent changes[76] to NAPLAN make it difficult to analyse trends over time,[77] although there was no consistent widening or narrowing of the gender gap prior to the change.

In 2023, ACARA implemented changes to NAPLAN: an earlier testing date (from May to March), new reporting standards (from ten to four bands, and a scrapping of national minimum standards.[78] Although it was deemed feasible to link the two datasets, to date ACARA has not done so.[79] [80]

Nevertheless, a mix of trends was detectable before the new system. ACARA's analysis[81] showed that between 2016 and 2021, the gender gap in average achievement remained steady in nine of 20 assessments, widened in five, and narrowed in six.

Gender gap trends varied depending on the NAPLAN year and domain.

Table 7: Trend in Average Achievement Gender Gap, NAPLAN 2016 to 2021

Year	Reading	Writing	Spelling	Grammar & Punctuation	Numeracy *(Boys > Girls)*
Year 3	No change	**Narrower**	**Narrower**	**Narrower**	No change
Year 5	No change	**Narrower**	**Narrower**	**Narrower**	**Wider**
Year 7	**Wider**	No change	No change	No change	**Wider**
Year 9	**Wider**	No change	No change	**Wider**	No change

From an equity point of view, there were some noticeable trends in the share of students failing to reach the *National Minimum Standard*. In particular, a widening gender gap was observed in Years 7 and 9 *Reading*.

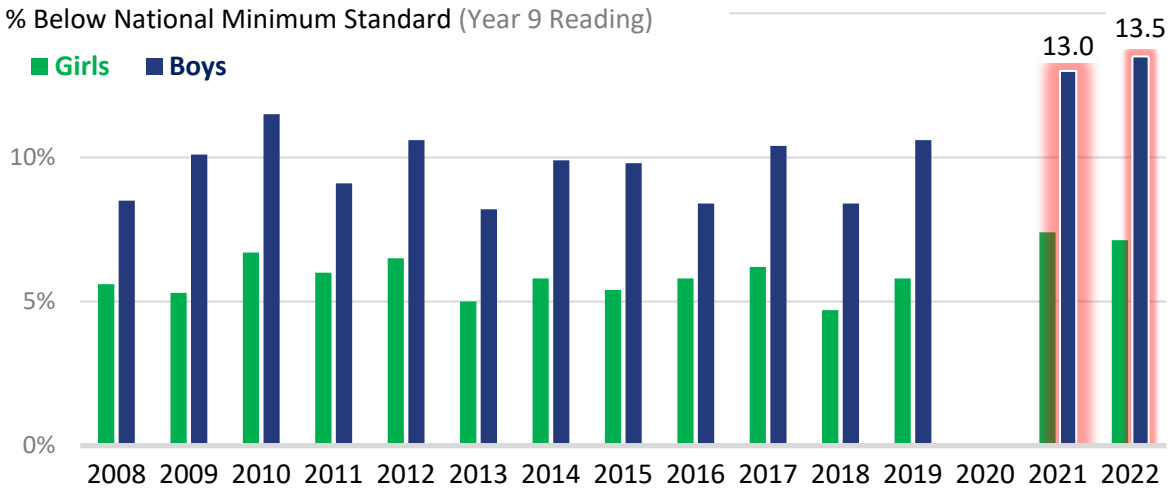
Pre-Covid, the gender gap in reaching the *National Minimum Standards* was widening in Years 7 and 9 Reading.

Table 8: Trend in National Minimum Standard Gender Gap, NAPLAN 2016-21 ('No change' = <1pt)

Year	Reading	Writing	Spelling	Grammar & Punctuation	Numeracy *(Boys > Girls)*
Year 3	No change	No change	No change	No change	No change
Year 5	No change	No change	No change	No change	No change
Year 7	**Wider**	**Narrower**	No change	No change	No change
Year 9	**Wider**	**Narrower**	No change	**Wider**	No change

The school closures and other disruptions of the pandemic era appeared to impact boys disproportionately. NAPLAN was cancelled in 2020, but upon its resumption in 2021 and 2022, there were record shares of boys failing to reach the *National Minimum Standard* in Year 9 *Reading*.

Following the pandemic, a record share of boys failed to meet the *National Minimum Standards* in Year 9 Reading.



APPENDIX III: NAPLAN TOP PERFORMERS

From an equity perspective, focusing on the top performers is less relevant, but still worth monitoring. As expected, girls comprise higher shares of top performers in the literacy domains, while boys are more represented in numeracy. The widest gaps are in *Writing*, where by Year 9, girls are 68% more likely than boys to achieve the highest band.

Girls make up more top performers in NAPLAN literacy, especially writing; boys are over-represented in numeracy.

Table 9: "% Exceeding" by gender, domain, year in NAPLAN 2024

"% Exceeding": Girls, Boys (Gap)

Year	Reading	Writing	Spelling	Grammar & Punctuation	Numeracy
Year 3	22.1, 18.1 (-4.0)	10.1, 6.6 (-3.5)	15.0, 15.6 (0.6)	11.7, 10.1 (-1.5)	7.1, 13.0 (+5.9)
Year 5	23.0, 20.1 (-2.9)	13.5, 9.5 (-4.0)	20.8, 20.0 (-0.7)	15.7, 12.7 (-3.0)	9.1, 15.7 (+6.7)
Year 7	21.6, 18.4 (-3.2)	22.2, 13.4 (-8.8)	24.5, 21.8 (-2.7)	18.4, 13.9 (-4.5)	10.7, 16.2 (+5.5)
Year 9	19.5, 16.5 (-3.1)	26.6, 15.8 (-10.8)	16.6, 15.1 (-1.5)	18.1, 12.8 (-5.3)	7.0, 10.6 (+3.6)

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"…what incentive exists for male students to change their educational engagement? As much as teachers might foster the belief that it is 'cool to work hard at school', can they expect male students to increase their effort when to be a boy is to 'succeed without trying' – and when hard work renders any results achieved 'feminine' and, therefore, 'inauthentic'?"

Hodgetts, K., 2008. Underperformance or 'getting it right'? Constructions of gender and achievement in the Australian inquiry into boys' education. British journal of sociology of education, 29(5), pp.465-477. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01425690802326887

[5] "Tales of victimization that currently frame the boys' literacy crisis are saturated in antifeminist backlash, gender binaries, and issues of power."

"After all, what many boys need to do to raise their literacy achievement is "to read more, listen and attend more to teachers and other pupils, work harder (greater diligence), be more conscientious and take more pride in their work, work collaboratively and articulate themselves better in all aspects of communication" (Francis & Skelton, 2005, p. 129). As long as these pursuits are constructed as feminine, some boys will continue to lag behind some girls, not because they are boys but because social and cultural constructions of gender continue to go unchallenged."

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