Female strides in schooling often don’t spill over into the workplace

By Erik W. Robelen

Evidence abounds that women have made huge inroads in the academic and professional spheres since the federal Title IX law on gender equity in education was enacted 40 years ago.

More than half those graduating from college each year are women. The percentage of law degrees earned by females climbed from 7 percent in 1972 to about 47 percent in 2011. Likewise, far more women are earning advanced degrees in business and medicine.

Despite the gains, experts say some gender divides are still apparent, especially with participation in the STEM fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.

Long before women pick a college major or enter the workforce, their K-12 education sets the stage in level of interest, confidence, and achievement in STEM. There, data suggest, some barriers continue to block girls. Heavy gender imbalances persist in some areas of career and technical education, from cosmetology to automotive mechanics.

Boys accounted for 77 percent of those taking the physics exam for electricity and magnetism. Girls also were routinely prevented from enrolling in vocational courses such as cosmetology, which could be a pathway into a career, while boys often could not take home economics.

Girls in school, if you mentioned that you wanted to be [a doctor], you were told that it was very hard to do and were overtly discouraged,” said Bernice Sandler, a senior scholar at the Women’s Research and Education Institute in Washington. “The assumption was that girls grow up, get married, and don’t work.”

“All kinds” of policies and practices limited opportunities for young women in high school and college, she added. Educators frequently conveyed the message, “You don’t really want to take advanced math, do you? It was often subtle but sometimes not,” she said.

Many experts say Title IX has been an important driver of change for women in academics and careers, though it’s not clear how much was specifically advanced by the law as distinguished from other societal shifts.

“The days when girls were told bluntly that they can’t take advanced math are over. But there are still challenges to equity.”

LARA S. KAUFMANN
National Women’s Law Center

Gender Gaps Persist in STEM Education

Not Just Sports

Title IX is best known for promoting equal access to athletic programs for girls and women. But its reach is far broader, including such areas as sexual harassment and the rights of pregnant and parenting teenagers, as well as academic study in K-12 and higher education.

Before Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, many colleges and universities excluded women or set quotas and other policies, such as access to financial aid, that limited their enrollment. Boys accounted for 77 percent of those taking the physics exam for electricity and magnetism and 74 percent of mechanics exams. Also, 59 percent of those taking Calculus BC, the more advanced of two AP courses offered in the subject, were male.

Moreover, data from the AP and the National Assessment of Educational Progress indicate continued achievement gaps between boys and girls in STEM fields, especially science.

At a conference last month in Chicago, Russlynn H. Ali, the U.S. Department of Education’s assistant secretary for civil rights, said she sees work to be done at the secondary level.

“Girls are underrepresented ... in those taking AP physics,” she said, also noting disparities in math. “We want to study why that is. Obviously, there is recruitment that happens on AP. There is a kind of counseling that happens.”

In fact, the office for civil rights is investigating a Colorado district to determine whether girls have fair and equitable access to AP math and science, and whether the district adequately prepares them in elementary and middle school for such courses.

Meanwhile, Title IX’s restrictions on single-sex education continue to spark debate. The American Civil Liberties Union in May sent “ cease and desist” letters to districts in six states, claiming their single-sex programs may violate Title IX. The Education Department’s revision of Title IX regulations in 2006 was seen as making it easier for districts to offer single-sex classes.

The Obama administration repeals the 2005 policy allowing schools to assess girls’ athletic interest via email. Schools and colleges are now required to provide stronger evidence that they offer equal athletic opportunities to both genders.
FOCUS ON: GENDER EQUALITY

Title IX Falls Short of Promise for Pregnant Students

Law’s applications often unrecognized

By Nirvi Shah

When Amelia Erickson learned she was pregnant at age 14, she was determined to keep working toward her high school diploma. But it wasn’t easy. After her son was born and she returned to school in Meridian, Idaho, she asked to step out a few times a day to breast-feed him at a nearby day care.

The school said no.

So for a year, Ms. Erickson tried working at home on her own, taking courses online, struggling, and nearly quitting her studies. Her son, now almost 2, "would be perfectly fine. Then as soon as I would turn around to do my homework, he would start crying," she recalled.

That wasn’t how Title IX was supposed to work. Passed 40 years ago to ensure all students have equal educational opportunities, the law is most often associated with student athletics. But it was intended to apply to many aspects of students’ schooling by strengthening the legal rights of pregnant teenagers, victims of sexual harassment, and others who may not get a fair shot at an education because of their gender.

While access to schooling for pregnant and parenting teenagers has improved since the law’s passage, data from 2006 show that only half of young women who gave birth as teenagers, victims of sexual harassment, and others who may not get a fair shot at an education because of their gender.

One reason: Too often, pregnant and parenting teenagers such as Ms. Erickson are deprived of equal educational opportunities, in part because of ignorance about Title IX’s application to this group of students, experts say.

“The lack of knowledge surrounding pregnant students means that in many cases the promise of the law is not being fulfilled,” said Erin Prangley, the associate director for government relations of the American Association of University Women, in Washington.

Likewise, recent statistics from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show that about one in 10 high school students said they had been hit or otherwise hurt on purpose by a boyfriend or girlfriend; about 7 percent said they had been forced to have sex.

And, as recently as 2011, Michigan had a law banning pregnant students from getting the same at-home educational services as students who might be unable to attend school for any other medical condition. The National Women’s Law Center in Washington worked on undoing that ban and one in Georgia in 2009.

Call for Data

To get a better handle on how extensive such disparities are, Ms. Prangley’s group and others are pushing for the U.S. Department of Education’s office for civil rights to collect data about pregnant and parenting teenagers and how schools serve them.

“Ask the schools point blank: Does your school provide child care, transportation, or tutoring? Does your school track data on girls who become pregnant?” she said.

Similar recommendations are in a report out this week, “Title IX at 40” from the National Coalition of Women & Girls in Education, which includes the AAUW.

In January, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan said the OCR this year would issue guidance about pregnant students’ rights, a point Russlyn H. Ali, the department’s assistant secretary for civil rights, repeated in an interview with Education Week.

“We’ve heard from lots of advocacy groups that say there’s a real concern,” Ms. Ali said. “How do we ensure that young mothers get the education they’re entitled to?”

Meanwhile, other federal policy makers are proposing measures to bolster support services for pregnant teenagers in schools. A bill introduced last August by U.S. Rep. Jared Polis, D-Colo., the Pregnant and Parenting Students Access to Education Act, would require school districts to provide academic support services for pregnant and parenting students and require the collection and reporting of data on pregnant and parenting students.

Eventually, Ms. Erickson found the Marian Pritchett School in Boise. A partnership between the Salvation Army and the Boise school district, it provides on-site day care, housing for women 18 and older, a social worker, and pregnancy and parenting classes. Students can miss school when necessary far more than at a typical high school, said head teacher Deborah Hedden-Niely.

Ms. Erickson said she’s on track to graduate next year.

“The whole school is a huge support system,” she said of Marian Pritchett. “It’s all girls, so there’s

Vocational Ed. Seen as a Trouble Spot

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find computing in high school, and it is rigorous, girls are very seldom represented in the classroom.”

Girls have made clear gains to close the test score gap in math over time, based on NAP. Results from 2011 show boys with a 1 point edge in 4th grade, a 2 point edge in the 4th and 8th grades. That difference is considered statistically significant.

In science, the gap is bigger, and wider at the secondary level. NAP science data for 2009 showed boys outperforming girls in the 4th, 8th, and 12th grades. The biggest gap was in 12th grade, where 28 percent of boys scored “proficient” or above, compared with 19 percent of girls. Again, data for the class of 2011, meanwhile, show that in every STEM subject tested, the average score for girls trailed that of boys.

But Mimi E. Lufkin, the CEO of the National Alliance for Partnership in Equity—a consortium of public and private entities based in Cochranville, Pa., that seeks to promote equity and diversity in the classroom today and more focus on finding solutions.

“There’s a great deal more knowledge of the need to pay attention to gender issues than was the case certainly 40 years ago, or even 10 years ago,” Ms. Rosen said. “There is a real growing understanding of this cultural stereotype in [STEM] that we’ve got.”

At the same time, she expressed some skepticism of whether Title IX compliance actions by the Education Department are the right approach, saying the key is initiatives that reach girls at a formative age.”

Promising examples she cited include the National Girls Collaborative Project, an effort that has received funding from the National Science Foundation to promote STEM for girls, and GirlStart, which provides STEM-focused after-school programs and summer camps.

School Limits

Vocational education, meanwhile, has a history of gender disparities that observers say still have not been fully erased, despite some headway. Girls dominate programs in cosmetology, child care, and health services, while fields such as auto mechanics and construction remain heavily tilted toward boys.

Although Title IX prohibits
advocates cite benefits beyond sport

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benefits of sports speak for themselves, advocates say.

Diana Parente, the director of Title IX operations for the 1 million-student New York City school system, believes that sports teaches girls how to lead a healthy life even after they graduate from high school.

"With the obesity problem that's currently facing the nation, it's important that girls are just learning academics; they're learning about a healthy lifestyle, too," she said.

Along with the District of Columbia, the New York City schools started offering female flag football programs this past school year. The league featured about 500 girls on 29 teams throughout the city, according to Jennifer Blum, the supervisor of the league.

"You can see how excited they get about it," Ms. Blum said. "You can see they want to bring the trophies and score the touchdowns and get the intercepts." ..."Watching these girls do that, it gives them so much confidence." Legal Challenges

Research indicates other benefits from playing sports. A study published in the June 2007 issue of Young and Society Journal found that female high school athletes were 41 percent more likely to graduate from college within six years compared with their peers who did not participate in sports.

Meanwhile, research from the New York City-based Women's Sports Foundation suggests that girls involved in K-12 sports are less likely to use illegal drugs or become pregnant in their teenage years. And a 2002 survey from the Oppenheimer Funds and MassMutual Financial found that more than 80 percent of high-level women business executives reporting having played sports in their K-12 days. "For women trying to break through glass ceilings, understanding the language of sports is a really great way to break through," said Ms. Maatz of the AUW.

Throughout its 40-year history, Title IX hasn't gone without challenges. The law arguably was dealt a mortal blow in 1984, when the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling in Grove City College v. Bell limited the application of Title IX to educational programs or activities directly involving federal assistance, effectively excluding most school sports programs.

"Four years later, over a veto from President Ronald Reagan, Congress enacted the Civil Rights Restoration Act, which reversed the Grove City decision by expanding the coverage of anti-discrimination laws to cover entire educational systems." Legal Challenges

For instance, some schools may double- or triple-count the same female athletes if the participates on multiple teams, to help balance out the proportionality. Other issues involve in-equitable distribution of resources, such as a girls' softball team playing on a field that's subpar to the boys' baseball field.

"Availability of the University of Pittsburgh cites scheduling discrepancies as well. "It's a Title IX problem if the boys are always scheduled for prime time and weekend nights, and the girls only get weeknights," said Ms. Drake. "You reinforce the reality of second-class status because the girls' team won't get as much fan support." Legal Challenges

Meanwhile, some others have called for congressional action for high schools similar to the 1994 Equity in Athletics Disclosure Act, which affects colleges and universities that receive federal funding to submit annual reports to the Education Department detailing their athletic program participation and enrollment breakdown of their athletic programs.

Still, compared with 40 years ago, the K-12 athletics scene for girls has undergone a night-and-day transformation, according to advocates. "We've made a lot of progress because it was so awful," said Ms. Sandler. "We've gone from absolutely horrid to very bad, and that's a lot of progress."
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