What's happening to the boy genius? Outside of fantasy fiction, he seems to be a shrinking breed. New York's gifted-and-talented schools are overstocked with girls, a recent Times study found. In some gifted classrooms, three-fifths of the students are female. Yes, we know girls are smart and dutiful and hardworking, but this phenomenon confounds what's long been considered the natural order. Could it really be that boys are now the struggling class, in need of help or affirmative action?

Experts have been warning about the boy crisis for years, but the idea has never really taken hold—partly because it originated as a crusade of the anti-feminist right. (Christina Hoff Sommers introduced it as a culture-war issue with her book The War Against Boys: How Misguided Feminism Is Harming Our Young Men.) Yet empirical evidence continues to mount that boys, as a class, may no longer have what it takes to succeed in school.

For at least a decade, a subtle shift has been happening in the educational system that seems to be working against boys, who tend to be later verbal bloomers. New initiatives have emphasized more
literacy skills in preschool, long before boys are ready. And early standardized testing—now the norm—sets up boys to see themselves as academic failures. To apply for a gifted program, children as young as 4 are required to sit through hour-long verbal exams. The patience and communication skills required all play to the strengths of girls.

“It doesn’t take a degree in child psychology to see what’s happening here,” says Richard Whitmire, author of the new book *Why Boys Fail*. “A test heavy on verbal skills aimed at the very early grades is going to turn up more girls than boys. I’m surprised the gifted gender gaps aren’t larger.”

Whitmire’s book is full of anecdotes of honors classes full of girls, from elementary school on up. He blames a regime that fixates on preparing children for college starting in kindergarten. “Why are they testing for gifted that early?” he asks. “It’s not intentional bias, but the same question applies here as with race: Do you judge bias by outcome? If so, yes, this is bias.”

To be fair, boys do tend to catch up to their female peers on both math and verbal test scores by high school. New York’s eight gifted high schools—Stuyvesant, Brooklyn Tech, etc.—have more boys enrolled than girls. But these particular statistics fail to capture the broader new reality for boys and men in the U.S.: They are less likely to graduate from high school and less likely to get a college degree.

Australia, New Zealand, and other countries have national initiatives to address the boy crisis—providing male teachers, boy-centric reading material, and lessons in technology. Here, educators have tried the occasional experiment—single-sex classes, for example—but they are resistant to the idea that boys, in a nation still ruled by men, are really in trouble. But as Whitmire likes to point out, this is a future problem: Men not achieving in school means men not going to college means men with no job prospects means men rejected as suitable marriage prospects by smarty-pants girls.