In most area schools, more girls than boys graduate

CAPITAL REGION — High school graduation season has come to an end, and at most schools in the area and across the state, more girls than boys marched to podiums in their caps and gowns.

The graduation rate for boys was an average of about 9 percent lower than the rate for girls in 2010-2011, the most recent statistics available, an analysis of 35 Capital Region school districts shows. Of the students who entered high school in the fall of 2007, on average 86 percent of girls graduated by August 2011 compared with 79 percent of boys.

The size of the gap varies but only in two districts — Fonda-Fultonville and Waterford-Halfmoon — did a higher percentage of boys than girls graduate.

Statewide, 81 percent of girls are graduating high school in four years, compared with 74 percent for boys.

American attitudes toward education may affect how boys do in school, according to LaRae Jome, associate professor of counseling psychology in the University at Albany’s School of Education, who has expertise on the influence of gender and race on work.

“There’s sort of more tolerance for boys to not be as focused in school, not to be focused on academics,” she said.

Chalk it up to a “boys will be boys” mentality, Jome said, and a belief by educators that boys will come around eventually and become responsible students.

Those attitudes are coupled with expectations of boys to be strong and tough and good in sports. “They don’t necessarily get the same reward for being good in academics,” Jome said.

By contrast, Jome said society traditionally expects girls to be more reserved. “They’re not allowed to kind of go out and do whatever they want,” she said. Their mantra is “stay focused, do well in school, listen to what you’re told.”

Jome said during the last 15 to 20 years, there has been a concerted effort to get more women into science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) careers, which pay higher salaries. More women are pursuing these careers and receiving bachelor’s degrees.

Cobleskill-Richmondville Superintendent Lynn Macan noted that while there has been a concerted effort by schools to encourage women to take STEM courses and pursue STEM careers, there isn’t a similar push to raise the graduation rates and academic achievement of boys.

She attributes the higher graduation rates for girls, which in her district is 87 percent compared with 67 percent for boys, to girls’ stronger communication and language skills. Having good verbal skills helps across the entire high school curriculum, she said.

“Women tend to outperform men at this level and then when you go to enrollment at college, you see that trend continue,” she said.

Another possible explanation for why girls do better in school is the structure of the classroom itself.

New Schenectady Superintendent Laurence Spring said boys may tend to be a little more active and they may feel like they don’t fit in with the quiet nature of school.

“A lot of times schools are set up for compliance so we expect kids to do what the teacher says: Follow my example, follow these steps, sit quietly, don’t speak until spoken to,” he said.

Research shows that boys and girls develop mentally at different speeds and demonstrate their intelligence in different ways, according to Spring. The traditional school setup of a teacher lecturing from the front of the classroom sometimes seems to favor girls.

Spring added that these are broad generalizations and don’t necessarily apply to all boys and girls.

Schenectady’s graduation rate is 54 percent for boys compared with 61 percent for girls. Of the boys who entered high school as freshmen in the fall of 2007, 54 percent graduated, 26 percent had dropped out, 13 percent were still enrolled, 4 percent transferred to a GED program and 2 percent earned an individualized education diploma as special needs students.

There isn’t a significant increase in the number of boys graduating when they stay in high school beyond four years. Only 56 percent of the male students who entered school in the fall of 2006 graduated by 2011. Only 59 percent who entered in 2005 had graduated six years later.

Spring said one way to engage boys is to work on more problem-based learning, where students are given a task to tackle. Schools must change their teaching to fit a variety of learning styles.

“How do I design instruction in such a way that’s making sure that every kid is engaged, that every kid has these moments
where their strengths are really shining but also having these moments when they’re really having to stretch themselves out of their comfort zone?” he said.

Spring, who started his job last month, said one thing he has noticed about Schenectady during his brief time here is how many boys participate in the performing arts. That’s usually not the case because in some places, doing band or chorus may be perceived as not cool. He thinks it’s good that boys are encouraged to perform and celebrated for their achievements.

The district faces a special challenge with a 35 percent African-American population. Only 57 percent of African-American students in Schenectady graduate. The state does not break down the data by boys and girls.

Expectations may not be as high for young black men, according to Ron Walker, executive director of the Coalition of Schools Educating Boys of Color.

Walker said young black men face negative stereotypes. People may look at them suspiciously just because of their clothing choices, such as hooded sweatshirts. “They may be [seen as a] thug or up to no good as opposed when [Facebook co-founder] Mark Zuckerberg turns around and puts a hood and sunglasses on, he’s a genius,” he said.

Like Spring, Walker said it’s important to have strong teachers who can adapt their style to the needs of the student and open up the lines of communication between home and school.

Walker said when young black men can understand that they can make a contribution to society, they become more engaged in school. “If they happen to be in an environment where their expectations of success or positive development are not high, they can feel that. All you have to do is flip the script and place them in school settings where there’s an appreciation for their gifts and talents. There’s an appreciation for who they are,” he said.

There are no easy solutions to raising boys’ achievement levels. Jome, of UAlbany, said that for the past 30 years, much of the research has focused on the achievement of girls. It has only been in the past decade that girls have started to overtake boys.

“This is a real shift,” she said. “I think people are still not entirely sure what to do.”