



## What We Do

Did you know that boys learn better if they drink water, keeping their brains hydrated? Were you aware that they have an inherent need to move, enjoy competition and prefer shoulder-to-shoulder interaction rather than face-to-face? By contrast, girls like more defined areas, small friend groups and more structure, excelling more in discussion-focused learning environments.

These are just some of the hallmark traits identified in Closing the Gap, an innovative and ground-breaking program of the Pinellas Education Foundation. The initiative grew out of deep concern over a gender gap among elementary school students across the nation – with boys lagging behind girls in literacy achievement.

The Foundation's board oversaw the creation of a white paper on the subject and, in 2013-14, held a series of community symposiums identifying the gap in our community. Working closely with Pinellas County Schools, the Foundation launched a transformative endeavor. It began with six Pinellas elementary schools and has since grown to 10, each offering gender specific teaching methods to support student success.

Woodlawn Elementary is recognized as a showcase school for Closing the Gap, enjoying marked success in academic performances of both boys and girls.

## Impact by the Numbers

**2** 2<sup>nd</sup> year for Woodlawn Elementary as a Showcase School for Closing the Gap

**9.7 to 0.6** The percentage the gender gap has been closed at Woodlawn from 2017-18 to 2018-19.

**10** The nearly 10 percentage point gain in literacy proficiency for boys (Grades 3-5, 2019-20) at Belcher Elementary, designated as the next Closing the Gap showcase school.

**47.7** The program's percentage of projected literacy proficiency for boys Grades 3-5 from Winter 2019-20; improved from 43.1 in 2018-19.

## Woodlawn's Story

### Creative Approach: Big Results

On any given day at Woodlawn Elementary, you'll likely observe various classrooms with lights dimmed and music playing softly to create a calm learning environment.

You'll see an array of flexible seating options, with students choosing to work on the floor, in cushy chairs that rock, or simply at their desks. You might notice a large white grid on a classroom floor filled with paper squares of different colors. Welcome to Connect 8, where students collaborate to determine the best approach in arranging eight squares in a row by answering science questions correctly. The strategies are geared to the different ways boys and girls learn – and ultimately to help boys thrive – as part of the cutting-edge Closing the Gap program.

“Our data shows that we were leaving our boys behind – and that can't happen.” says Woodlawn principal Tammy Keiper. “We're here to educate all of them, so with this initiative and my teachers participating in creating ideas, it makes school more engaging for kids. It makes them more motivated to learn.”

**For more information about the program or donor opportunities, please contact Vice President of Advancement Julie Perrelli at 727-588-4816 ext. 2113 or [julie.perrelli@pinellaseducation.org](mailto:julie.perrelli@pinellaseducation.org)**

## MORE ABOUT CLOSING THE GAP

### The Need for Support

A detrimental imbalance has existed nationally that has left boys at an unintentional systemic disadvantage in learning. Decisions are made about curricular content, behavior management and the structure of the school day that inadvertently ignores boys' interests, experiences and inherent tendencies. Compared to girls, boys often perform lower academically and receive more disciplinary action, and are more frequently diagnosed with learning disabilities and emotional disorders. Unfortunately, these elementary performance disparities follow the genders through to high school graduation where the gap in graduation rates can also be found.

### Background

In 2013-14, the Pinellas Education Foundation released a white paper and held a series of symposiums raising awareness of the disparity in achievement between boys and girls in reading. During the following year, the Pinellas Education Foundation created the Gender Achievement Gap Committee, now known as the Closing the Gap Committee – comprised of key business and school district leaders.

This committee recognized that something needed to be done to address the literacy and behavior challenges teachers were facing with their boys due to a lack of understanding around the differences in how boys and girls learn. To start, a rubric, used as a school-based self-assessment tool, was implemented to help schools understand their current practices. The rubric provided ideas of strategies in multiple areas to engage boys.

Next, the committee, through donor support, invested in training for teachers on gender specific classroom strategies and in school grants to support tools for instruction. Professional development for teachers has become a major focus, and is held multiple times throughout the year. As a follow-on activity, participating teachers receive direct feedback in the classroom, where a trained coach observes the new teaching methods in practice and offers tips to improve delivery of the new instructional strategies. Schools also receive grants to purchase items that support gender-specific techniques, such as flexible seating, books of interest to boys, action games, etc.

A new feature this year is the “Boys Read Books Battle,” designed with the competitive nature of boys in mind as a motivational tool, featuring 10 teams with four boys each who have read such action books as *The Attack of the Shark-headed Zombie*, *Buried Bones* and *Space Mission Adventure*.

Over the past four years, the Foundation has been able to support 10 elementary schools with the Closing the Gap program. Initially, six elementary schools (**Belcher, Belleair, McMullen-Booth, Sunset Hills, Sutherland** and **Woodlawn**) were selected to participate. During the current 2019-20 school year, the grant and professional development opportunities expanded to four additional schools (**Garrison Jones, Kings Highway, Mildred Helms** and **Sandy Lane**). And on the heels of Woodlawn's immense success, Belcher Elementary is now the county's second showcase school.

We are excited to have made a difference for the students, teachers and families at these 10 schools, but there are more lives to impact by expanding the program to even more Pinellas elementary schools. With your support, we can bring this ground-breaking instruction to those who need it the most – and continue to close the gap.



**Pinellas Education  
Foundation**

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