



Pictured are the 2022 winners of the Boys Read Book Battle: the team from Mildred Helms Elementary with coach Daniel Williams (back right) and Jim Myers, co-chair of the Foundation's Closing the Gap Committee.

What We Do

Research has long recognized that girls and boys learn differently. For instance, boys have an inherent need to move, enjoy competition and prefer shoulder-to-shoulder interaction rather than face to face. By contrast, girls prefer more structure, small friend groups, and discussion-focused learning environments. The Pinellas Education Foundation's Closing the Gap 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.

In collaboration with Pinellas County Schools, the Foundation's Closing the Gap Committee currently assists teachers in 11 local elementary schools. Support is provided through brain-based, research-driven instructional strategies to increase student success. Use of these strategies has already led to higher achievement for both boys and girls.

The Pinellas Education Foundation has a long history of addressing achievement gaps with innovative programming, and then gaining momentum to scale the program and its impact. In Summer 2021, the Foundation's signature work gained serious momentum when the State of Florida created the Task Force on Closing the Achievement Gap for Boys resulting in recommendations for the legislature, governor's office Department of Education, and local districts to help improve educational outcomes for boys.

By the Numbers 2021-22

- 3,343** The number of students directly impacted by Closing the Gap grants
- 272** The number of teachers directly impacted by the program
- 11** The number of Pinellas County Schools participating in the grant program and the annual Boys Read Book Battle.

Closing the Gap Through Books

Pinellas County Schools has developed a series of strategies that aim to close the gender achievement gap by improving literacy achievement. One of these strategies led to the creation of the annual Boys Read Book Battle, which focuses on achievement among boys in grades 3-5, in particular.

The Boys Read Book Battle taps into inherent preferences for games and competition among boys and engages their need for hands-on activities that reflect their interests. Always using gender as a lens, the idea is to individualize instruction as much as possible. The event tests the boys' reading and comprehension of a variety of books, some of which are more challenging than they might have selected on their own.

"The Book Battle demonstrates just how passionate our students can be about reading and learning," said Jim Myers, President of the Crown Automotive Group and co-chair of the Foundation's Closing the Gap Committee. "It's an excellent step toward success in the classroom and in life."

MORE ABOUT CLOSING THE GAP

Program Background and Objectives

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 and which is comprised of key business and school district leaders.

The 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. An annual Boys Read Book Battle provides an opportunity for young readers to compete, earning recognition for their comprehension of select books which is measured through a series of timed responses to the material.

Gender Differentiated Instruction

Changing instruction and learning environment practices is crucial to closing gender achievement gaps and eliminating gender disparities. A new 21-hour micro-credentialing program for teachers in Gender Differentiated Instruction (GDI) employs literacy strategies, student engagement, and brain research to help educators implement learning practices in the classroom that support gender-specific learning. This initiative is the first of its kind in Florida.



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