

Same Sex Classrooms: Can They Fix Our Public Schools?

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Education has its fashions and fads, just like many other areas of modern American society. Remember the switch from spanking to "time-outs" as a way to discipline kids? And the open-classrooms experiments in schools?

Single-sex schools are poised to be the next big trend in education. Although gender separation has already been tried and, some claim, failed in public schools in California, that won't necessarily prevent its spread to other states.

Supporters of same-sex education say it builds confidence and helps students concentrate on their work by removing the distractions of dating and other social pursuits. Opponents claim it would weaken Title IX, part of the 1972 Higher Education Act that requires federally funded educational institutions to treat males and females equally in the classroom and on the sports field.

Meanwhile, while the battle rages and the experts debate, parents need to choose the best schools for their children. Should you consider a single-sex school for your child? And does it make a difference whether that child is a boy or a girl?

Waiting for answers

The experts I talked to say very little research actually exists on single-sex schools, especially public schools. "The effectiveness of single-sex schools is a big educational question mark," says David Sadker, a professor of education at American University in Washington, D.C., and author, with his late wife, Myra Sadker, of *Failing at Fairness: How America's Schools Cheat Girls*.

The research that has been done, says Sadker, has focused primarily on girls and private, all-girls schools. There is scant research on the effectiveness of all-boys schools.

"We do know that in the major study--based on data collected in the 1980s--that girls who attended single-sex Catholic schools had higher academic achievement than girls who attended coed Catholic or public schools," says Mary Rose McCarthy, an assistant professor of education at Pace University in Pleasantville, N. Y., who has researched the topic.

"The effect was more noticeable among [lower-income] girls and students of color... People who tried to replicate the study in 'elite,' nonsectarian public schools could not find the same effect."

Sadker says studies have found that single-sex schools are more effective for girls than for boys, that only disadvantaged students benefit from single-sex education, and even that single-sex schools can intensify gender stereotypes and homophobia.

Is the research relevant to a parent trying to choose a school?

"The research looks at all boys schools, or all girls schools," Sadker points out, "but parents don't send their child to all--they pick one school. So in the end, my research doesn't help a parent make a decision, although it may help a parent know what to look for."

Pros and cons for girls

The advantages of same-sex education for girls are well-documented. They include the following highlights:

- Girls get 100 percent of teachers' attention.
- The schools usually have women principals, "which shows women in leadership," Sadker says.

- Girls schools are more likely to have women teaching math and science, "which also sends a message," says Sadker.
- Without boys to inhibit them or grab the spotlight, girls speak up more freely and more often in the classroom.
- The curriculum is likely to include women in nontraditional roles and positions of authority.
- Girls report high self-esteem as a result of their academic achievement, not as a result of their looks or popularity.
- Girls feel freer to take part in all types of extracurricular activities, and take on leadership roles in these activities.
- On the sports field, girls do not take second place to male athletes.

On the downside:

- Girls' schools can be cliquish, Sadker says, as detailed in the book *Odd Girl Out*, by Rachel Simmons.
- Some are little more than old-fashioned finishing schools, preparing girls for the life their grandmothers led 50 years ago.
- All-girls schools can actually reinforce gender stereotypes, rather than eliminating them. "There is no evidence that single-sex schools totally eliminate gender stereotypes," says McCarthy. "In fact, unless the school makes a real effort to do otherwise, the stereotypes are actually more likely to be reinforced in many ways."

Pros and cons for boys

When I read the book *Real Boys*, by William Pollack, in particular the chapter, "Schools: The Blackboard Jumble," I found his argument for all-boys schools or all-boys classes within coed schools to be a compelling one.

Pollack writes that public coed schools are failing boys: Most of the students at the bottom of the class are boys, most of the students in remedial classes are boys, most of the students suspended are boys, fewer boys than girls go to college, and many more boys than girls have serious difficulties with reading and writing.

When the gender-separated schools experiment was tried in California, however, it was a resound-

ing failure with boys, Sadker says. The "problem boys" were segregated in all-boys classes with teachers who were not trained to teach in this environment. The boys were resentful, and so were the teachers, Sadker says.

Still, a good all-boys school can:

- Give all boys a place to be themselves, whether that self is athlete, scholar, actor, or techie.
- Give boys the chance to speak up in class, without fear of embarrassing themselves in front of girls.
- Be very effective for poorer, minority boys.
- Address the unique needs of boys.

On the downside:

- An all-boys school may reinforce gender stereotypes and contempt for girls.
- All-boys schools or classes may be used as punishment--by parents or teachers--for boys who are not doing well in a coed environment.

A good school is a good school

When it comes to choosing a school for your child, the best advice is to focus first on the quality of the school, and only second (or third) on whether or not it is a single-sex school. As Sadker says, "A good school is a good school."

He points to the private boys' school St. Alban's in Washington, D.C., as an example of a wonderfully effective school. "It has committed parents, small classes, well-trained teachers, an up-to-date curriculum, and good resources," Sadker says. "The fact that it is single-sex is way down the list."

Parents need to choose the best school they can find for their individual child, and realize that it is too early to conclude that same-sex schools are the answer, especially in the public sector.

For the time being, Sadker concludes, the role of same-sex schools is that of a "lighthouse" that shows the way for coed schools to be better.

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