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Single-Sex Education: Would teaching boys and girls separately improve academic performance?

Introduction

SUPPORTERS ARGUE

Single-sex schooling helps eliminate gender stereotypes that keep students from excelling in particular subjects and removes distractions associated with being in the presence of the opposite sex. It also allows teachers to tailor their lessons especially for students of each gender.

OPPONENTS ARGUE

When boys and girls learn separately, the education they receive is more likely to be unequal. Students should also have the opportunity to interact with members of the opposite gender, which can help them overcome stereotypical perceptions about gender later on.



AP Photo/Morry Gash

Single-sex classes, like this all-girl English class at Arrowhead High School in Hartland, Wisconsin have grown in popularity in the last two years across the U.S.

For many, the presence of girls and boys in the same classrooms is taken for granted in U.S. public schools. That has not always been the case, however. There was a time when it was more common for boys and girls to be educated separately, as they still are in many private and parochial schools. Recently, same-sex education has experienced a resurgence in popularity in public schools, prompting debate over its advantages and drawbacks. [See 2002 Update:

Single-Sex Education]

In the mid-20th century, the number of single-sex public schools began to decline, as women's and civil rights groups campaigned to make all-male schools coeducational. In the 1990s, however, concerns over the academic progress of both girls and boys, as well as a Supreme Court ruling upholding the practice of single-sex education in some cases, revitalized the concept, leading to an increase in the number of single-sex schools (and single-sex classrooms within coed schools) in the U.S.

Another, more recent factor has been the 2006 revision of a landmark 1970s law meant to ensure equal access to education for girls. Known as Title IX of the 1972 federal Education Amendments, it originally outlawed single-sex schooling in all but limited circumstances or when substantive steps were taken to provide for both genders. The 2006 revisions made the requirements far less stringent, enabling schools and districts to implement same-sex education more easily.

Supporters of single-sex education say that it reduces the preconceptions about gender that keep boys from pursuing certain subjects, such as reading and art, and girls from pursuing others, such as science and mathematics. Some supporters also argue that girls and boys are biologically programmed to learn differently, and that they will get more out of school if they are taught in separate environments tailored to the particular needs of each gender. Single-sex education simply offers another alternative to coed schools, giving public school students a choice already available to private and parochial school students, they say.

Critics of single-sex education counter that separating students by gender compromises the quality of their education. In separate classes, one gender might receive a better education than the other, they charge. It is also important that boys and girls socialize in school to discourage gender stereotyping in later years, they argue. Single-sex education diverts attention from the real problems facing education in the U.S., such as lack of funding and resources, they add.

The Single-Sex Education Movement

Proponents of single-sex education tend to fall into two camps, and many single-sex programs combine the two outlooks when designing their curricula. The more traditional supporters of the movement present it as a solution to a social problem—the tendency of girls to feel ignored and discouraged from fully expressing themselves in classrooms with boys. A single-sex environment provides girls with a less intimidating atmosphere, they argue. A number of all-girl schools, such as the Young Women's Leadership School in the Harlem district of New York City, are often said to adhere to that view.

Another, more controversial perspective focuses on what proponents say are biological differences in the way girls and boys learn. For instance, they argue that girls tend to have better hearing than boys and perceive visual detail better, while boys are better at processing movement and direction. Where boys and girls are educated separately, teachers can tailor lessons to each gender, they say. One of the most prominent backers of that theory is the National Association for Single Sex Public Education (NASSPE), which has advised many of the newer single-sex programs.

Research into the effectiveness of single-sex education is ongoing. One often-cited source has been *Girls and Boys in School: Together or Separate?* (1990) by sociologist Cornelius Riordan of the University of Providence in Rhode Island. Riordan examined single-sex and coed Catholic schools, and found that single-sex education improved academic achievement, especially for poor and minority students. In 2005, the U.S. Department of Education and the American Institutes for Research analyzed the most reliable studies on single-sex education and found that results of 41% of the studies favored single-sex over coeducation, while 45% found little evidence to support one over the other. Only 8% favored coed over single-sex schools.

Same-Sex Schooling in the U.S.

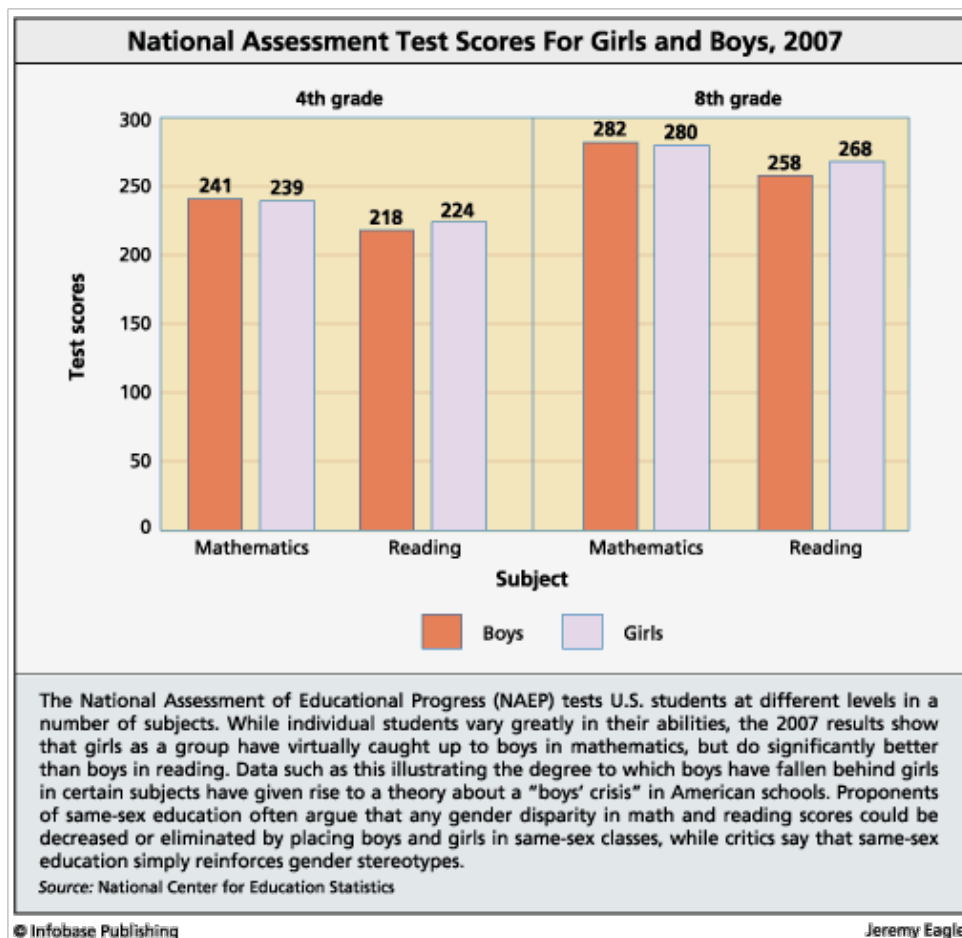
Until the mid-20th century, single-sex colleges and high schools were not uncommon. That began to change with the growth of the women's rights movement in the 1960s, which pressed for coeducation partly on the grounds that all-female schools were inferior to all-male schools. Similar arguments had been voiced by the civil rights movement, in its push for the racial integration of public schools and other institutions. [See 2008 Key Recent Events in the History of Single-Sex Education]

A major victory in the push for coeducation was the 1972 passage of Title IX of the federal Education Amendments. Although best known for requiring schools to provide equal funding for boys' and girls' athletics, Title IX also banned single-sex classes in schools receiving federal funds. (Among the exceptions to this rule were physical education and sex education programs.) If a district offered a single-sex school for one gender, it had to offer a comparable single-sex school for the opposite gender as well. In general, however, the mood among both the public and the educational community following the passage of Title IX strongly favored coeducation.

During the 1990s, single-sex education began making a comeback. One of the factors in its resurgence was a Supreme Court decision involving a single-sex college. In 1996, the court ruled in *United States v. Virginia* that the Virginia Military Institute, a public, all-male military college, had to admit female cadets. In its ruling, the court also stated that single-sex schools might be legal if they functioned to "dissipate, rather than perpetuate, traditional gender classifications." Many took that to mean that single-sex public schools were permissible as a way to address educational disadvantages faced by students of a particular gender.

Another factor was the concern, expressed in a series of reports beginning in 1992 from the American Association of University Women (AAUW), that education for girls was inadequate. The reports, entitled *Shortchanging Girls*, *Shortchanging America*, charged that teachers in coed schools called on girls less frequently than on boys and gave them less encouragement. As a result, the AAUW argued, girls were less confident than boys and less likely to express their ideas in the classroom.

The concern over a "girls' crisis" in education was followed later in the 1990s by talk of a "boys' crisis." Some authors and education experts noted that boys had lower high school and college graduation rates than girls, and scored lower in reading and writing on the National Assessment of Education Progress tests. (Boys had a slight advantage over girls in science and mathematics.) Groups such as the AAUW disputed the idea of a boys' crisis, however, noting that men continued to earn more than women once they entered the workforce, and argued that it was mostly low-income and minority boys who lagged behind girls in school. The disadvantages that boys faced in school fell primarily along racial and economic rather than gender lines, they claimed.



In 2006, the federal government significantly revised Title IX to correspond with No Child Left Behind, which, in 2002, had provided school districts with funding for same-sex schools. Under new Title IX regulations, schools could offer single-sex classes, as long as they met an "important objective," such as improving students' education or meeting particular student needs. Schools were also required to offer a coed class in every subject covered in a single-sex class. In addition, schools had to conduct reviews every two years to monitor their adherence to the rules.

The new regulations made it easier for schools to offer single-sex classes and for school districts to establish single-sex schools. While school districts that opened single-sex schools for one gender were previously required to provide a comparable single-sex school for the other, under the new rules they could establish a single-sex school as long as a comparable coed school was available as an alternative.

The Supreme Court's legal clarification, the desire not to shortchange either gender, and the revisions to Title IX have led to a proliferation of single-sex schools since the 1990s. According to an estimate by Leonard Sax, executive director of the NASSPE, as of fall 2007, there were more than 360 single-sex programs—both schools and individual classes—in the U.S., up from around a dozen five years earlier. While a major increase, it still represented an extremely small part of the U.S. public school system, with its more than 90,000 schools.

The loosened restrictions for single-sex schooling have led to more experimentation with the method. In February 2008, for instance, the Greene County, Ga., school board voted to establish single-sex schools throughout the entire district as a way to improve academic achievement and discipline in the rural, low-income area. The plan called for separate classrooms for boys and girls in elementary schools, and for same-sex middle and high schools. Critics of the plan included even some prominent single-sex education supporters, all of whom declared it illegal for failing to provide a coed alternative to students. (The district contained a charter school that was to remain coed, but many of the county's residents were ineligible to attend due to zoning rules.) After a backlash from parents angry that they were not consulted on the plan, the district decided to drop it in March.

Supporters Argue: Single-Sex Education Would Benefit Students

Supporters of single-sex education argue that when girls and boys are separated, teachers can overcome traditional gender stereotyping that often keeps students from pursuing, and doing well in, particular subjects. For example, the NASSPE says that girls in single-sex environments are more likely to demonstrate an interest in math, science and computers, while boys are more likely to show an interest in foreign languages, music, art and drama. "Both girls and boys have more freedom to pursue their own interests and abilities in single-gender classrooms," the group states.

In addition to removing the common gender stereotypes attached to certain subjects, single-sex schools remove some of the problems that arise when boys and girls are in the same classroom, supporters maintain. Students might be less likely to speak freely if they are worried about teasing from the opposite gender, they say. Romantic attraction to members of the opposite sex can also be a distraction, they add. "Teachers can build a community of boys and a community of girls that will help them be much more accepting of each other than in a coed classroom," says David Chadwell, coordinator for single-sex education in South Carolina.

Advocates of single-sex education also point to a 2007 study at Stetson University in Deland, Fla., which randomly assigned fourth grade students to single-sex or coed classes at a local elementary school. The study found that 75% of girls and 86% of boys in the single-sex classes passed a state writing test, compared with 57% of girls and 37% of boys in the coed classes.

Supporters say that there should not be such resistance to same-sex schooling, given the problems with the U.S. education system identified in the 1990s. In addition, they say, single-sex education has been shown to reduce the large gaps in academic performance between students of different races and income levels. "This is a strategy to really turn around what is a failing environment for lots and lots of young people," says Beverly Hall, superintendent of the Atlanta, Ga., school system.

Some supporters point to what they say are biological differences in the two genders that make learning different for girls and boys. For instance, they say, young boys tend to be more fidgety than girls, so providing an environment that allows them to be physically active while learning is more effective than confining them to their desks. Similarly, they say, girls often respond better in classrooms with group interaction, such as when they are sitting in a circle. By structuring classes to specifically benefit each gender, teachers and administrators can ensure that all students get the most out of their education, they argue.

Proponents dismiss what they say is an overreaction to single-sex education by its critics. For one thing, they contend, the requirement that school districts must offer one coed school for every single-sex school ensures that no one has to attend a single-sex school. Offering same-sex schooling as an option simply gives parents and students more of a choice, they contend.

Advocates also point out that single-sex education used to be more common in public schools, and remains the norm for many private and parochial schools. "Single-sex educational options have always existed.... But sending kids to private school—and paying private-school tuitions—is not a choice that every family can afford to make," writes Carrie Lukas, vice president for policy and economics at the Independent Women's Forum.

Opponents Argue: Single-Sex Education Would Not Benefit Students

The single-sex education movement is opposed by some well-known feminist and civil rights groups, including the National Organization for Women (NOW) and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). These critics say that educating students separately reinforces gender stereotypes rather than eliminating them. The educational methods called for by single-sex advocates increase the likelihood that girls will learn a watered-down version of math and science, while boys will be taught reading and writing inadequately, they charge. That deprives students of a well-rounded education, they say.

For the same reasons that racial segregation in schools has been outlawed, critics say, gender segregation should be. There is no such thing as "separate but equal" in education, they maintain. Once boys and girls are divided into separate schools or classrooms, a school or district could easily fund one gender at the expense of the other, they warn. "Segregation is totally unacceptable in the context of race," says Nancy Zirkin, vice president of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights. "Why in the world in the context of gender would it be acceptable?"

Critics also say that single-sex education deprives students of the experience of dealing with people of the opposite gender, which can make students less tolerant. That can have reverberations when students leave school, they say. "Because school is the 'workplace' of children, this kind of segregation is likely to increase sex stereotyping in adulthood by depriving both boys and girls of the opportunity to interact daily as peers during their formative years," says NOW president Kim Gandy.

Opponents say that the idea of a "boys' crisis" in education has been exaggerated, claiming it is mostly low-income and minority boys, not boys in general, who are lagging behind. Concern over boys' achievement has been a driving force in the recent same-sex education movement, they note. "As girls and women continue to make gains in education, it is important to remember that these successes do not come at the expense of boys and men," states the AAUW, which opposes the recent Title IX revisions.

Critics say that the focus on single-sex education diverts people from the real problems facing U.S. education. Increased funding for additional teachers, smaller classrooms and better resources would more effectively address those problems than same-sex classes, they assert. "Separating our daughters from our sons is an ineffective response to a complex problem, and it pulls resources away from dealing with a broken school system," says Gandy.

Some of the gains reportedly made by students in single-sex classrooms may also be due to something other than single-sex education itself, critics venture. For instance, they say, the best teachers and most motivated students might be drawn to what is advertised as a more academically serious environment. Another factor could be parents, with those most involved in their children's schooling choosing to enroll them in what they think might be a better program, critics argue. Such parents would be more likely to have children who are high-performing students overall, they say.

Revisions to Title IX Controversial

The revisions to Title IX have intensified the debate over single-sex education. On the one hand, the Education Department has framed the issue as one of choice for students and parents. "The Department of Education is committed to giving communities more choices in how they go about offering varied learning environments to their students," Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings said in introducing the revisions in October 2006. "Every child should receive a high-quality education in America and every school and district deserves the tools to provide it."

Critics, however, say the revisions have weakened a law meant to safeguard girls' right to a good education. "Women have made great advancements in our society, thanks in part to Title IX, and we must not abandon that commitment to ending discrimination against women," says Gandy.

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Additional Sources

Additional information on single-sex education can be found in the following source:

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Contact Information

Information on how to contact organizations that are either mentioned in the discussion of single-sex education or can provide additional information on the subject is listed below:

National Association for Single Sex Public Schools
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Internet: www.singlesexschools.org

National Organization for Women
1100 H Street, N.W., 3rd Floor
Washington, D.C. 20005
Telephone: (202) 628-8669
Internet: www.now.org

For further information about the ongoing debate over single-sex education, search for the following words and terms in electronic databases and other publications:

Boys' crisis
Shortchanging Girls, Shortchanging America
Title IX
United States v. Virginia

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