

Research Spotlight on Single-Gender Education

NEA Reviews of the Research on Best Practices in Education

If you walked into the average public school classroom in the United States, you'd find an equal number of boys and girls. But some experts suggest it may be time for a change. Single-gender education and the often-spirited dialogue surrounding it have raised a number of issues concerning the best manner to educate boys and girls.

In 1993, American University professors Myra Sadker and David Sadker published their research in *Failing in Fairness: How America's Schools Cheat Girls*, which describes striking discoveries about fairness in American schools. During a three-year study, trained observers visited more than 100 elementary school classrooms in Connecticut, Maryland, Massachusetts, Virginia, and the District of Columbia and noted student-teacher interactions, including the following:

- Boys called out eight times as often as girls did. When a boy yelled out, the teacher ignored the "raise your hand" rule and usually praised his contribution. Girls who called out got reminders to raise their hands.
- Teachers valued boys' comments more than girls' comments. Teachers responded to girls with a simple nod or an OK, but they praised, corrected, helped, and criticized boys.
- Boys were encouraged to solve problems on their own, but teachers helped girls who were stuck on problems.

Male dominance in the classroom may come as no surprise to advocates of single-gender education who suggest that boys and girls are regularly treated differently in coeducational settings and that both boys and girls could both benefit from single-gender classrooms. Studies suggest that when boys are in single-gender classrooms, they are more successful in school and more likely to pursue a wide range of interests and activities.

Girls who learn in all-girl environments are believed to be more comfortable responding to questions and sharing their opinions in class and more likely to explore more "nontraditional" subjects such as math, science, and technology. In addition, advocates believe that when children learn with single-gender peers, they are more likely to attend to their studies, speak more openly in the classroom, and feel more encouraged to pursue their interests and achieve their fullest potential.

Of course, these beliefs have been challenged as well. The American Association of University Women published *Separated by Sex: A Critical Look at Single-Sex Education for Girls (1998)*, which notes that single-sex education is not necessarily better than coeducation. According to the report, boys and girls thrive on a good education, regardless of whether the school is single-sex or coeducational. Some findings include:

- No evidence shows that single-sex education works or is better for girls than coeducation.

- When elements of a good education are present—such as small classes and schools, equitable teaching practices, and focused academic curriculum—girls and boys succeed.
- Some kinds of single-sex programs produce positive results for some students, including a preference for math and science among girls.

Additional research on the effectiveness of single-gender classrooms is necessary, but we all can agree that we need to construct an educational environment that meets the social and intellectual needs of boys and girls.

Here are two additional studies from the current research on single-gender education:

- [Is Single-Gender Schooling Viable in the Public Sector? Lessons from California's Pilot Program](#)(PDF, 402 KB, 83pp) - This report provides a good background and review of the literature with a broad assessment of where research stands on the controversy. It covers a pilot program in California, the nation's biggest pilot project, a project that was subsequently shut down. This report presents the findings of a three-year case study of an experiment of single-gender schools with the public sector. It provides a thorough analysis of the topic and examines future directions for single gender school reform program. Amanda Datnow et al., 2001.
- [The Evidence Suggests Otherwise: The Truth About Boys and Girls](#) (PDF, 363 KB, 21pp) - "The real story is not bad news about boys doing worse; it's good news about girls doing better. In fact, with a few exceptions, American boys are scoring higher and achieving more than they ever have before. But girls have just improved their performance on some measures even faster. As a result, girls have narrowed or even closed some academic gaps that previously favored boys, while other long-standing gaps that favored girls have widened, leading to the belief that boys are falling behind. There's no doubt that some groups of boys—particularly Hispanic and black boys and boys from low-income homes—are in real trouble. But the predominant issues for them are race and class, not gender. Closing racial and economic gaps would help poor and minority boys more than closing gender gaps, and focusing on gender gaps may distract attention from the bigger problems facing these youngsters. The hysteria about boys is partly a matter of perspective. While most of society has finally embraced the idea of equality for women, the idea that women might actually surpass men in some areas (even as they remain behind in others) seems hard for many people to swallow. Thus, boys are routinely characterized as 'falling behind' even as they improve in absolute terms." Sara Mead, Education Sector (2006).

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