

THE ADVANTAGES OF SINGLE-SEX EDUCATION

Teresa A. Hughes
Klein Independent School District
Prairie View A&M University
Educational Leadership
Doctor of Philosophy Program Student

ABSTRACT

Traditionally, single-sex education has been provided in the form of private schooling. Title IX regulations have loosened as a result of the No Child Left Behind Legislation; therefore, public school districts now have the legal right to create single-sex classes or single-sex schools if they deem it to be in the best interest of their students. In public school single-sex environments, student achievement improves, especially for minority students or students in poverty, as a result of improved behaviors and teacher focus on learning-style differences. The author of this article concludes that school districts should give parents the choice of single-sex education or coeducation by offering single-sex classes or single-sex schools along with coeducation.

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to explore whether public schools should provide a choice to parents to have single-sex education along with coeducation. The author believes that in single-sex classrooms or single-sex schools student achievement will be positively impacted. Moreover, in single-sex classes or single-sex schools, student behaviors will improve, students in poverty or minority students will benefit, and students' learning style differences will be better met. The following scenario is classic and natural in coeducational classrooms.

Ms. Ballard announces, "Today is the day we have all been looking forward to; we are dissecting frogs!" Cheers and moans are heard throughout the classroom. The boys, eager to obtain the lifeless frogs,

immediately jump out of their seats while the girls turn their heads, moan, and comment, "Gross." Ms. Ballard reviews the lab procedures reminding the students of the following: "One person in your group will gather all of the supplies and dissect the frog; the other person will be the time-keeper and note-taker." Typically, in a coed group, such as in Ms. Ballard's lab room - the boy would be the one dissecting the frog while the girl would be watching the time and taking notes.

The above situation, where boys control the lab equipment and experiment and where girls sit back passively, could be avoided if public schools offered a choice of single-sex education.

Historical Background

Coeducation had been the norm for most public schools in the United States throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. In 1972, Title IX became law prohibiting discrimination based on sex in education programs and activities in federally funded institutions. What had been the norm was now the law.

In 1975, the Department of Health, Education and Welfare issued Title IX regulations barring single-sex classes or programs. During the 1970s and 1980s, the U.S. Supreme Court handed down decisions that impacted Title IX. Hutchinson states, "Federal courts have consistently held that single-sex education does not violate Title IX" (as cited in Logsdon, 2003, p. 294). Logsdon agrees with Hutchinson and further adds, "As long as comparable classes and facilities are available to males and females, single-sex public education is constitutional" (2003, p. 294).

Now, in the 21st century, George Bush's No Child Left Behind Legislation (NCLB), has paved the way for an aggressive approach to educational reform. The U.S. Senate included incentive grants for single-sex schools in NCLB. These gave schools the opportunity to revisit the idea of single-sex classrooms or single-sex schools. In 2002, The Department of Education began revising Title IX provisions to make it easier for schools to adopt single-sex policies.

Seemingly no guidelines existed to help public schools in the transition from the traditional coed to single-sex education. Recognizing this need, Senators Kay Bailey Hutchison(R-TX) and Hillary Rodham-Clinton (D-NY) sponsored a provision for the purpose of providing direction to schools that wish to establish, under NCLB, single-sex classes or schools. Former U.S. Secretary of Education, Rod Paige, in a press release commented, "This regulation is designed to provide educators and parents with a wider range of diverse education options in public as well as private schools that receive federal aid to meet the needs and interests of students" (2004).

It has now been established that there are no legal constraints keeping public schools from creating single-sex education. Public school districts should take advantage of the opportunity to provide choice of single-sex classrooms or single-sex schools because it is beneficial to learners, particularly minorities and those in poverty, in that their learning-styles are more easily matched, their behaviors improve, and ultimately their academic performance improves.

There are organizations and individuals who do not agree that single-sex education meet federal criteria in that it violates the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling of (1954) “separate is inherently unequal.” Opponents contend that separating by sex is no different than separating by race. The “National Organization for Women (NOW) and the American Association of University Women (AAUW) worry that separating children by sex is similar to separating them by race” (Vail, 2002, p. 33). Some argue that allowing single-sex education would be a legal step backwards and feel strongly that the interpretation of the law is being violated. Rosemary Salomone states, “Those in opposition to single-sex education also claim this type of education denies females equal protection of the laws under the Fourteenth Amendment. These critics say ‘separate but equal’ is as illegitimate for classifications based on gender as it is for classifications based on race” (as cited in Logsdon, 2003, p. 295).

To suggest single-sex education is comparable to separating by race, one must recall that in *Brown v. Board of Education*, **choice was not an option**. Students were segregated by race in an attempt to keep down the African American and non-white population. Not even the most ardent segregationist would have claimed that segregation was designated to elevate the educational achievements and opportunities for blacks. In contrast, the initiative behind single-sex education is to elevate both sexes to a higher level of achievement. According to Salomone’s studies (as cited in Heise 2004), “In the current context, attendance in single-sex schools is voluntary, and coeducational options remain, if not predominant” (p. 1224) and she further urges “that in the education context, as it relates to gender, separate can be inherently equal” (p. 1224). “Because the courts have considered the issue of single-education in four cases and clearly approved of publicly funded single-sex classes in three of them, single-sex education, within stated parameters, is constitutional” (Caplice, 1994, p. 5). In addition Salomone notes, “the Supreme Court’s decision in *United States v. Virginia* demonstrates that this argument does not support the unconstitutionality of single-sex education” (as cited in Logsdon, 2003, p. 295). Because single-sex education is not unconstitutional, school districts should take advantage of the option to either create single-sex schools or single-sex classes along with coeducation if they conclude that it improves performance of students.

Opponents also reason that single-sex schools or single-sex classes have a detrimental impact on the social growth of each sex. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and NOW each argue that coeducation is better for boys and girls because it allows them to develop interpersonal skills so they can interact with each other. Teresa Mendez of the *Christian Science Monitor* (2004) worries that “without

the collegial relationships boys and girls form in school, they will not develop into men and women who understand and respect one another.” As stated by Vail, “Boys and girls must learn to get along together in the world, opponents of the single-sex approach say, and separating them will take away that opportunity” (2002, p. 38).

The assumption here is that the only opportunity young people have to “learn to get along together in the world” is through their experience in public schools. Is the opposition implying that the *main* goal of schools is to develop students socially? The assumption is false; other, and arguably better, opportunities are available for students to develop “real world” experiences with individuals of the opposite sex through family, neighborhood, church, or volunteer organizations, etc. Additionally, society has historically (and correctly) treated young people differently by sheltering them from certain elements and opportunities that exist in the “real world.” For example, minors are not allowed to purchase alcohol or tobacco, gamble, or vote because they have not yet reached a level of maturity that equips them to make such decisions. Single-sex education would simply be one more way we treat young people differently, if it results in higher academic achievement. And again, it is not mandatory; the choice is a local decision. Caplice also disagrees with the opponents stating,

These students are not taught, nor could they possibly believe, that they will only encounter members of their own sex throughout life. They merely seek to become well-equipped, in whatever environments are best suited for their intellectual, social, and physical development, to face the world and all it offers. In addition, attending a single-sex school does not erase all other-sex contacts (1998).

Educators’ motivation is to maximize academic achievement and intellectual development so upon entering the real world, both sexes are better equipped to function together. Single-sex classes and single-sex schools are simply options to teach children all about the real world before they actually enter it. If education research establishes single-sex education maximizes achievement, and the education establishment fails to offer even the **choice** to parents, then that is a gross disservice.

Improved Behavior

“In the United States, part of the rationale for single-sex schooling is the view that adolescents create a culture in school that is at odds with academic performance and achievement” (Herr, 2004, p. 531). In coeducational settings, the culture is one of socialization where for some, academics might not be a priority. For these individuals, single-sex classes or single-sex schools might be a better choice. “Single-sex school officials say test scores and *attendance rise* [italics added] and

attitude improve” (Vail, 2002, p. 33). At Matthew Henson Elementary School, the country’s longest all-boy classroom experiment, Dunkel reports, “a decrease in disciplinary problems, an *increase in attendance levels*, [italics added] improved academic performances, and more positive attitudes” (Dunkel as cited in Caplice, 1994). So, by providing single-sex classes or single-sex schools student attendance improves, distractions decline, and student participation increases, all of which serve to maximize student achievement.

In coeducational classrooms, boys and girls are easily distracted by one another. They want to impress each other and often act out in ways that are detrimental to their individual learning. “By far, the advantage most often associated with schooling boys and girls separately is that it eliminates distraction. Freed from the worries of impressing the opposite sex, boys and girls can focus on their books” (Vail, 2002, p.35). Mael (as cited in Herr and Arms, 2004) says “preoccupied with the ‘dating and rating’ culture, students in the coeducational environment are thought to be unnecessarily distracted, concentrating on how they look rather than focusing on academics” (p.531). Caplice adds, “It does not require rigorous thought to conclude that a preoccupation with sexual attractiveness ultimately will be damaging to academic achievement” (1994). By separating the sexes into different classes or schools, the students would be free of distractions from the opposite sex and would be better able to concentrate on academic pursuits.

Another characteristic of improved behavior is increased participation. Boys and girls, each in their own way, blossom in an environment free from the inhibiting factor contributed by the presence of the opposite sex. In single-sex classes or single-sex schools girls feel more comfortable participating in all facets of the lessons or activities. In an all-girl setting, “Girls exhibited an eagerness to participate in discussions and a willingness to ask for help in front of the other girls” (Gillibrand, 1999). Janice Streitmatter studied and compared the results of girls taking physics in a coeducational and single-sex setting. According to Streitmatter (1998) the girls repeatedly asked the teacher questions and used the answers as opportunities for group learning. As a result of the opportunities for increased participation, achievement also improved. In Streitmatter’s findings, in the single-sex physics class 87.5% of the girls made an ‘A’ and 12.5% of the girls made a ‘B’; whereas in the coeducational class only 14.3% of the girls made an ‘A’, 14.3% made a ‘B’, and 71.4% made a ‘C’. So across the board, girls benefit the most in the area of participation when boys are not in the class.

Boys, on the other hand, typically lead in the participation in coeducational settings, are more apt to participate in areas where emotions are expressed- or in the area of fine arts; such as, drama or music. Jill Rojas, former Principal of two single-sex public middle schools, states, “You see boys being more supportive, and there’s less giggling if they have to read poetry” (as cited in Vail, 2002, p. 36). This statement supports the thinking that boys are more likely to work in collaborative settings when separated from the girl students, where they are free to express their emotions. Caplice adds, “If there are no girls around to ridicule boys participating in

these activities [art, theatre, cheerleading] and no need for posturing on the part of boys to disassociate oneself from such “girlie” endeavors, presumably more boys will experiment and become comfortable in these areas” (1994). Once again, by allowing school districts the choice of single-sex classes or single-sex schools, student behavior is improved in the areas of attendance, distractions, and participation, thus improving student achievement.

Disadvantaged and Minority Students

Historically, families with money have had a choice to send their children to single-sex schools in the form of private schooling. By providing single-sex education in the public schools, all students, including those in poverty and minorities, will have the same choices as those who can afford private schools. Advocates of single-sex schooling argue, “...poor parents should have the same opportunity as wealthy parents to send their children to all-girls or all-boys schools” (Vail, 2002, p. 33).

Cornelius Riordan, professor of sociology at Providence College, studied the data on students who attended private Catholic schools. Riordan’s studies showed:

Poor and disadvantaged students, Riordan found, were especially likely to benefit from single-sex education. When he studied data on minorities attending Catholic schools, he found that black and Latino students in single-gender schools academically outperformed their peers in co-ed Catholic schools. “The more disadvantaged the student,” Riordan says, “the more likely these students are to gain an advantage from attending single-sex school” (as cited in Vail, 2002, p. 36).

Caplice notes, “single-sex schools also have a proud record of minority graduation rates” (1994) and she further comments, “minorities tend to outpace non-minorities, even within the single-sex setting (1994). It is well-documented that students in poverty and minority students overall are not performing as well as other students in the public school system. Salomone points out, “Single-sex public education provides poorer families the chance to see their children excel in single-sex classrooms, an option once only available to families able to pay private school tuition” (Logsdon, 2003, p. 293). “Other single-sex school supporters share a conviction that single-sex education – especially for girls and low-income families – is now essential as a *remedy* for unequal education” (Heise, 2004, p. 1226). Each public school district should act immediately in this educational reform effort providing the choice to families in order to improve student achievement among students in poverty and minorities.

Learning-Style Differences between Boys and Girls

Another argument for single-sex education is boys and girls learn differently. Leonard Sax, founder of the National Association for Single-Sex Public Education, believes, "The kind of learning environment that is best for boys, is not necessarily best for girls" (as cited in Vail, 2002, p. 36). Richard Hawley suggests, "Physiological and psychological differences between girls and boys require different teaching techniques at different times" (as cited in Caplice, 1994). The teacher is responsible for designing the environment in the classroom using space, movement, and collaboration in order to accommodate different learning styles. Swain and Harvey (2002) agree, "The classroom environment is an additional factor effecting student learning" (p. 18). In single-sex classes or single-sex schools, the teacher would be able to concentrate on the learning-styles of each sex and use the styles to bring out the academic best in each student. Lessons and activities could be designed with a single-sex in mind.

One such environmental learning-style difference is the use of space. At younger ages, males tend to use a lot of space. If a boy and girl are working together at a table the boy might spread his papers over the entire table, leaving little room for the girl. Gurian and Ballew state, "This tendency can affect psychosocial dynamics" (2003, p.18). Some teachers might misunderstand this behavior as rude or aggressive when "in fact, they are often just learning in the way their spatial brains require" (Gurian and Ballew, 2003, p.18). The teacher's knowledge of this information can assist him or her in the design of the single-sex classroom in order to accommodate the male's use of space, thus improving academic achievement.

Another environmental learning-style difference between boys and girls is movement. While movement is an excellent instructional strategy for both boys and girls, boys tend to benefit more from the use of movement. Boys are naturally always moving and they have a tendency to be squirmy or restless, which can be perceived as distracting by female students and the teacher. "Movement is natural to boys in a closed space, thanks to their lower serotonin and higher metabolism, which create fidgety behavior" (Gurian and Ballew, 2003, p. 18). Boys need movement to increase their learning. Gurian and Ballew contend, "Movement seems to stimulate male brains and helps to manage impulsive behavior" (2003, p.18). When school districts take advantage of the opportunity to offer single-sex classes or single-sex schools the teachers in single-sex education settings can make allowances for the movement learning-style difference so that it will positively impact student achievement.

A third environmental learning-style difference is collaborative learning. While all students can benefit from collaboration, girls seem to adapt to this strategy better than boys. Gollnick and Chinn state, "Girls are more likely to learn in cooperative mathematics activities..." (2004, p.152). Girls utilize more words than

boys during the learning process and the collaborative method allows girls to communicate with one another about the topic at hand. "Girls learn while attending to a code of social interaction better than boys do. Boys tend to focus on performing the task well, without as much sensitivity to the emotions of those around them" (Gurian and Ballew, 2003, p. 19). On the other hand, when a teacher chooses to use collaborative learning in a single-sex educational setting the "boys feel it's acceptable to be collaborative" (Vail, 2002, p. 36). As a result of single-sex settings where collaboration is implemented, girls have an easier time at learning and the learning becomes more meaningful.

The classroom learning environment contributes to student academic performance. In coeducational classrooms, girls are often passive and submissive whereas males are more assertive and aggressive, vying for the teacher's attention. Swain and Harvey agree with my comments regarding coeducational classrooms, "In this environment, boys tended to monopolize student-teacher interactions, disrupt lessons, and dominate the physical space" (2002, p. 19). Swain and Harvey (2002) state, "Girls showed their passivity by infrequently participating in class discussions, limiting talking to among themselves and not objecting to the boys' domineering behaviors" (p. 19). Therefore, by separating the sexes teachers will have a better chance to meet individual learning needs by adjusting lessons accordingly.

It is a fact that boys and girls learn differently. Whether students are taught in coeducational or single-sex classrooms, educators must "buy into" the school of thought that learning differences do exist between the sexes. "Single-sex environments allow teachers to adjust their curriculum and teaching style to the particular behavioral patterns of males or females" (Caplice, 1994). "Many teachers, both male and female, commented on how difficult it was to switch gears from what was required of them in the all-male classes – typically a more authoritarian approach – to the requirements of all-girls' classes, where issues of control could recede somewhat to the background" (Herr and Arms, 2004, p. 547). Based on the research of Herr and Arms, teachers found it difficult to "switch gears" between their all-boy and all-girl classes; this in itself, directly supports the fact that girls and boys have different learning-styles, and thus require different teaching strategies. Caplice says it the best, "You have to get away from the notion that if you put everyone in a bowl and mix it up, everybody gets the same and everybody's going to benefit from that experience—that's not necessarily true in education" (1994). Because boys and girls have different learning-styles, public school districts ought to pursue the opportunity to design single-sex classes or single-sex schools to improve student achievement.

Conclusion

The scenario at the beginning of this article describes a typical coeducational classroom. Ms. Ballard would like the girls to be dissecting the frogs

as often as the boys are and she would also like the boys taking notes as often as the girls do. Single-sex education would give Ms. Ballard's students *equal opportunities*.

The establishment of single-sex education permits students the opportunity to learn in an environment free from other-sex distractions demonstrating that social interaction is not the priority of public schools rather academic performance is. Also, in single-sex settings teachers are able to design the curriculum to tailor to the individual needs of each sex. "Separating the sexes for purposes of custom-designing an educational atmosphere to fit the developmental schedules and characteristics of each of the sexes, is based not on stereotypical ideas about the proper roles of men and women in society, but rather on the fact that males and females are different, biologically, psychologically, and developmentally" (Caplice, 1994).

School districts have been given the legal latitude to choose to offer single-sex classes or single-sex schools and it is this author's opinion that districts should take advantage of this opportunity. I agree that with "...the desire to present parents with more education options for their children, in 2001 the Bush Administration set out to make it easier to form such schools" (Mendez, 2004). In Streitmatter's concluding comments regarding her studies, she states, "In general, the girls gave strong and unqualified support for the class, strengthening the argument for the continuation of this and other all-girls classes as options within the curriculum for young women in public coeducational high schools" (1998, p. 374). School districts should implement single-sex education because it is beneficial to learners, particularly minorities and those in poverty, in that their learning-styles are more easily matched, their behaviors improve, and ultimately their academic performance improves.

Single-sex public education has gained more popularity because of the No Child Left Behind Legislation. Heise argues,

Those with the economic ability to exit public for private schools exhibit an increasing preference for single-sex schooling options. Should the ability to act on such a preference be limited only to those families that can afford private schools? If not, then why should a similar education option not be made available to those who attend public schools? (2004).

Also, as Caplice concluded, "The objective is not to replace all mixed-sex schools with same-sex schools. Rather, the goal is to present a full menu of schools from which a student can choose the one that is most closely tailored to the way she learns and creates the environment in which she feels the most comfortable" (1994).

The question comes to mind. Why are public schools hesitant about doing this? Is it not our duty as education professionals to aggressively pursue any avenue that has been shown to improve student achievement? If that is not our duty, then what is?

References

- Caplice, K. (1994). *The case for public single-sex education*. **Harvard Journal of Law & Public Policy**, 18(1), 227-291.
- Mendez, T. (2004). *Separating the sexes: a new direction for public education*. Retrieved Jul. 18, 2005, from The Christian Science Monitor Web site: <http://www.csmonitor.com/2004/0525/p11s02-legn.html>.
- Gillibrand, E., Robinson, R., Brawn, R., & Osborn, A. (1999). *Girls' participation in physics in single sex classes in mixed schools in relation to confidence and achievement*. **International Journal of Science Education**, 21(4), 349-362.
- Gollnick, D., & Chinn, P. (2004). **Multicultural education in a pluralistic society**. 6th ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.
- Gurian, M., & Ballew, A. (2003). **The boys and girls learn differently action guide for teachers**. 1st ed. San Francisco: Josey-Bass.
- Heise, M. (2004). *Are single-sex schools inherently unequal?* **Michigan Law Review**, 102(6), 1219-1244.
- Herr, K., & Arms, E. (2004). *Accountability and single-sex schooling: A collision of reform agendas*. **American Educational Research Journal**, 41(3), 527-555.
- Logsdon, E.C. (2003). "No child left behind" and the promotion of single-sex public education in primary and secondary schools: *Shattering the glass ceilings perpetuated by coeducation*. **Journal of Law Education**. 32(2), 291-296.
- Riordan, C. (1999). *The silent gender gap*. **Education Week**, 19(12), 46,49.
- Streitmatter, J. (1998). *Single-sex classes: Female physics students state their case*. **School Science & Mathematics**, 98(7), 369-375.
- Swain, S. L., & Harvey, D. M. (2002). *Single-sex computer classes: An effective alternative*. **Technology Trends**, 46(6), 17-20.
- U.S. Department of Education, (2004). *Department to provide more educational options for parents*. Retrieved Jul. 12, 2005, from Press Releases Web site: <http://www.ed.gov/news/pressreleases/2004/03/03032004.html>.
- Vail, K. (2002). *Same-sex schools may still get a chance*. **Education Digest**, 68(4), 32-38.