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Same-Sex Schooling

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Research on Educating Boys and Girls Separately Versus Together Is Abundant But Far From Conclusive

In November 2006, the U.S. Department of Education issued new rules making it easier for schools and districts to use gender-separate classes, programs and activities as a strategy for enhancing educational achievement and opportunity.

Education Secretary Margaret Spellings described the revised Title IX regulations as part of a greater effort to expand and diversify options in the public sector. "Every child should receive a high-quality education in America, and every school district deserves the tools to provide it," she said.

The federal action is expected to accelerate efforts by public school systems to experiment with single-sex education, particularly in inner-city and charter schools.

Over the past decade, the number of public schools in the United States offering same-sex educational opportunities has increased from three to more than 250. They range from elementary, middle and high schools exclusively for boys or girls to those offering a blend of gender-separate and coeducational classes and activities.

In announcing the new regulations, Secretary Spellings pointed to a federally sponsored review of research on same-sex schooling that suggests educating boys and girls separately – either in different schools or separate classes – "may provide benefits to students under certain circumstances."

This issue of *The Progress of Education Reform* features highlights of that research review and of a similarly comprehensive analysis published recently by the United Kingdom's Centre for Education and Employment Research.

Taken together, they provide a useful, up-to-date look at what we know – and what we don't – about the relative merits of same-sex versus coeducational schooling.

Inside, you'll also find links to other sources of information on the topic and, on the back page, additional details about the revised Title IX regulations.

What's Inside

- What the research says about same-sex schooling
- Links to other resources
- Details about the revised Title IX regulations



Single-Sex versus Coeducational Schooling: A Systematic Review
(Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development, U.S. Department of Education,
October 2005) <http://www.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/other/single-sex/index.html>

This literature review, conducted by the American Institutes for Research (AIR) for the U.S. Department of Education, finds – albeit with significant qualifiers – that same-sex schooling has some definite advantages over coeducational setups.

The AIR research team reviewed both quantitative and qualitative literature on same-sex and coed instruction and divided the best studies into 32 separate assessment areas, ranging from achievement test scores to self-concept to long-term indicators of success in college and the workplace.

In 22 of these areas, same-sex schools outperformed coeducational ones. For example, most of the studies examining the academic performance of students in both types of schools show that single-sex education had positive effects on current and long-term achievement. And in studies examining the softer side of student performance, same-sex education seemed to help foster higher educational and career aspirations, particularly for girls.

The report's authors make it clear that their conclusions are not rock solid. "The results are equivocal," they say. "There is some support for the premise that single-sex schooling can be helpful, especially for certain outcomes related to academic achievement and aspirations. A limited number of studies provide evidence favoring coeducational schooling. It is more common to come across studies that report no differences between single-sex and coed schooling than to find outcomes with support for the superiority of coeducation."

The report notes that the research base on same-sex versus coed schooling, while copious, is rife with methodological shortcomings. Too few researchers report descriptive statistics or effect sizes. Many studies have conceptual or interpretive flaws, and few studies address important "moderators" – ethnicity, religious values, financial privilege, prior learning and other variables that may have differential effects for single-sex schooling.

The report points out that it has been impossible to design "gold standard" randomized studies of single-sex public schools, since they have been more or less illegal for three decades under Title IX regulations. But rather than "trying to conduct all-or-nothing studies of whether single-sex schooling is better or worse than coeducational schooling," the report says, researchers should focus on "more careful specification of hypotheses and direct linkage of hypotheses to specific outcomes."

The report concludes on a cautionary note. "Some issues cannot be resolved by any type of research, even randomized experiments, because they involve issues of philosophy and worldview and represent the relative priorities of dueling stakeholders. There is no way to resolve whether an outcome that is important to one stakeholder group should be accorded more weight than an outcome valued by another group. What is possible is to separate out fact (in the form of evidence) from fiction by converting as many claims as possible to testable hypotheses and performing the necessary research."



The Paradox of Single-Sex and Co-Educational Schooling

(Alan Smithers and Pamela Robinson, The Centre for Education and Employment Research, University of Buckingham, United Kingdom, July 2006)
<http://www.buckingham.ac.uk/education/research/ceer/pdfs/hmcsscd.pdf>

Smithers and Robinson reviewed hundreds of studies conducted in England, Ireland, Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States over the past four decades on the relative merits of separating or mixing the sexes in education.

The issue of whether to educate boys and girls separately or together is one that arouses strong feelings but on which there is little conclusive – and often contradictory -- evidence, Smithers and Robinson say. “The paradox of the single-sex/coeducation debate is that the beliefs are so strong and the evidence is so weak.”

Among their key findings:

There is little to suggest that girls and boys choose different subjects or do better in them in either single-sex or mixed schools. More boys than girls study subjects like physics, the authors say, but “high-ability girls are just as likely to study the subject in a mixed as in a girls’ school.”

Findings on the superiority of coeducation in terms of social development are contradictory. While some studies suggest that coed schools provide an environment more conducive to social adjustment and adaptability, others have found that girls feel more comfortable and perform better in single-sex settings.

There are excellent single-sex and coeducational schools, but they are excellent for reasons other than that they separate, or bring together, the sexes for their education. The main determinants of a school’s performance are the ability and social background of the pupils, the authors say. The gender mix of a school is only one factor – and its effects, if any, “are usually not strong enough to be detected by the methods of educational research.” As for whether single-sex schooling is particularly beneficial for disadvantaged children, it is generally argued, Smithers and Robinson note, that “this is not because of the gender mix per se, but because it represents a pro-academic choice on the part of the parents.”

Given the seemingly small effects of separating or bringing the sexes together for education – and the limitations on what educational research can and cannot do – “it seems unlikely that evidence will ever be obtained that is sufficiently robust to cause the proponents of one approach or the other to change their views,” Smithers and Robinson conclude.

In the end, they say, deciding whether to mix or separate the sexes for education “has to be a matter of judgment. It is for the providers to work out which they think is the most appropriate to offer in their circumstances, and for parents to choose the schools they think would best suit their children.”

Other Resources

In *Same, Different, Equal: Rethinking Single-Sex Schooling* (Yale University Press, 2003), St. John’s University law professor Rosemary Salomone presents a comprehensive, even-handed review of the legal, political and cultural dimensions of the battle over gender equality in education in general, and over single-sex schooling in particular. Salomone concludes that “it defies reason for government to mandate coeducation for all students enrolled in public schools,” and that single-sex education is a legally acceptable option that ought to be widely available in the United States, especially for disadvantaged children.

The National Association for Single-Sex Public Education keeps track of the growing number of public schools in the United States offering same-sex educational opportunities. Its Web site, www.singlesexschools.org, provides information on public elementary, middle and high schools exclusively for boys or girls and those that offer a blend of gender-separate and coeducational classes and activities.



New Federal Rules on Gender-Separate Classes, Schools and Activities

Under Title IX, the 1972 law that banned sex discrimination in educational institutions receiving federal funds, single-sex classes and extracurricular activities have been largely limited to physical and sex education classes. And to open schools exclusively for boys or girls, a district has until now had to show a “compelling reason” – for example, that it was acting to remedy past discrimination.

The school-choice provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 called for a loosening of those strictures, making it easier for public schools to educate boys and girls separately

New Title IX regulations – proposed two years ago by the U.S. Department of Education and made final on Nov. 24, 2006 – will allow districts to create single-sex classes and schools provided that:

- They have an “important objective,” such as improving student achievement, providing diverse educational opportunities or meeting the needs of particular students.
- Enrollment is voluntary.
- Coeducational classes and schools of “substantially equal” quality are available for students of the excluded sex.
- Single-sex programs are evaluated every two years to ensure they are meeting federal requirements.

The revised Title IX regulations are available online at:
<http://www.ed.gov/legislation/FedRegister/finrule/2006-4/102506a.html>.



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