

# **SINGLE-SEX SCHOOLS AND GENDER ROLES: BARRIER OR BREAKTHROUGH?**

Chrissy Guarisco  
May 19, 2010

## **INTRODUCTION**

The number of single-sex public schools has steadily increased in recent years.<sup>1</sup> As of April 2010, at least 540 schools offered single-sex programs.<sup>2</sup> Most of these schools were coeducational and merely offered single-sex classes.<sup>3</sup> However, about 91 of the 540 schools were completely single-sex.<sup>4</sup> This essay seeks to determine whether single-sex schools generally limit students to certain gender roles, or if they instead provide opportunities to transcend them. This essay will seek to identify and weigh the main potential harms and benefits of single-sex education, with a particular discussion of the feminist viewpoints on the issue. Two single-sex secondary schools in Chicago will then be discussed as examples of how these “innovative assistance programs” have worked in practice. This essay will eventually conclude that while single-sex schools should remain an option, schools should make careful efforts to ensure that they present curriculums for both boys and girls that equally value both traditionally masculine and feminine endeavors.

---

<sup>1</sup> See Nat'l Assoc. for Single Sex Public Educ., Single-Sex Schools /Schools with Single-Sex Classrooms/What's the Difference?, <http://www.singlesexschools.org/schools-schools.htm> (last visited May 15, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

<sup>3</sup> *Id.*

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*

## **A BRIEF RECAP OF THE RECENT INCREASE IN SINGLE-SEX EDUCATION**

Title IX, which prohibits sexual discrimination,<sup>5</sup> and Supreme Court decisions such as *United States v. Virginia*<sup>6</sup> initially presented a hurdle to the widespread development of single-sex schools.<sup>7</sup> However, the No Child Left Behind Act effectively endorsed single-sex education for students by identifying such programs as “innovative assistance programs.”<sup>8</sup> The Department of Education subsequently enacted Title IX regulations in 2006 allowing for voluntary single-sex classes and activities; however, the regulations allow these classes and activities only when they were accompanied by "substantially equal" classes and activities available to both sexes or to the excluded sex.<sup>9</sup>

## **ARGUMENTS AGAINST SINGLE-SEX SCHOOLS**

First, empirical evidence supporting single-sex education is not conclusive, and the Department of Education actually admitted this uncertainty when they issued their Title IX regulations in 2006. The Department recognized a “debate among educators on the effectiveness of single-sex education,” but nevertheless allowed schools to make their own individualized decisions on the matter.<sup>10</sup> Some commentators have criticized the regulations’ lack of purpose and guidance for educators in conducting the single-sex experiment.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> See 20 U.S.C. § 1681 (2000).

<sup>6</sup> 518 U.S. 515 (1996) (holding that Virginia’s separate program for women could not be considered equal to the men’s program).

<sup>7</sup> See Benjamin P. Carr, *Can Separate Be Equal - Single-Sex Classrooms, the Constitution, and Title IX*, 83 NOTRE DAME L. REV. 409, 410-11 (2007).

<sup>8</sup> See 20 U.S.C. § 7215(a)(23) (2006).

<sup>9</sup> Nondiscrimination on the Basis of Sex in Education Programs or Activities Receiving Federal Financial Assistance, 34 C.F.R. § 106 (2007); see also 34 C.F.R. § 106.34(b)(1)(B)(iv), available at <http://frwebgate6.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/PDFgate.cgi?WAISdocID=947701477301+46+2+0&WAIAction=retrieve>.

<sup>10</sup> 71 Fed. Reg. 62,530 (Oct. 25, 2006) (responding to comments).

<sup>11</sup> See David Zadker and Karen Zimmerman, *Single-Sex Schools: A Good Idea Gone Wrong?*, CHRISTIAN SCI. MON., Apr. 8, 2004, at 9, available at <http://www.sadker.org/PDF/SingleSexSchools.pdf>.

The Supreme Court noted in *United States v. Virginia* that inherent differences between the sexes “remain cause for celebration, but not for denigration of the members of either sex or for artificial constraints on an individual’s opportunity.”<sup>12</sup> The most obvious problem with single-sex education is that it segregates students, and “[h]istorically, societies that support the segregation of women are also those that typically include more rigid and traditional gender roles.”<sup>13</sup>

Schools have a strong effect in the formation of students’ gender roles. Research shows that “both boys and girls come to school with a sense of their own identity (whether they are a boy or a girl) but that they do not have the same sense of gendered identity (what characteristics are associated with being a boy or a girl).”<sup>14</sup> Allowing children to learn only with those of their same sex may push children into a sort of gender box, which punishes children who may naturally tend to display gender characteristics usually associated with the opposite sex. Further, by telling boys and girls that it is acceptable to segregate them because of inherent differences, such as how their brain works, these children may perceive that they are somehow limited to prescribed gender roles. Brain differences “might not be applicable in every case,”<sup>15</sup> and it is unrealistic to expect that one education model may be the best for *all* girls or *all* boys. But this is why single-sex schools and programs are required to be voluntary and accompanied by substantially equal coeducational schools and programs – the students who may not benefit from a single-sex learning environment should easily be able to find the coeducational equivalent.

---

<sup>12</sup> 518 U.S. 515, 533 (1996).

<sup>13</sup> See Elizabeth S. Kisthardt, *Singling Them Out: The Influence of the Boy Crisis on the New Title IX Regulations*, 22 WIS. WOMEN’S L.J. 313, 334 (2007).

<sup>14</sup> David S. Cohen, *No Boy Left Behind – Single-Sex Education and the Essentialist Myth of Masculinity*, 84 IND. L.J. 135, 138 (2009).

<sup>15</sup> Bill Piatt, *Gender Segregation in the Public Schools; Opportunity, Inequality, or Both*, 11 SCHOLAR 561, 575 (2009).

Another argument that is often brought up in opposition to single-sex schools is that such schools cannot adequately prepare students for the “real world.”<sup>16</sup> Indeed, one consequence of single-sex education is that inevitably, some social interaction between boys and girls will not occur. However, the idea that this absence of interaction should invalidate single-sex education is a tenuous argument, considering that the United States already condones private single-sex schools, as well as homeschooling. Homeschooling presents the same risk of decreased socialization. It is also practically certain that most students at single-sex schools will have to interact with members of the opposite sex outside of school, even if they don’t actually see them in the classroom. The goal of single-sex education is not to stifle interaction, but to improve the quality of learning for those who may learn better in a single-sex environment.

### **ARGUMENTS FAVORING SINGLE-SEX SCHOOLS**

Generally, some studies show that girls’ and boys’ brains function differently, necessitating distinct educational approaches and techniques.<sup>17</sup> Students may also be distracted by the presence of the opposite sex in the classroom, and separation may allow the learning process to proceed more smoothly.<sup>18</sup>

Private and religious schools are able to offer boys and girls a single-sex learning experience. Public single-sex schools have a unique opportunity to give students the option to reap the same benefits offered by private schools, without the financial burden. The founder of one of the first single-sex female public schools explains that she thought that underprivileged

---

<sup>16</sup> See *Inner-City Single-Sex Schools: Educational Reform Or Invidious Discrimination*, 105 HARV. L. REV. 1741, 1758 (1992).

<sup>17</sup> See generally Nat’l Ass’n for Single Sex Pub. Educ., *Brain Differences*, <http://www.singlesexschools.org/research-brain.htm>.

<sup>18</sup> See Rebecca A. Kiselewich, Note, *In Defense of the 2006 Title IX Regulations for Single-Sex Public Education: How Separate Can Be Equal*, 49 B.C. L. REV. 217, 229 (2008).

students she met needed “a completely different path, a path that wealthy girls and parochial-school girls and yeshiva girls are offered.”<sup>19</sup>

Fittingly, the rest of this discussion on the benefits of single-sex education will be separated by sex. Educators have worked to address what they believe are inherently different problems faced by male and female students. Some believe that single-sex schools may provide the solution for these difficulties.

#### **A. POTENTIAL BENEFITS FOR BOYS**

Boys have unique problems that single-sex schools aim to address directly – there has even been talk of a “boy crisis” in the media and in scholarly debate. Boys have a higher rate of disciplinary problems and drug use than girls.<sup>20</sup> Boys drop out of school more than girls, and boys are attending and completing college less than girls.<sup>21</sup> Some commentators believe that educational models in schools geared at addressing girls’ needs have actually harmed boys.<sup>22</sup>

In the last two decades, the education system has become obsessed with a quantifiable and narrowly defined kind of academic success, these experts say, and that myopic view is harming boys. Boys are biologically, developmentally and psychologically different from girls--and teachers need to learn how to bring out the best in every one. "Very well-meaning people," says Dr. Bruce Perry, a Houston neurologist who advocates for troubled kids, "have created a biologically disrespectful model of education."<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> Elizabeth Weil, *Teaching Boys and Girls Separately*, N.Y. TIMES, Mar. 2, 2008, available at [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/02/magazine/02sex3-t.html?\\_r=1&pagewanted=all](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/02/magazine/02sex3-t.html?_r=1&pagewanted=all).

<sup>20</sup> Cohen, *supra* note 14, at 136-37.

<sup>21</sup> *Id.*

<sup>22</sup> See Kisthardt, *supra* note 13, at 314.

<sup>23</sup> Peg Tyre, *The Trouble with Boys*, NEWSWEEK, Jan. 30, 2006, available at <http://www.newsweek.com/id/47522/page/1> (mentioning single-sex education as a potential solution that has worked in some cases).

Moreover, some believe that single-sex schools would actually benefit boys the most – specifically, boys from minority groups and boys from poor families who may need more direct guidance.<sup>24</sup>

Boys might also feel freer to engage in pursuits they may not have considered at a coeducational school. For instance, a school principal who has taught at both coeducational and single-sex schools has noted that "there is a subtle pressure toward gender stereotyping in mixed schools. In boys' schools, boys feel free to be themselves, to follow their interests and talents in what might be regarded as non-macho pursuits: music, arts, drama."<sup>25</sup> This anecdotal evidence makes sense. When girls are around, they are the ones expected to take part in such 'non-macho pursuits.' But when the girls aren't in the school, boys may perceive that it is acceptable to fill those 'feminine' roles. Single-sex schools would therefore allow some boys to transcend the gender roles that are typically assigned to them.

## **B. POTENTIAL BENEFITS FOR GIRLS**

Proponents of single-sex schools argue that these schools allow girls to flourish in a way that coeducational schools may not. Some studies indicate that girls at schools with single-sex programs achieve higher learning, display more self-confidence and leadership skills, and enter male-dominated fields at a higher rate.<sup>26</sup> Studies have also shown that girls in single-sex classes are actually more likely to act outside of traditional gender roles.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> See Amy R. Rigdon, *Dangerous Data: How Disputed Research Legalized Public Single-Sex Education*, 37 STETSON L. REV. 527, 549 (2008).

<sup>25</sup> Nat'l Assoc. for Single Sex Public Educ., *Single-Sex Schools - Advantages for Boys*, <http://www.singlesexschools.org/advantages-forboys.htm> (quote from principal Andrew Hunter).

<sup>26</sup> See Rigdon, *supra* note 24, at 532 (2008), citing Nancy Levit, *Separating Equals: Educational Research and the Long-Term Consequences of Sex Segregation*, 67 GEO. WASH. L. REV. 451, 472 (1999).

<sup>27</sup> See Carr, *supra* note 7, at 436.

Girls might also benefit from a less sexualized learning environment. For example, a teacher at an all-girls high school in New York has stated:

. . . I think I'm giving girls a better education than I could have if there were guys in the room. I'm freer. I'm more able to be bold in my statements. When I teach poetry and I talk about the sex in poetry I don't need to be worried about the boy in the room who is going to chuckle over the thing he did with the girl last week and embarrass her. Which happened more than once in my last coed environment.<sup>28</sup>

Sexual harassment is an unfortunate problem in coeducational environments. While the risk is still present in single-sex schools, some feel that the single-sex environment provides a safer environment for female students.

### **FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES ON SINGLE-SEX EDUCATION**

To further examine the issue of whether single-sex schools benefit or harm students, it is helpful to consider the feminist point of view. Single-sex education is not an issue that divides people neatly across political party lines. Similarly, feminist scholars have disagreed on whether it harms or helps students.<sup>29</sup> Some individual feminist scholars have spoken out in favor of single-sex public schools as a viable option for students.<sup>30</sup> However, major feminist groups have strongly disagreed. The National Organization for Women (NOW) opposes single-sex education, in the belief that "so-called 'separate but equal' policies rarely treat girls equally, often relying on outdated sex-stereotypes about girls' and boys' interests and abilities."<sup>31</sup> They

---

<sup>28</sup> Weil, *supra* note 19.

<sup>29</sup> See Rosemary Salomone, *Feminist Voices in the Debate over Single-Sex Schooling: Finding Common Ground*, 11 MICH. J. GENDER & L. 63, 65 (2004).

<sup>30</sup> See *id.* at 93.

<sup>31</sup> NOW and Single Sex Education, <http://www.now.org/issues/education/single-sex-education.html>.

also fear that “all-boys schools increase sexism and exacerbate feelings of superiority toward women.”<sup>32</sup> NOW believes that the best way to achieve workplace equality in the future is to enhance, and not eliminate, interaction between boys and girls in the classroom.<sup>33</sup>

The Feminist Majority Foundation also opposes single-sex education, arguing that “most efforts to provide sex-segregated education are detrimental and waste resources that instead should be used to end sex stereotyping and discrimination in coeducational environments.”<sup>34</sup>

NOW also disagrees with the argument that girls should be provided the option of a safer, harassment-free learning environment:

[W]hen we separate the sexes, we perpetuate the concept that men and women can't get along, and that male harassment of women is best handled by building a wall, not by changing the behavior and its motivation. This is the coward's way of dealing with the problem, and it serves to drive the sexes further apart, socializing our kids to perpetuate these divisions throughout their lives.<sup>35</sup>

While an interesting point, this argument is overly theoretical. It fails to address the needs of the female students who do desire a safer learning environment, or who simply learn better without the distraction. Children and teenagers are (for the most part) far less mature than adults in the workplace, and it is unrealistic to expect them to solve complicated issues like sexual harassment on their own. Instead, the best way to prepare a student for the workplace is to provide the best learning experience possible for that student. The next section will discuss two single-sex high schools in Chicago, and will take into account the statements that have been made by actual

---

<sup>32</sup> *Id.*

<sup>33</sup> *Id.*

<sup>34</sup> Feminist Majority Foundation – Education Equality, <http://feminist.org/education/SexSegregation.asp>.

<sup>35</sup> *Below the Belt: Looking at Education through Father Knows Best-Colored Glasses*, National Organization for Women, Sept. 19, 2007, <http://www.now.org/news/note/091907.html>.



students at these schools. In the end, the voices of the students who have experienced both coeducational and single-sex education may be the best “empirical data” out there.

### **CHICAGO’S SINGLE-SEX SECONDARY SCHOOLS**

Recently, Chicago’s only public all-male, all African-American high school made history when every one of its graduating seniors was accepted into a four-year university.<sup>36</sup> Although Urban Prep’s rigorous academic program and strong emphasis on college may have played the main role in this accomplishment, the school’s own mission statement demonstrates that its curriculum choices are specially designed for boys:

The mission of Urban Prep is to provide a comprehensive, high-quality college preparatory education to young men that results in graduates succeeding in college. This mission is a direct response to the urgent need to reverse abysmal graduation and college completion rates among young men in urban centers, particularly African-American males. **Urban Prep’s tailored curriculum is based on the developmental stages and learning styles of boys as well as the unique challenges facing urban youth.**<sup>37</sup>

An honor roll student at Urban Prep recently expressed his gratefulness that the school “taught [him] to become a young man,” and that there are “males [t]here to guide [him] through

---

<sup>36</sup> See Duaa Eldeib, *Every Urban Prep Senior is College-Bound*, CHI. TRIB., Mar. 5, 2010, available at [http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2010-03-05/news/ct-met-urban-prep-college-20100305\\_1\\_metal-detectors-college-school-leaders](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2010-03-05/news/ct-met-urban-prep-college-20100305_1_metal-detectors-college-school-leaders).

<sup>37</sup> Urban Prep Academies Home Page, Mission Statement, <http://www.urbanprep.org/> (emphasis added).

[his] everyday problems like a father figure would.”<sup>38</sup> This is especially important for boys from minority groups and poor families, where male role models can be scarce.

There is one single-sex high school for girls in the Chicago Public Schools system. The Young Women’s Leadership Charter School was founded ten years ago, and enrolls girls from the seventh to twelfth grades.<sup>39</sup> The school’s college placement rates are excellent, considering that its student population is mostly made up of girls from low-income families.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, the school’s students seem happy:

"In other schools, boys mostly answer all the questions and do all the talking in class, and the only thing the girls care about is looking cute for the boys," said Jenaun Armstrong, 18, a senior who plans to major in acting when she starts at Tennessee State University in the fall.

"At ‘Y-Dub,’ we speak up, and we don't have to worry about the boys doing all the talking."<sup>41</sup>

Further, the worries about single-sex schools potentially limiting students’ gender roles seem unfounded - a recent newspaper article about the school begins by profiling a student who chose the school because she felt it would give her the best chance at a career in automotive design, a stereotypically “masculine” career.<sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup> Allison Horton, *Academy of Achievers: All Chicago Charter School’s Seniors Get Into College*, Jet Magazine, April 2010, available at [http://www.urbanprep.org/pdf/EbonyJetMag\\_Apr2010.pdf](http://www.urbanprep.org/pdf/EbonyJetMag_Apr2010.pdf).

<sup>39</sup> Young Women’s Leadership Charter School Home Page, <http://www.ywles.org/about/>.

<sup>40</sup> Pam DeFiglio, *Subtract Boys, Add Confidence*, CHI. TRIB., Apr. 21, 2010, available at [http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2010-04-21/features/ct-x-all-girls-school-0421-20100421\\_1\\_chicago-public-schools-magnet-school-girls](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2010-04-21/features/ct-x-all-girls-school-0421-20100421_1_chicago-public-schools-magnet-school-girls). But see Brenna Swift, *Girls-Only School Seeks Renewal*, CHICAGO JOURNAL, May 12, 2010, available at [http://www.chicagojournal.com/News/05-12-2010/Girls-only\\_school\\_seeks\\_renewal](http://www.chicagojournal.com/News/05-12-2010/Girls-only_school_seeks_renewal) (discussing the uncertainty of this same school’s future as a result of its students’ poor standardized testing scores).

<sup>41</sup> *Id.*

<sup>42</sup> *See id.*

The Young Women's Leadership Charter School lists its distinguishing qualities on its website. The website indicates that its single-sex environment provides a "cooperative, supportive working environment" with an "emphasis on math, science, and technology."<sup>43</sup> This statement again undercuts the argument that single-sex education pushes students into traditional gender roles; however, it also raises a concerning issue. Math and science are commonly the two areas of study where girls struggle more than boys. *Emphasizing* these subjects in a single-sex girls' school may actually be sending the girls a message that stereotypically "masculine" areas of study are more worthwhile. This is something that single-sex schools and programs should approach carefully. Giving girls the opportunities to branch outside of traditional gender roles is ideal, but actually emphasizing certain subjects over others runs the risk of devaluing femininity and may be a form of sexism in itself.

## **CONCLUSION**

In a footnote to her opinion in *United States v. Virginia*, Justice Ginsburg states that single-sex programs may be intended to "dissipate, rather than perpetuate, traditional gender classifications."<sup>44</sup> Her words ring true. Perhaps the best way for some students to escape their gender "box" is to attend a single-sex school, where there are no members of the opposite sex to automatically fill those prescribed gender roles. Perhaps the best way for other students is to attend a coeducational school, where they share completely equal facilities with members of the

---

<sup>43</sup> Young Women's Leadership Charter School Home Page, <http://www.ywlcs.org/about/>.

<sup>44</sup> See Salomone, *supra* note 29, at 65, *citing* 518 U.S. at 534 n.7 (*quoting* Brief for Twenty-Six Private Women's Colleges as Amici Curiae 5).

opposite sex. The biggest concern from those who oppose single-sex schools is that the schools' segregation by sex will result in inequality. To address this concern, schools must be vigilant to ensure that students receive an education that values so-called feminine subjects of study and extracurricular activities as much as so-called masculine subjects of study and extracurricular activities. Teaching respect for all gender roles and for the opposite sex, even in a single-sex school, is the surest path to real equality after graduation.