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Whether Mandating Same-Sex Schools will help to minimize the Achievement Gap for Disadvantaged and Minority Students? A Glance at the Advantages and Disadvantages of Same Sex Schools

With politicians, school administrators, activists, scientific researchers, teachers, and parents weighing in on the subject of single- gender education, much controversy has developed around the subject. The question, “Is the separation of students by gender a vehicle for improving the educational experiences for low-income and minority students?” remains unanswered. However, parents and educators push for more school choice in the public sector and strive to replicate the successes of single-sex education that have been documented in the private sector. Today, many public schools throughout the nation are either entirely single-sex or have single-sex classrooms. More and more school districts are evaluating the pros and cons of single-sex education. While most public schools will remain coeducational, there may be good reason to make single-sex schools and classrooms available to some public school students, particularly in schools with underprivileged students and in schools showing repeated poor academic performance.

I. History of Same Sex Education in America

The U.S. Supreme Court case, *United States v. Virginia*, held that the exclusion of women from admission to the Virginia Military Institute (VMI) was a violation of the “equal protection” clause of the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.¹ This case makes it clear that any categorical exclusion of members of one sex from a public educational institution or program will be met with “skeptical scrutiny” under the Constitution—scrutiny that VMI was unable to endure.² The constitution requires such skepticism, and the Court held, because, as in the VMI case, such sex-

¹ Deborah L. Brake, *A Legal Framework for Single-Sex Education*, at 1 (1999), <http://www2.edc.org/WomensEquity/pubs/digests-singlesex.html>

² *Id.*

based distinctions often work an inequality on deserving individuals and bring about harmful stereotypes.³ In addition to the constitutional limits on public institutions, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 prohibits sex discrimination in public and private institutions that receive federal funding.⁴

However both the Constitution and Title IX recognize that there are limited circumstances in which single-sex educational opportunities may be justified. For instance, the Constitution because it guarantee of equal protection requires “strict scrutiny” of any gender classification by a public institution or in a public program, and Title IX because it prohibits sex discrimination by educational institutions that receive federal funds. For instance, in the case of VMI the court makes it clear that a public school or program that excludes all members of one sex “may pass constitutional muster only if the school demonstrates persuasively that it truly serves the objective of compensating for discrimination and eliminating arbitrary barriers to advancement.” In addition, like the constitution, Title IX does not firmly prohibit single-sex education; instead, it contains exceptions that permit specified programs separated by gender, which means that single-sex schools are not barred by Title IX. The Supreme Court has made it clear that public single-sex education does not violate the guarantee of equal protection as long as the proponents of a single-sex program or institution are able to demonstrate that it substantially furthers the goal of remedying past or present discrimination. Title IX also permits single-sex programs in a number of specific circumstances, such as remedying discrimination or overcoming the effects of sex-based barriers to participation.⁵ The law thus recognizes that there are circumstances in which properly designed and implemented single-sex

³ *Id.*

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ *Id.*

education can play an important role in combating discrimination and dissipating traditional gender classifications.

Furthermore, the No Child Left Behind Act provides guidance for school districts that wish to implement single-sex classes without violating Title IX. The No Child Left Behind Act, which was signed in early 2002, authorized districts to use funds to establish same-sex schools and classrooms.⁶ The Act gives more flexibility to educators to provide a wide range of educational programs and more options for parents, while neither encouraging nor favoring single-sex education.⁷ The Act allows schools and districts to offer single sex classes when the single-sex nature of the class is substantially related to providing a diversity of educational options or to meeting the particular, identified needs of students.⁸ Under the act, schools and districts must treat male and female students neutrally in providing single-sex classes.⁹ Student participation in single-sex classes would be on a voluntary basis.¹⁰ A substantially equal coeducational class in the same subject always would be required. Schools and districts would be required to evaluate single-sex classes periodically to ensure compliance with these nondiscrimination requirements.¹¹

II. Academic Achievement of Low-Income Minority Students in America

In the United States, many efforts to improve the academic achievement of low-income and

⁶ Education World, *No Educator Left Behind: Single Sex Education*, http://www.educationworld.com/a_issues/NELB/NELB078.shtml

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ *Id.*

minority students have been undertaken, including Head Start preschools, comprehensive school restructuring models such as Success for All and Accelerated Schools; and tutoring, mentoring, and after-school programs. Recently, as part of a plan to provide additional opportunities for students to choose a “better” school, the Bush administration lessened Title IX restrictions on single-sex schools.¹² This change has renewed interest in establishing single-sex schools within the public school system as a way to address the needs of students who have not been successful in traditional coeducational schools.¹³ As a response to the Bush Administration’s proposal of establishing more single-sex schools within the public school system, politicians, school administrators, activists, scientific researchers, teachers, and parents have began expressing their opinions about the advantages and disadvantages of single-sex school and coeducational schools.

III. Advantages of Single Sex Schools

The interest in single-sex schools as a solution for low-income and minority students is supported by research showing that students’ educational experiences vary by gender within and across ethnic and racial groups. It is claimed that girls and boys have different patterns of brain development, brain processing, hearing sensitivity, and responds to stress in different ways and their differences can best be responded to by differentiating their instruction and learning environment in single-sex schools.¹⁴ Furthermore, it is argued that coeducational schools encourage gender stereotypes and studies have shown that student who have been educated in single-sex environments have a stronger preference for subject that are stereotypically aligned with the opposite sex. Also,

¹² Education World, *No Educator Left Behind: Single Sex Education*, http://www.educationworld.com/a_issues/NELB/NELB078.shtml (last visited 5/4/2011).

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ Education Bug, *CoEd or Single Sex Education*, <http://www.educationbug.org/a/coed-or-single-sex-education.html> (last visited 5/4/2011).

since it has been proven that girls mature earlier than boys, advocates for single-sex schools argue that in a class by themselves, girls are relieved of the consequences of the acting out that the boys of the same age may engage in. And, advocates for same-sex schools claim that behaviors of preening, showing off, and carrying on social behavior during academic courses may be reduced in a single-sex-environment.¹⁵

Moreover, proponents of single-sex education claim that separating school-age boys and girls into separate classrooms benefit both boys and girls. That is the experience of Jefferson Middle School in Illinois after only a half semester with voluntary same-sex classes for 7th and 8th graders. School officials report higher grades, better attendance, and less trouble-making for all students.¹⁶ Moreover, the school reported that most girls improved in science and math, and boys performed better in reading and writing. Proponents of single-sex education also believe that the theory underlying single-sex education is that boys and girls learn differently because of actual differences in how their brains process information. They believe that when girls and boys are in separate classrooms, teachers can adapt their teaching methods to take advantage of the particular learning techniques of boys and girls. For example, girls tend to prefer teamwork, whereas boys are motivated by competition. They also believe that another benefit of single-sex classes is that students are not continually distracted by members of the opposite sex. There is less emphasis on clothing and acting out to get noticed by the opposite sex; girls may be more likely to raise their hands to participate in class and boys have improved concentration.¹⁷

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ Public School Review, *Single- Sex Public School Education*, at 2 (2008), <http://www.publicschoolreview.com/articles/11>.

¹⁷ *Id.*

In addition, proponents for same-sex education argue that, socially same-sex schools are emotionally easier on students. They believe that in these settings, girls are more outspoken and competitive when boys are not around to tease them, and that they also feel more comfortable participating in sports and traditionally male dominated fields when boys are not watching.¹⁸ Conversely, they argue that boys become less competitive and collaborate more because they don't have to worry about girls opinions of the, and they can also feel free to participate in the arts with a class full of other boys. Proponents of same-sex schooling say this freedom builds confidence in young students and allows them to concentrate on their studies more because it removes the distractions of coeducation social pressures. Although very little research exists, some studies have suggested that the benefits are more evident in girls, lower-income families, and minorities, which author Rosemary Salomone argues in her book entitled "Same, Different, Equal: Rethinking Single-Sex Education."

IV. Disadvantages of Single Sex Schools

Opponents of same-sex schooling such as the ACLU and National Organization for Women have historically maintained that same-sex schooling would diminish the affects of Title IX.¹⁹ Title IX, a 1972 Higher Education Act, calls for federally funded educational institutions to treat males and females equally in schools and in sports. Some opponents also suspect that same-sex schooling will either push students into exploring homosexual relationships, or on the reverse viewpoint, it would increase stereotypes and homophobia.²⁰ Also, opponents of same-sex schooling argue that since women and men are likely to interact in the workplace and in the home, schools should be an

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ *Id.*

environment in which gender differences come to be understood and prepare students for real life.²¹ They also believe that students also should learn to deal with the social issues that arise in mixed company rather than avoid them.

Furthermore, opponents of same- sex schools claim that single sex education for boys sometimes becomes very problematic, and that their behavior may become negative and impossible to control at times. Opponents of same-sex schools argue that this type of education may strengthen or support academic stereotypes like girls are better in social science and boys are better in mathematics. Also, they claim that separate classrooms for girls will reinforce the notion that girls don't belong in the classroom with the boys; hence the inferiority in girls may rise again. Also, they believe that the learning pattern in single sex education makes use of the areas where they are strong and does not pay attention to areas of weakness.²² Opponents of same-sex schools are claim that to some the idea of substantially equal schools, classes, or extracurricular activities is reminiscent of the "separate but equal" policy for racially segregated schools.²³ They also question how a coeducational class for both sexes can be substantially equal to a single-sex for one sex.²⁴ Some have argued that single-sex education is a step back from hard-won gains brought about by the feminist movement.²⁵ In their view, interaction between girls and boys furthers the goal of equality in the workplace, whereas separate classrooms reinforce gender stereotypes.²⁶

²¹ AAUW Educational Foundation, *Separated by Sex: Title IX and Single-Sex Education*(1998).

²² Patricia Fioriello, *Pros and Cons of Single Sex Classes in K-12 Education (2009)*, available at <http://drpfconsults.com/pros-and-cons-of-single-sex-classes-in-k-12-education/> (last visited 5/4/2011).

²³ *Id.*

²⁴ *Id.*

²⁵ AAUW Educational Foundation, *Separated by Sex: Title IX and Single-Sex Education*(1998).

²⁶ *Id.*

V. Is Single-Sex Education Effectively Helping to Minimize the Achievement Gap?

While there are several different advantages and disadvantages for single-sex education, there are also numerous studies that have recently been conducted to determine how effectively single-sex classes and schools are educating students. For example, in the article “Is Single Gender Schooling in the Public Sector? Lessons from California’s Pilot Program” the article states that in “In 1997, California became the first state to experiment with single gender public education on a large scale. Six districts opened gender academies (both boys and girls) as a result of former California Governor Pete Wilson’s legislation and funding for a single gender academies in six districts in California. The study involved study involved 300+ extensive interviews with educators, policymakers, and students, and school and classroom observations. Findings from this study suggest that the success of California’s pilot program was undermined by implementation challenges; most of the single gender academies were, by design, not open to all students; traditional gender stereotypes were often reinforced in the single gender academies, for example, boys tended to be taught in a more regimented, traditional, and individualistic fashion, and girls in more nurturing, cooperative and open environments: the separation of girls and boys did reduce classroom distractions from the opposite sex, however , students still experienced teasing and harassment in the coeducational spaces of the single-gender academies; and public, single gender academies were not sustainable under California’s policy framework.”²⁷

Also, on November 12, 1997, the AAUW Educational Foundation convened a historic roundtable of educational scholars to examine the collected research on single-single education in grades K-12 generated over more than two decades. The basic points of consensus which emerged from the roundtable was that there is no evidence that single-sex education in general “works” or is

²⁷ *Is Single Gender Schooling Visible in the Public Sector? Lessons from California’s Pilot Program*, available at <http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/depts/tpsadatnow/final.pdf> (last visited 5/4/2011).

“better” than coeducation no matter whether in a coed or a single-sex setting, educators and policymakers need to work further to identify the components of a “good education,” single-sex educational programs produce positive results for some students in some settings; the long term impact of single-sex education on girls or boys is unknown; no learning environment, single sex or coed, provides a sure escape from sexism; and single-sex education covers so broad a gamut as to deft most generalizations. Furthermore, the report goes on to state that regulation changes to incorporate more single-sex schools could be costly for schools that choose to implement them because the schools likely have to add new teachers for every subject area that they choose to provide a single-sex class for, as they still must provide a co-ed option.²⁸

Furthermore, in the article “The Impact of Single-Sex Education on the Performance of First and Second Grade Public School Students,” the author states that “in terms of academic achievement, this researcher’s findings support single sex education for females and but not for males. Improvement in math and in reading was statistically for females, but not for males. In this study, the impact of school sector on discipline referral frequency could not be ascertained. However, this researcher found support for single sex education with respect to attendance. In practical terms, this means that students who attend single sex classes are apt to be in the instructional environment with greater frequency than if they attended coeducational environments.”²⁹

However, on the other hand, in the article “A Case for Same-Sex Education,” it discuss how Chicago Urban Prep, an all-male charter school in Chicago, is an example of how same-sex education can and does work for young black males, and how it might be the key to closing the dismal achievement gap. The article states, “while there are pros and cons of same-sex education, we

²⁸ *Separated by Sex: A Critical Look at Single-Sex Education for Girls*, available at <http://www.aauw.org/research/upload/SeparatedbySexSummary.pdf> (last visited 5/4/2011).

²⁹ Katherine Bradley, PhD., *The Impact of Single-Sex Education on the Performance of First and Second Grade Public School Students*.

should consider the success of Urban Prep and try to replicate it on a wide scale. Any school that places 107 out of 107 seniors into college is worthy of emulation. Considering the fact that those seniors hail from some of Chicago's most disadvantaged, impoverished, and crime-ridden neighborhoods, Urban Prep should be popping up across the nation as we speak."³⁰

Furthermore, the article "Single-Sex Schools Versus Co-Educating Schooling: A Systematic Review," discusses the research of a systematic review of single-sex education, which was conducted by the U.S. Department of Education, which suggests that single-sex education improves educational outcomes by comparing single sex schools to coeducational schools and measuring the quantifiable academic accomplishments, individual student adaptation and socio-emotional development, gender equity, and school climate of both types of schooling. The study suggests that single sex schooling can be helpful, especially for certain outcomes related to academic achievement and more positive academic aspirations.³¹

Also, in LA times article "Too Few Women—Figure It Out," the author Leonard Sax responds to the recent comment made by a distinguished Harvard professor which suggests that women may be innately less capable of scholarship at the highest levels, by stating that, "most girls attend coed schools in which girls and boys study the same subjects in the same sequence. Too often, the result of that kind of gender-blind education is that by age 12 the girls think they're no good at math and never will be. The irony is that many of those girls might be math prodigies, if only they were taught in schools whose curriculum was tailored to the individual." He then goes on to state that, "all-girl schools hold great promise for eliminating the gender imbalance in math and science. A study of graduates of girl's high school in the United States that 13% went on to major in hard

³⁰ Deron Snyder, *A Case for Same-Sex Education*, 17 November 2010, available at <http://theroot.com/views/case-same-sex-education> (last visited 5/4/2011).

³¹ *Single-Sex Versus Coeducation Schooling: A Systematic Review (2005)*, <http://www.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/other/single-sex/pdf>

sciences and math, compared to only 2% of girls who attended coed schools. In other words, girls who attended all-girls schools are more than six times as likely to earn degrees in math and sciences.”³²

VI. What are some other alternatives to minimize the Achievement Gap for Disadvantaged and Minority Students?

In the AAUW Report it mentions that “while single-sex education experiments have produced positive results for some students in some cases, research indicates that the properties of a good education- not a sex-segregated environment- makes the difference.” For instance, offering qualified teachers, more funding for resources in these schools, diversity amongst the teachers and the student body, and more parent involvement, in these disadvantaged and under-achieving schools help to minimize the achievement gap for the students at these schools. In the article “Do Single-Sex Schools improve the Education of Low-Income and Minority Students? An Investigation of California’s Public Single-Gender Academies,” it states that “Single-sex public schools are viewed by some as a vehicle for improving the educational experiences of low-income and minority students. This two-year ethnographic study of low-income and minority students who attended experimental single-sex academies in California indicate that improving achievement involves more than just separating students by gender. Using students and educator’s voices, this anthropological study shows that these schools successes were due more to the interrelated contributions of the schools’ organizational characteristics, positive student-teacher relationships, and ample resources.”³³

³² Leonard Sax, *Too Few Women—Figure It Out: If Their Numbers in Math and Science Don’t Add Up, Blame Schools, not Brainpower*,” 23 January 2005, available at <http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/sunday/commentary/la-oe-sax23>.

³³ *So Single-Sex Schools Improve the Education of Low-Income and Minority Students? An Investigation of California’s Public Single-Sex Academies (2005)*, available at <http://www.anthrospurge.net/doi/abs/10.1525/aeq.2005.36.2.115>

Moreover, legislators, policymakers, and school officials should not be opposed to creating more pilot and voluntary single-sex public schools that expand the research and comply with the relevant civil right law, so long as such programs are designed to improve the academic achievements of those students who are lacking. As the values of society change, so does the goals and objectives of education. A formal education system necessarily reflects the values of society, because it's very purpose is to implement those things that the general community considers to be important and valuable. The system must change therefore, if the general community changes with regard to what it and what is not appropriate. This seems to be particularly relevant to the question as to whether coeducational or same-sex schools are in the best interest of students.

Furthermore, another alternative to minimizing the achievement gap for disadvantages and minority students is possibly implementing single-sex classes within co-educational schools. The No Child Left Behind Act provides guidance for school districts that wish to implement single-sex classes without violating Title IX. In the best of both worlds, a school district would provide substantially equal single-sex and coeducational classes for both girls and boys. The parents and students could decide which learning environment better suits each student. Whatever the option may be, the most important aspect to consider is the students that will be ultimately affected by any changes that the school districts implement. The students are the first priority to take into consideration before any drastic changes are made to the public school system in America.

VII. Conclusion

In evaluating the advantages and disadvantages of single-sex schools, it may be concluded that single-sex schools are only one option for minimizing the achievement gap within schools with a majority of disadvantaged and minority students. However, offering qualified teachers, more funding for resources in these schools, diversity amongst the teachers and the student body, and more parent

involvement are essential ingredients that must be incorporated in either single-sex school or coeducational schools in order to address some of the immediate issues that disadvantaged and minority students are facing, which are causing them to perform poorly in school. Although there are several research studies which advocate for single-sex schools or co-educational schools, the question, “Is the separation of students by gender a vehicle for improving the educational experiences for low-income and minority students?” remains unanswered. However, the most important question at hand for politicians, school administrators, activists, scientific researchers, teachers, and parents, is what essential ingredients are schools lacking and what should be done to incorporate these ingredients into the curriculum at all schools across the nation, in order to equalize the education being offered in schools.