

Single-Gender education: the pros and cons

Should boys and girls be taught separately? Does single-gender education boost academic success? Read the arguments for and against. By Kristin Stanberry

Single-gender education (teaching boys and girls in separate classrooms or schools) is an old approach that's gaining new momentum. While single-gender education has long existed in many private schools, it's a relatively new option for public schools. The National Association for Single-Gender Public Education estimates that approximately 400 public schools now offer some form of single-gender education. What is fueling this movement? And what are the risks and benefits of single-gender education?

A driving force in the single-gender education movement is recent research showing natural differences in how males and females learn. Putting this research into practice, however, has triggered a debate that extends beyond pure academics. Political, civil rights, socioeconomic and legal concerns also come into play. As the debate heats up, it helps to understand all sides of the issue.

Nature vs. nurture

Before weighing the pros and cons of single-gender education, consider the influences of "nature versus nurture." Many factors affect each child's learning profile and preferences:

- Some factors relate to the child's nature, such as gender, temperament, abilities (and disabilities), and intelligence.
- Other influences stem from the way parents and society nurture the child: Family upbringing, socioeconomic status, culture and stereotypes all fall under the "nurture" category.

According to Leonard Sax, founder of the National Association for Single-Gender Public Education, "...whenever girls and boys are together, their behavior inevitably reflects the larger society in which they live." Depending on one's point of view, this statement can trigger arguments both for and against single-gender education.

Making the case for single-gender education

Those who advocate for single-gender education in public schools argue that:

- Some parents don't want their children to be in mixed-gender classrooms because, especially at certain ages, students of the opposite gender can be a distraction.
- Leonard Sax and others agree that merely placing boys in separate classrooms from girls accomplishes little. But single-gender education enhances student success when teachers use techniques geared toward the gender of their students.
- Some research indicates that girls learn better when classroom temperature is warm, while boys perform better in cooler classrooms. If that's true, then the temperature in a single-gender classroom could be set to optimize the learning of either male or female students.
- Some research and reports from educators suggest that single-gender education can broaden the educational prospects for both girls and boys. Advocates claim co-ed schools tend to reinforce gender stereotypes, while single-gender schools can break down gender stereotypes. For example, girls are free of the pressure to compete with boys in male-dominated subjects such as math and science. Boys, on the other hand, can more easily pursue traditionally "feminine" interests such as music and poetry. One mother, whose daughter has attended a girls-only school for three years, shares her experience on the Great Schools parent

community: "I feel that the single gender environment has given her a level of confidence and informed interest in math and science that she may not have had otherwise."

- Federal law supports the option of single- gender education. In 2006, Education Secretary Margaret Spellings eased federal regulations, allowing schools to offer single- gender classrooms and schools, as long as such options are completely voluntary. This move gives parents and school districts greater flexibility.

What critics say about single-gender education

Those who claim single- gender education is ineffective and/or undesirable make the following claims:

- Few educators are formally trained to use gender-specific teaching techniques. However, it's no secret that experienced teachers usually understand gender differences and are adept at accommodating a variety of learning styles within their mixed-gender classrooms.
- Gender differences in learning aren't the same across the board; they vary along a continuum of what is considered normal. For a sensitive boy or an assertive girl, the teaching style promoted by advocates of single- gender education could be ineffective (at best) or detrimental (at worst). For example, a sensitive boy might be intimidated by a teacher who "gets in his face" and speaks loudly believing "that's what boys want and need to learn."
- Students in single- gender classrooms will one day live and work side-by-side with members of the opposite gender. Educating students in single- gender schools limits their opportunity to work cooperatively and co-exist successfully with members of the opposite gender.
- At least one study found that the higher the percentage of girls in a co-ed classroom, the better the academic performance for all students (both male and female). Professor Analia Schlosser, an economist from the Eitan Berglas School of Economics at Tel Aviv, found that elementary school, co-ed classrooms with a majority of female students showed increased academic performance for both boys and girls. In high school, the classrooms with the best academic achievement were consistently those that had a higher percentage of girls. Dr. Schlosser theorizes that a higher percentage of girls lowers the amount of classroom disruption and fosters a better relationship between all students and the teacher.
- The American Council on Education reports that there is less academic disparity between male and female students overall and a far greater achievement gap between students in different racial, ethnic and socioeconomic groups, with poor and minority students children faring poorly. Bridging that academic chasm, they argue, deserves more attention than does the gender divide.
- Single-gender education is illegal and discriminatory, or so states the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) . In May 2008, the ACLU filed suit in federal court, arguing that Breckinridge County Middle School's (Kentucky) practice of offering single- gender classrooms in their public school is illegal and discriminatory. The school doesn't require any child to attend a single-gender class, yet the suit argues that the practice violates several state and federal laws, including Title IX and the equal Educational Opportunities Act.

Measuring public perception

How does the general public view single- gender education? To answer that question, Knowledge Networks conducted a nationwide survey in early 2008. (Education Next and the Program on Education Policy and Governance at Harvard University sponsored the survey.) Survey results indicate:

- More than one-third of Americans feel parents should have the option of sending their child to a single-gender school. (25% of respondents oppose the idea.)
- Yet when asked if they'd consider a single- gender school for their own children, only 14% said they "definitely would" and 28% said they "probably would." The fact remains that there are relatively few single- gender x schools in our nation's public education system, and where they do exist, they are offered as an option rather than a requirement. If the single- gender education movement continues, you may find yourself in a position to vote for or against it in your own community.