

## The Advantages of Single-Sex Education for Girls

There has been a resurgence of interest in single-sex public education in the United States.

There is evidence to support the advantages of single-sex education for girls. A 2008 Department of Education study found that both principals and teachers believed that the main benefit of single-sex schooling for girls is decreasing distractions to learning, and improving student achievement. The gender slant—math is for boys and home economics is for girls is eliminated.

Two categories that highlight the advantages of single-sex education for girls are expanded learning opportunity and custom tailored learning and instruction with greater autonomy. The all-girl classroom can create opportunities to explore classroom subjects, particularly math and science, that girls tend to avoid in coed classes. Hannover and Kessels (2004) randomly assigned 401 11<sup>th</sup> grade students to single-sex or to coed classrooms to study physics for a year. After a year, they found that the girls in the all girls' classroom more engaged in physics and less likely to regard physics as a “boys” subject. They also outperformed the girls in coed classes on assessments.

Coed classes tend to support and increase the old traditional roles, and do not motivate girls to explore new opportunities. Single-sex schools encourage girls to be daring, and to try new things without the preoccupation of feeling different based on gender stereotypes. In girls' only settings, girls tend to have more freedom to enroll in non-traditional subjects. They participate in more extra-curriculum activities. One reason may be that girls at single-sex schools have diverse role models. The “computer geek” is a girl, the student council president is a girl, and the best athletes are girls. This experience tells younger girls that it is okay to excel in math, sports, and be elected to leadership roles.

## Custom Tailored Learning and Instruction

Teachers must customize what they do to fit the needs and abilities of the students in their classroom. The use of DI (differentiation instruction) is the preferred method of teaching to varying abilities. Surveying hundreds of teachers about utilizing DI, and the majority responded that it was easier to implement DI in all girls' classrooms than in the coed classroom. (National Educational Association 1998) Teachers have the freedom to design courses and to develop teaching styles that cater to the way that girls learn. In a literature class, one teacher in Australia had girls playing all the male roles in Hamlet.

Underwood (1997) conducted another notable study. The Underwoods gave 31 pairs of 8-year olds a computer-based language task. Children were randomly assigned to girl-girl, girl-boy, or boy-boy pairs. Each child within a pair was matched with the other for reading ability. Boys in boy-boy pairs performed least well, while girls assigned to girl-girl pairs obtained the highest scores. However, the girls in girl-boy pairs performed as badly as the boy-boy pairs. Just putting a girl with a boy degraded her performance 50% on this computer-based task. The result is that pairing girls with boys does not help boys, but it does hurt girls. This directly speaks to positive learning outcomes for girls who attend single-sex schools.

Simply putting girls in one school and boys in another without appropriate professional development for the staff will not automatically produce and increase achievement. However, if teachers are taught which strategies to use, study how girls learn, and afford them the opportunities to thrive in subjects such as math, technology, science, and computers, girls from single-sex schools consistently outperform those that attend coed schools.

Stetson University in Florida completed a three-year research pilot comparing single-sex classrooms with coed classrooms in an elementary school on the Florida state standardized test. They found that boys in coed classes were 37% proficient, and girls in coed classes were 59% proficient. Girls in single-sex classes were 75% proficient, and boys in single-sex classes were 86% proficient. The students studied the same curriculum in the same school, and all classes were mainstreamed. There are numerous studies that offer similar results, which makes a strong case for single-sex schools for girls.

Educators and parents are recognizing that all too often coeducational settings are reinforcing gender stereotypes via the process that researchers call “gender intensification”. Critics argue that single-sex schools promote harmful stereotypes. Studies have confirmed that negative gender roles often sharpened in coeducational environments. Many boys at coed schools will tell you that reading and poetry are for girls. Many girls at coed schools will tell you that computer science and math are for boys. Yet, after attending single-sex schools boys say that they enjoy literature, art, foreign language and music classes. Girls interviewed stated they felt less pressure in taking advanced math, electronics and computer courses. (Pevtzow, 1996)

The right to choose single-sex public education in the United States has not been an option due to discrimination laws. In 2001, Senators Hillary Clinton and Susan Collins authored legislation to allow public school to offer single-sex education. The 2001 law did not require that children be educated in single-sex schools, but had the option to attend, as long as opportunities were equally available to boys and girls. (Hutchinson 2012) Many parents have elected to send their girls to single-sex schools, because they believe their daughters will have opportunities and advantages in an educational setting tailored to their specific needs.

## Bibliography

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