Should Public Schools Offer Single-Sex Education?

The number of single-sex classrooms in public schools is growing; there are now more than 400

YES

For more than 100 years, some of the nation's finest private schools have experienced the benefits of single-sex education. It's time to make this choice broadly available in our public schools.

Researchers have found that there are biological and developmental differences between boys and girls that affect how they learn. For example, in general, boys respond better to a more active teaching style. Girls tend to be more cautious about participating in discussions.

For six years, I've been studying the effectiveness of single-sex versus co-ed classrooms at a Florida elementary school. Both boys and girls do better academically in single-sex classrooms: 95 percent of the boys in the 5th-grade all-boys class passed the state reading exam, compared with 68 percent of the boys in the co-ed class. In the all-girls class, 91 percent passed the state reading test, compared with 75 percent of those in the co-ed class.

Research also shows that high school students in single-sex classrooms are more likely to take courses that run counter to gender stereotypes: Girls are more likely to study computer science and physics; boys are more likely to study art, music, and drama. And they're more likely to excel at and stick with these subjects.

In a recent survey of more than 2,000 students in single-sex classes, 67 percent said it increased their self-esteem, and 72 percent reported an increased desire to learn and participate than when they were in co-ed classrooms.

Most students attend public schools. They shouldn't be forced to miss out on the advantages of single-sex education just because their schooling is funded by taxpayers.—Kathy Piechura-Couture, Prof. of Education, Stetson University, Delano, Fla.

NO

Single-sex education is not the answer to the challenges facing public schools.

First and foremost, we believe that creating separate classes for girls and boys violates the Constitution as
well as federal and state laws designed to guarantee that all public-school students are offered equal opportunities.

In 1954, the Supreme Court ruled in Brown v. Board of Education that separate can never truly be equal in public education. The Court was referring to racial segregation, but the same holds true for gender segregation. Almost by definition, classrooms separated by sex offer different resources, different teaching methods, and other factors that create unequal learning environments.

Beyond issues of constitutionality, single-sex classes aren't good for students. They reinforce gender stereotypes, like the idea that boys are assertive and outspoken, while girls are timid and quiet. Telling students that the best solution is to split up boys and girls, rather than have them learn to work together, sends the wrong message and does nothing to prepare students for the real world.

One thing many single-sex programs do have going for them is that they are innovative and experimental. Everyone involved—from administrators and teachers to students and parents—is highly motivated to see them succeed. If this same level of energy, funding, and out-of-the-box thinking were applied to co-ed classrooms, all students could benefit. And at the same time, schools would be promoting cooperation rather than isolation.—Kim Gandy, President, National Organization For Women