

Single-Sex Schools

by Thomas C. Reeves

Before 1965, a large number of public and private schools in this country were single-gender. But over the next 30 years almost all public and private schools became coeducational. Sexual and racial integration was thought to be beneficial to everyone in all walks of life. Today there is a growing belief that the earlier organization of the schools was wise, and some 223 public schools are offering single-sex classrooms. The U.S. Department of Education has proposed regulations to permit them all across the nation. (Current Title IX regulations generally discourage single-sex schools.) The American Civil Liberties Union, stalwart voice of the Left, has gone to court to stop it.

The ACLU equates the concept of single-sex schools with racial segregation and claims that it violates the equal protection clause of the Constitution. Jay Cook, executive director of the ACLU in Louisiana, has condemned such schools because they are “based on broad gender stereotypes and psychological differences between boys and girls.” The American Association of University Women also opposes single-gender schools.

There are at least two major reasons for single-sex schools: that boys and girls learn differently, and that the absence of the opposite sex in the classroom eliminates a major distraction that hinders learning. The latter point is obviously true, so that leaves the learning issue raised by the ACLU. Dr. Leonard Sax, director of the National Association for Single Sex Public Education, has written *Why Gender Matters* (Random House, 2005), addressing this issue at length.

Sax argues, “Boys and girls learn in profoundly different ways. If you ignore those differences you end up reinforcing gender stereotypes. Therefore, you end up with fewer girls studying math, computers, and physical science and fewer boys studying languages and art.” Catering to student needs, he contends, has proven effective. In a study conducted in Florida, for example, fourth grade students were randomly assigned to coeducational and single-sex classrooms. In the coed classes, 57% of girls and 37% of boys scored “proficient” in the writing segment of the standardized test. In single-sex classes, 75% of the girls and 86% of the boys scored “proficient.” A Department of Education report released in 2005, based on 2,221 studies, found a preponderance of evidence lending support to single-sex schooling.

The separation of boys and girls in the classroom is most common today in Catholic institutions; a total of 441 Catholic schools in this country are single-gender. Still that number is much smaller than it once was, amounting to only 0.8% of the Church’s elementary schools and 33% of its secondary schools. That number may well increase, if only to improve test scores. Barbara Daush, president of the St. Agnes Academy in Memphis, Tennessee, has been experimenting with single-sex and co-ed classrooms, and she predicts a stronger

move in the future toward the former. "The brain research that's been released over the past 10 years has been a big part of our program. Especially in the upper school, it is important for high school girls to be separate from high school boys." Daush observes that relations between the sexes, in the fire of puberty, also have an impact on learning outcomes.

Leonard Sax contends, "The brain research findings have made us re-examine all the things that we took for granted about boys being better at math and girls being more verbal. There are profound differences with how boys and girls see, smell, hear, and learn. The reality is that both can learn very well, but only if you know how to teach them." The vital importance of test scores associated with the No Child Left Behind law will no doubt inspire many educators to think about the possibilities of single-sex education. Many students and parents may agree. When Arrowhead High School in Wisconsin recently offered single-gender education in ninth grade English and tenth grade biology, volunteers quickly filled up both classes. The ACLU of Wisconsin said immediately that it would be monitoring Arrowhead's experiment for evidence of discrimination.

The Detroit News recently urged the ACLU to back off on its efforts to block single-sex schools in the state. "Michigan's public schools fail one in four students who are entrusted to their care. And in large urban school districts like Detroit, the failure rate is above 50 percent. Any idea to reduce the number of children being left behind by the current system ought to be welcomed."

See www.singlesexschools.org.