

# Why Single-Sex Public Education is a Civil Rights Issue

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**T**he widely acknowledged crisis in our public education system has led to a consensus that too many schools are failing our children, particularly in communities with high minority and low-income populations, and that the need for reform is critical.

Unfortunately, in recent years, numerous public school districts have introduced single-sex education programs as “quick-fix” solutions, largely based on widely-debunked, pseudoscientific theories positing that boys and girls learn differently. At their core, many of these programs rely on and perpetuate outdated and harmful gender stereotypes. They rely on faulty theories about supposed “hard-wired” differences between boys’ and girls’ brains and development. Their proponents espouse the view that boys and girls learn and develop so differently that they should be educated separately using radically different teaching techniques.

In the classroom, this may mean that girls are not given time limits on tests on the unsupported theory that girls’ brains cannot function well under pressure; that girls are seated in circles to promote collaboration while boys are seated side-by-side to prevent conflicts; that boys are given Nerf baseball bats with which to hit things in order to release tensions during class while girls are expected to sit quietly and discuss their feelings.

To make matters worse, single-sex proponents increasingly propose these programs in low-income, minority communities, making unsupported claims that they will close the achievement gap for boys of color while failing to even address the needs of girls of color. They also often rely on generalizations about black boys, such as statements that they are more “messy,” have discipline problems, or are more difficult to control.

Existing research is clear: single-sex education is not a “magic bullet.” No well-designed, peer-reviewed studies show that single-sex education improves academic performance. In fact, the behavioral, psychological, and cognitive differences among the individual members of any group of girls or any group of boys are much greater, and more relevant from an instructional standpoint, than the differences between boys and girls as groups. There are plenty of girls who can’t sit still and would benefit from the opportunity for physical activity; there are plenty of boys who would thrive in a quieter, more collaborative environment. Under the sex-stereotyped instructional agenda, these students are forced into a classroom designed around a stereotype that they do not fit.

While there is a pressing need for new strategies in struggling schools and among underserved communities, such reforms should be free from racial and gender stereotypes. In an effort to end this wave of government-sponsored discrimination in education, we are working to stop new single-sex programs and discontinue existing programs that rely on and promote gender stereotypes and limit educational opportunities for all children.

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## Single-sex schools and classrooms are not the solution to problems in our education system.

- We can all agree that ending racial disparities in education is a top priority. But coeducational classes are not the cause of the racial achievement gap, and schools and programs that separate boys and girls are not the answer.

- Across the country, graduation rates are dismally low for both boys and girls of color. But there is no valid evidence that separating students by sex improves academic achievement for children of any racial or ethnic background.
  - While there is no doubt that there are some successful examples of single-sex schools, there is also no evidence that it is the single-sex structure of these schools that has made them successful.
  - Research has shown that effective schools, especially for low-income students of color, consistently share strong, positive relationships between teachers and students; high expectations for students; a personalized learning environment with mentors, counseling, and other supports; high teacher quality; high parental involvement; and strong but not necessarily authoritarian leaders. All of these elements can be—and, in fact, are being—adopted in coeducational settings.<sup>1</sup>
  - Recent studies of charter schools, including single-sex academies, show that while many of these schools boast outstanding graduation or college acceptance rates, too many also practice “creaming” and “dumping”: quietly enrolling the cream of the crop and pushing out students who fail to thrive.<sup>2</sup>

## Sex separation in education raises concerns about racial and gender equality.

- Sex-stereotyped instruction conveys the message to students that there are particular ways “normal” boys or girls ought to think or behave.
  - This message is inherently detrimental to any student who does not conform to gender stereotypes, and is also detrimental to those who do conform because they are deprived of an opportunity to explore other ways to think or act.
  - Michael Kimmel, SUNY Stony Brook professor and author of *Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men* and *Manhood in America*, found in his 400 interviews with boys, that teaching to sex stereotypes can “flatten the differences among boys, which will crush those boys who do not conform to that stereotype: the artistic ones, the musical ones, the soft-spoken ones, the ones who aren’t into sports.”<sup>3</sup>
- Racial as well as gender stereotypes all too often undergird efforts to offer single-sex schools in communities of color, including the unsupported claim that the best way to educate and “save” boys of color is to separate them from the girls.
  - Programs targeted at black boys frequently rely on the premise that black boys are more “out of control” and that they need a more authoritarian approach.
  - The argument that sex separation is justified in order to prevent “distraction” is prevalent in schools located in communities of color. This justification sends the message that boys and girls of color are unable to learn effectively if they are in each other’s presence.
    - This justification harks back to the troubling history of sex segregation: In the wake of *Brown v. Board of Education* many schools in the South integrated racially but separated students on the basis of sex in an overt effort to prevent black boys from being in the same room as white girls.

- Then, as now, this justification for single-sex education reinforces the harmful stereotypes that children of color are sexually out of control, and of black boys in particular as sexual predators who need to be separated for the safety and education of the girls.
- It is true that there are gaps between boys and girls in certain outcomes, such as test scores, proficiency rates in certain subjects, and graduation rates, that are more pronounced for boys of color. There is no doubt that these gaps should be addressed. But providing opportunities only to boys leaves out individual girls who are also falling behind. Students should not be excluded from programs focused on graduation and college preparation based on their sex. Rather, these programs should be available to students who need them the most, regardless of their sex.

## **There is no proof that separating girls and boys results in better-educated kids, but there is evidence that single-sex programs can increase gender stereotyping.**

- Social scientists have found that, when children are labeled and separated based on some characteristic (*e.g.*, gender, eye color, randomly assigned t-shirts), they infer that the groups differ in important ways and develop intergroup biases.<sup>4</sup>
- Just as racially segregated schools have been found to promote racial prejudice and inequality, “there is evidence that sex segregation increases gender stereotyping and legitimizes institutional sexism.”<sup>5</sup>

**Single-sex programs often distract from the real problems that pervade our education system, including racial and economic disparities. Educators should focus on strategies that have been proven to work, while ensuring that new programs do not involve stereotyping or exclusion. After all, every student deserves to reach his or her full potential, and that starts with a high quality education that teaches all students as individuals, not as stereotypes.**

## **ENDNOTES**

<sup>1</sup> Pedro Noguera, “Saving Black and Latino Boys,” *Education Week*, Feb. 3, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., R.A. Hayes, E. Pahlke, and R.S. Bigler, “The Efficacy of Single-Sex Education: Testing for Selection and Peer Quality Effects,” *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research*, 65 (2011): 693-703.

<sup>3</sup> Kimmel, Michael and Christina Hoff Sommers, “Do Boys Face More Sexism than Girls?” *Huffington Post*, Feb. 20, 2013, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/michael-kimmel/lets-talk-boys\\_b\\_2645801.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/michael-kimmel/lets-talk-boys_b_2645801.html).

<sup>4</sup> Diane Halpern et al., “The Pseudoscience of Single-Sex Schooling,” *Science* vol. 333, 1706 (2011): 1707.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*