

**Evaluation of Research Studies Offered by the Urban League  
In Support of a Single-Sex Organization for Madison Prep**

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Unless otherwise noted, all quotations and page references are from the Urban League of Greater Madison, *Madison Preparatory Academy Business Plan* (Oct. 28, 2011), referred to herein as "Business Plan."

Items marked [NASSPE] came from the website of the National Association for Single-Sex Public Education, an advocacy group for single-sex schools headed by Leonard Sax.

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*"Research on single-gendered education in the U.S. has revealed significant educational benefits among students attending single-gendered schools." (Business Plan, p.29)*

**Response:** Many of the studies cited below were not actually conducted in the U.S.

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*"After Sunrise River School..." (Business Plan, p.29)*

**Response:** No citation is offered as evidence for this statement.

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*"After Thurgood Marshall Elementary school in Seattle, WA implemented single-sex classes in its fourth grade during the 2000-01 school year, 'students experienced dramatic gains on standardized tests.' The percentage of students school-wide that tested proficient or advanced increased from 27% to 51% in reading, 14% to 35% in writing, and 38% to 59% in one year. The percentage of boys testing at proficient or advanced levels in reading improved from 10% to 73% in two years." (Business Plan, p.29) [NASSPE]*

**Response:** The source here is Christina Hoff Sommers, writing for the Eagle Forum, a far-right organization that was founded by Phyllis Schlafly, well-known opponent of the Equal Rights Amendment. Sommers is not a scientist and her source is a newsletter. No scientific evidence is presented.

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*"In 2004-05, researchers at Stetson University in Florida partnered with faculty and staff at Woodward Avenue Elementary School... 37% of boys in the coed classes scored proficient or above..." (Business Plan, p.29-30) [NASSPE]*

**Response:** The author quoted here is Cheryl Downs of Stetson University. She is not a scientist; she is Stetson's Director of Media and Public Communications. This is not a scientific study, it is a media piece for Stetson.

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*"The Australian Council for Educational Research analyzed the achievement of 270,000 students in six academic areas over six years (1994-99) and found that students in single-gendered classrooms scored 15 and 22 percentage points higher in reading and math than their peers in coed classrooms."* (Business Plan, p.30)

**Response:** This book is not available at the University of Wisconsin library or at any of the System libraries; it has not yet been evaluated. This study appears to have been only of boys, so it demonstrates no gains for girls.

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*"Single-gender school students achieved higher standardized test scores in gender atypical subject areas for both boys and girls..."* (Business Plan, p.30)

**Response:** This is a British study of a cohort born in 1958. This study had such a small number of ethnic minority students that results could not be analyzed for them separately, so this is basically a study of British Whites. The author, Alice Sullivan, actually is a scientist.

The use of this study to support single-sex schooling is a fine example of cherry-picking the evidence. This very same article (Sullivan, 2009) found that boys in single-sex schools had lower math self-concepts than boys in coed schools; for girls, there was no significant difference in math self-concept between single-sex and coed (Table 5 and p. 275). In short, girls were not helped and boys were hurt by single-sex schooling.

While the study is touted as showing that boys at boys' schools were more likely to gain highest level scores on standardized tests in gender atypical subject areas (English) compared with boys in co-educational schools, the data in fact show a gain of only 8% of boys scoring in the top third (33% in coed, 41% in single-sex), scarcely a major achievement. Of more concern, the percentage of girls scoring in the top third in English was lower in SS schools (36%) compared with co-ed (43%). So, a slight gain for boys was balanced by a slight loss for girls – scarcely strong evidence for single-sex schools.

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*"Post-secondary test scores for seniors in single-sex schools are higher, for both boys and girls, in comparison to coeducational high schools in the US."* (Business Plan, p.30)

**Response:** The source here is a book by Cornelius Riordan, *Girls and boys in school: Together or separate?* Riordan is a professor of sociology at Providence College in Rhode Island. His research compares single-sex and coed Catholic schools in the U.S., so its relevance to public education is doubtful. The sample is from the U.S. high school graduating class of 1972 (the NLS), so the study is 40 years out of date. It is also true that the advantage for boys in single-sex disappeared when appropriate statistical controls were applied (controlling for differences in ability before entering high school) (p. 94). These analyses were for White students.

Riordan conducted additional analyses of Black and Hispanic students in predominantly minority Catholic schools (p. 102). Although boys in SS scored better than boys in coed on advanced math, girls in SS scored worse on advanced math than girls in coed schools (p. 102).

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*“Single-sex schooling reduced the gender gap in academic self-concept, while co-educational schooling was linked to lower academic self-concept overall. In single-gender schools, girls academic self-concept was greater in math and science classes, and boys academic self-concept was greater in English and modern language classes.”* (Business Plan, p.30)

**Response:** This is the same British study by Alice Sullivan (2009) cited earlier. For English, boys’ self-concept was helped slightly by SS schooling, but girls’ English self-concept was hurt by SS schooling to about the same extent. And girls’ math self-concept did not actually differ significantly between SS and coed.

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*“In measured observation, girls got more teacher time, attention and better access to resources in girls-only schools.”* (Business Plan, p.30)

**Response:** The source here is a book published in 1980, reflecting conditions in the 1970s (Spender & Sarah, 1980). Since then, teachers have received much training in gender-fair classroom methods and it is doubtful whether these effects still occur in coed schools today. The author, Dale Spender, is not a scientist; she is a feminist author and was director of a copyright agency from 2002-2004.

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*“In male single-gender schools there is a measurable absence of anti-learning social norms such as, shouting-out, refusal to do work, and/or defiance. The greatest measurable absence is in schools that serve poor and ethnic minority youth.”* (Business Plan, p.30)

**Response:** The author, Cornelius Riordan, is a professor of sociology at Providence College in Rhode Island. The source is not a peer-reviewed journal article, but rather a chapter in a book. Riordan is an advocate for single-sex schools, but with many qualifiers. He believes that single-sex classes have no effect; it must be an entire single-sex school (p. 13). He believes that single-sex schools have no effect for middle-class students, and claims positive effects only for low and working-class students, especially African American and Hispanic boys and girls (p.13-14). For at-risk students, he notes that these effects are “small in comparison with the much larger effects of socioeconomic status and type of curriculum” (p. 14). So, curriculum is the big issue, not single-sex.

He goes on to say, “single-sex schools do not have uniform and consistent effects. The effects appear to be limited to those national educational systems in which single-sex schools are relatively rare... When single-sex schools are rare in a country, the proacademic choice-making by parents and students results in a more selective student body that brings with it a heightened degree of academic demands” (p. 15-16). Again, it is not the single-sex configuration, but rather the selection bias of families who choose the demanding school.

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*Women who went to girls' schools were more likely than co-educated women to gain college/university degrees in male-dominated disciplines. [examples include Engineering, Math and Computer Programming]. Likewise ... more likely to gain their [atypical] field's highest qualification by age 33. (Business Plan, p.30)*

**Response:** This is another paper by Alice Sullivan (2010) using the 1958 British birth cohort. It is difficult to compare the British educational system, with “qualifications,” to the American system. Summarizing the results, Sullivan says “single-sex schooling is positive for girls at age 16 but neutral for boys, while at later ages, single-sex schooling is neutral for both sexes” (p. 6). This supports our conclusion that single-sex schooling provides no substantial, consistent academic advantages. Regarding qualifications in counter-stereotyped fields at age 33, single-sex schooling did give girls an advantage (but did not give boys an advantage), but these findings might be limited to British children born during the traditional 1950s.

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*For men who went to single-gender schools, there is no difference in their degree attainment or career performance than their co-educated peers. They were neither advantaged, nor disadvantaged by attending single-gender school(s). However, boys who attended single-gender schools have a greater chance of attending university than co-educated boys. (Business Plan, p.31)*

**Response:** The source again is Sullivan’s (2010) analysis of the 1958 British cohort. The point is precisely stated above – boys from single-sex schools were no more likely to earn a college degree than boys from coed schools. The same was true for girls. Again, there is no academic advantage to single-sex schooling.

## References

1. Riordan, C. (1990). *Girls and boys in school: Together or separate?* NY: Teachers College Press.
2. Riordan, C. (2002). What do we know about the effects of single-sex schools in the private sector. In L. Hubbard & A. Datnow (Eds.), *Gender in policy and practice: Perspectives on single-sex and co-educational schooling* (10-30). London: Routledge.
3. Spender, D. & Sarah, E. (Eds.). (1980). *Learning to lose: Sexism and education*. London: Women’s Press.
4. Sullivan, A. (2009). Academic self-concept, gender and single-sex schooling. *British Educational Research Journal*, 35, 259-288.
5. Sullivan, A., Joshi, H., & Leonard, D. (2010). Single-sex schooling and academic attainment at school and through the lifecourse. *American Educational Research Journal*, 47, 6-36.