

Single-Sex Education: Pros and Cons

The U.S. Department of Education defines single-sex education as “education at the elementary, secondary, or postsecondary level in which males or females attend school exclusively with members of their own sex” (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). Reports indicate that in 2011-2012 more than 500 public schools across the country offered single-sex options in some form.

Note: Sex describes the biological structures of individuals. Gender describes social identity.

While there are a variety of rationales for single-sex education, the reasons usually emphasized are to address (a) male-female differences in development and performance and (b) the achievement gap favoring boys and discriminating against specific racial minorities growing up in poverty. Additional rationales include notions such as that boys will focus better on school tasks if not distracted by girls and that all girl classes will counter gender-bias toward girls as well as eliminating the distraction of boys.

How do Single-Sex Education Offerings Vary?

Variations include (1) single-sex schools, (2) co-ed schools offering single-sex classes, and (3) schools that differ in socio-economic, racial, and religious composition. In USA, there are both private and public single-sex schools; however, the preponderance are in the private sector. (By way of contrast, in many of the Middle Eastern Countries, most public schools are segregated by sex, whereas most private schools are co-ed.)

What is the Legal Status of Single-Sex Education in the USA?

Segregating boys and girls in an education setting has been challenged with respect to the 19th amendment of the U.S. Constitution and the Civil Rights Act of 1964. However, it has been deemed legal under specific conditions. First, it must be voluntary. Second, all subject matter taught in a co-educational school must be taught in a single-sex school. Third, for every all-male public school in the district, there must be a comparable all-female public school so that both sexes have the choice to attend a single-sex school.

What is the Status of Research Findings Related to Single-Sex Education?

Research has focused on two major matters: (1) the relevance of male-female differences as a rationale for single-sex education and (2) the positive and negative impact of single-sex education. Clearly, males and females differ in many ways, but research has not made the case that gender variations trump other differences that should be addressed in schools (e.g., individual differences in development and motivation). And the findings about impact remain equivocal because of the methodological problems encountered by research in this arena.

*The material in this document was culled from the literature and drafted by Cindy Yayang Xiong as part of her work with the national Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA. Key references used are cited in the reference list at the end of the document.

The center is co-directed by Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor and operates under the auspices of the School Mental Health Project, Dept. of Psychology, UCLA, Phone: (310) 825-3634 Email: smhp@ucla.edu Website: <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu> Send comments to ltaylor@ucla.edu

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What are the Pros and Cons?

Given the status of the legal and research matters, decisions about same-sex education tend to be based on the values and beliefs of decision makers and often are shaped by politics and economics. Different cost-benefit analyses of advantages and disadvantages arise from evaluations focused on the impact on (a) *individuals* (e.g., academic achievement, personal growth, health, social development), (b) *subgroups* (e.g., outcome differences in socioeconomic opportunities and status), and (c) the *society* (e.g., enhancing equity of opportunity, facilitating socialization/teaching/parenting, economic development).

Common Positive Claims

Proponents argue that, compared to co-educational classes, single-sex education improves learning and performance by allowing a better match for teaching and learning. That is, as with other forms of homogenous grouping, separate classes for girls and boys are seen as enabling teaching and learning and reducing achievement gaps. For girls, for example, single-sex education is viewed as a way to enable them to do better in math and science, opening up careers where females are underrepresented. For urban African-American and Latino males, single-sex education is viewed as a way to counter dropouts and the school-to-prison pipeline.

Examples of problems in co-educational settings that are emphasized include:

- boys and girls develop at different rates which produces differences in their respective academic learning readiness in the early schooling years
- teachers often respond differently to males and females (e.g., favoring males, overprotecting females)
- peer attitudes toward the opposite sex also differ in the early years of schooling and change with biological development (e.g., male domination of females, distractions due to the presence of the opposite sex)
- sexual activity that leads to pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.

Proponents also assert that single-sex education counters male-females stereotypes by ensuring that both sexes can

- take initiative in meeting challenges
- assume leadership roles
- pursue activities that in co-educational settings often are seen as too “masculine” for females or too “feminine” for males.

Common Claims Against

Opponents argue that public funds should not be used to support single-sex education because the approach

- has not generated methodologically sound empirical evidence showing societal benefits (e.g., findings related to improved achievement for males and females is equivocal, achievement gaps are more associated with socio-economic factors than gender and CNS differences)
- maintains and even exacerbates sexist attitudes and gender stereotypes (e.g., gender-oriented facilities and teaching content and methods create a gender-stereotypical environment, limit exposure to the opposite sex and cross sex social-emotional learning)
- can make transition to co-educational situations difficult.

In addition, it is suggested that single-sex schools tend to overemphasize academics at the expense of “whole child” development (e.g., they tend to minimize activities that promote creative expression, intrinsic motivation, and positive attitudes toward schooling).

And, from a teaching perspective, opponents underscore that behavior often is harder to manage in all male classes.

The following are the pros and cons highlighted in a 2013 technical report on single-sex education done by Connecticut's State Education Resource Center. (<http://ctserc.org/docs/Single-sex%20Education%20report%20SERC%202013.pdf>)

THE PROS

- Makes boys less competitive and more cooperative and collaborative
- Makes girls feel less pressure as they mature and develop
- Increases staff sensitivity and awareness of gender differences
- Improves peer interaction
- Provides positive same-gender role models
- Provides more opportunities to pursue academic and extracurricular endeavors without racial and gender stereotypes
- Is less distracting than co-ed environments

THE CONS

- Promotes gender stereotyping
- Undermines gender equality
- Doesn't prepare students for work or family life
- Makes exclusion acceptable
- Doesn't value diversity
- Deprives access to mainstream programs
- Doesn't socialize students to be less sexist
- Expensive to run two parallel programs

Concluding Comments

So, where do you stand on same-sex education?

Does it enhance overall equity of opportunity to succeed *at school and beyond*? What role does it play with respect to various stereotypes and biases? How does it enhance teacher efforts to match individual differences and personalize instruction?

At this time, the answers to basic questions about same-sex education cannot be satisfactorily answered by formal research findings. Prevailing pro and con arguments reflect a host of considerations (e.g., philosophical, economic, political, psychological, personal). Proponents on either side of the debate regularly provide counter arguments. Others caution that arguments about single-sex education tend to pay too little attention to school and staff variables that have the greatest impact on students.

In the end, policy makers are caught making decisions about single-sex education that balance political and economic costs and benefits, and when there is a choice, parents are left to make decisions they believe are in their child's best interests.

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