

Single-Gender Education: An Option for Meeting Diverse Student Needs

More schools are experimenting with single-gender classes for high academic gains.

David Chadwell

As schools across the country strive to meet the diverse needs of individual students, educators are constantly looking for new ways to unlock each young person's potential. In 2006, federal legislation opened another option for parents and teachers: optional single-gender classrooms and schools. As a result, single-gender education is experiencing a public school revival.

As of October 2008, South Carolina was the nation's leader in single-gender education, with classes in 78 elementary schools, 100 middle schools, and 20 high schools. If every school that has expressed interest in single-gender classes were to implement a program, one-third of all the state's schools (and three-fourths of its middle schools) would offer this option.

A Unique Model for Reform

Single-gender classes are not created in opposition to coed classes; rather, they provide an alternative. A single-gender program is a unique reform model because it involves all stakeholders in the educational process. This is because, by federal law, participation in single-gender programs must be by parents' choice. Typically, the single-gender option is explained to parents, who then can opt in or out. This creates buy-in for both single-gender and coed classes—a win-win situation for the school, for the parents, and for the students.

A survey conducted in the spring of 2008 to discover what stakeholders thought about single-gender education shows that it is being well received by South Carolina's students, parents, and teachers. More than 66 percent of the surveyed students reported that being in a single-gender program improved or increased their self-confidence, independence, and participation, as well as the desire and ability to succeed. Sixty-five percent of parents of girls rated the program as favorable, as

did 70 percent of parents of boys. Teachers surveyed were even more positive about single-gender programs, with an approval rating of 80 percent.

The survey results indicate clearly that there are students, parents, and teachers who see single-gender options as a positive step toward meeting the needs of all students. We are currently working to gather data to measure results in a consistent manner.

Empowering Teachers to Better Meet Student Needs

South Carolina's single-gender efforts are notable because of the hard work of teachers and of the principals who provide them with training on recent brain research and different learning styles. Successful schools do not use gender differences to limit students' opportunities. Rather, they use them to empower teachers to better understand their students and to meet their needs. Teaching based on gender differences is merely an extension of differentiated instruction.

Educators in single-gender classrooms are able to present lessons based on the interests of their students and to plan more engaging learning experiences. Additionally, the tendencies of boys in coed classes to act out, and girls not to appear "too smart" may be lessened without the distractions of the opposite sex. This can translate into fewer discipline issues and more time on task, with boys and girls inclined to take greater advantage of classroom opportunities.

The consideration of gender differences is not exclusive to single-gender classrooms, however. Experts such as Eric Jensen, David Sousa, and Carol Ann Tomlinson have said that understanding more about how boys and girls learn can help all educators, whether they work in single-gender or coed environ-

ments. Teachers in coed classes can certainly tailor more learning experiences to take gender into account. Again, the goal is to use the understanding of gender differences to expand opportunities for students, not to limit them.

Recognizing diversity in the classroom is important. Excluding gender from that recognition limits the options educators can consider. Looking at gender differences and single-gender options as teaching tools can allow educators to better meet the needs of all students.

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