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Putting Single-Sex Schooling Back on Course

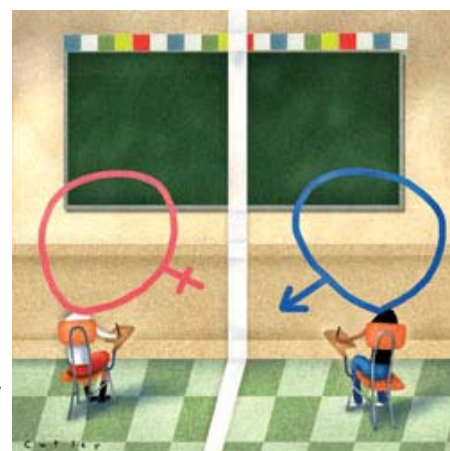
By Rosemary Salomone

The U.S. Department of Education recently put into effect regulations that ease the way for single-sex public schools and classes. ("**New U.S. Rules Boost Single-Sex Schooling**," Nov. 1, 2006.) As news of that action broke, I was on my way to Verona, Italy, to speak on this very topic. My mission was to help a network of private single-sex schools initiate a reasoned debate in a country where the approach is viewed as socially outdated. Surprisingly, the U.S. story made the front page of the Italian newspaper *La Stampa*. Over the next several days, my Italian hosts engaged me in almost nonstop conversation on all things American, but especially on the reported opposition in this country to single-sex schooling. In the end, I learned as much from them as they did from me.

I carefully laid before them the usual American arguments on single-sex schooling, pro and con. They in turn shared with me their educational philosophy supporting such programs. Reflecting on their thoughts and responses confirmed for me how the legally driven and bipolar debate in the United States has derailed the discussion and distracted us from what really matters. They talked about using gender as a window for understanding the individual child, about teaching children to respect one another's uniqueness and intrinsic worth. I talked about judicial decisions, legal standards, and the legacy of forced racial separation. For them, my story was intellectually interesting but somewhat remote. For me, theirs was refreshingly open, constructive, and devoid of political characterizations to the left or right. We were at cross-narratives.

I returned home invigorated yet disheartened, concluding that the only hope here for reasoned discussion is for educators to recapture single-sex schooling from the extreme rhetoric on both sides of a perplexing ideological divide. I sensed that the Education Department's revised Title IX regulations presented the moment to take action, lest we reach a point of no return.

On one side of the debate stand civil-liberties and women's groups who argue that separation on the basis of sex is, like separation on the basis of race, inevitably unequal and therefore violates the federal Constitution. At the opposite end stand proponents who rely on brain research showing specific differences between females and males. Driving these extreme positions are two landmark decisions of the U.S. Supreme Court: *Brown v. Board of Education*, the 1954 case striking down racially segregated public schools, and *United States v. Virginia*, the 1996 ruling declaring unconstitutional the exclusion of women from the state-supported Virginia Military Institute. In one, the justices stated that "separate is inherently unequal" in the context of state-mandated racial segregation. In the other, they recognized certain differences between women and men, but noted



—Dave Cutler

that the state must provide an “exceedingly persuasive justification” whenever it classifies students on the basis of sex, a standard now embedded in the Title IX regulations.

Legal opponents of single-sex schooling overstate the relevance of the first principle. Psychologists and others overstate findings from brain research in an attempt to meet the second. Together, the two camps have set up a collision course for what has proved to be a sound educational option, particularly for at-risk students.

The flaws in both arguments are self-evident, beginning with the race-sex analogy. The type of state-enforced racial segregation struck down by the court in *Brown* placed a badge of inferiority on African-American children, causing them, as the court noted, irreparable psychological harm. At the heart of the decision was the concept of equal dignity and respect. Ironically, that is exactly what well-designed single-sex programs aim to achieve. As initiatives such as the Young Women’s Leadership School in New York City, the Young Women’s Leadership Charter School in Chicago, and the Brighter Choice Charter Schools in Albany, N.Y., demonstrate, thoughtfully planned single-sex programs can effectively empower students, giving them a sense that they are masters of their own destiny. In these schools, poor and working-class parents are making a pro-academic choice to place their children in a rigorous educational environment—a far cry from the forced segregation in Southern school districts of the 1950s.

The argument that separate programs inevitably shortchange female students is likewise refutable. No doubt that was the case in the past, nor should we overlook continuing issues with women’s athletics. Yet almost four decades of litigation and legislation on behalf of women undeniably have created a national commitment and legal safeguards that strongly militate against inequalities in other curricular areas. In fact, the data demonstrate that the prevailing system of education (overwhelmingly mixed-sex) is failing boys as well as girls, if in different ways, regardless of resource allocations.

Just as these arguments, though faulty, have had a chilling effect on single-sex programs, those at the other extreme have inspired them, but in a potentially dangerous way. Here the forces of brain differences have hijacked the discussion, taking it in a dark direction.

Based on research findings of speculative educational relevance, these proponents maintain with certitude that “hard-wired” sex differences in brain development, albeit of indeterminate size, affect learning styles and therefore justify not only different methods of teaching, but also separation in either schools or certain classes. Such provocative assertions appeal to the media. Unfortunately, they also have gained increased appeal among a surprising number of well-meaning educators in search of a simple and clear justification to sell the approach to parents and school boards. Deceptively providing the “exceedingly persuasive justification” required by law, these arguments smack of the very overbroad generalizations that the Supreme Court unequivocally rejected in the case against the Virginia Military Institute. Statements regarding different levels of classroom lighting, or the tone or formality in which teachers should categorically address students of either sex, undoubtedly give rise to the stereotypes that women’s advocates justifiably fear.

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That is not to negate the potential contributions of brain research, a science that is advancing at breakneck speed. Nor is it to deny that there are, in fact, developmental differences between the sexes. The Supreme Court itself noted that women and men are not “fungible.” Psychologists have

more-advanced verbal and fine-motor skills than boys, while boys tend to possess greater visual-spatial skills. But there also is general consensus that innate abilities are not carved in biological stone, while social conditioning, in many cases, reinforces whatever small differences appear at birth. The fact that educational programs have dramatically improved girls' achievement and interest in math and science in recent years suggests that these abilities are not fixed, but changeable given proper attention.

Besides, many girls and boys fall outside this pattern. The same can be said for the conventional wisdom that girls like collaborative work while boys prefer to work competitively. That may be the aggregate, or may not. Three decades of athletic opportunities, thanks to Title IX, have given many girls the taste and tools for competition. At the same time, studies demonstrate that boys benefit from collaborative learning, especially among other boys. As my Italian colleagues at co-ed schools should provide all students with both types of experiences, which are essential for the world of work and life. Basing teaching methods definitively and uniformly on these gross differences disservices those students for whom they hold true, as well as those for whom they do not.

There is an intuitive urge to magnify differences beyond the evidence and draw sweeping conclusions about innate abilities and their impact on real-life performance. We also risk embedding differences where they do not exist in the first place. Above all, we run the danger of turning separation into isolation and even alienation. The repeated language of difference, spread throughout these arguments, conveys to students the damaging message of "otherness" that can negatively affect their relationships with the opposite sex now and in the future.

As I noted in the Italian schools I visited, rather than focusing on brain differences of questionable magnitude and still-inconclusive relevance to learning, it proves more reasonable and productive to examine the stages at which certain abilities tend to observably develop in females and males as long as we remember that there are variations within each group. In fact, as one teacher explained to me, the more-narrow range in ability in a single-sex class makes it easier for the teacher to address the individual needs of young students in particular.

Educators searching for a sufficiently "persuasive justification" to comply with the law need not rely on anecdotal reports from existing programs in the United States, along with findings from several large-scale studies abroad. Together, these results point to rationales unrelated to brain differences per se.

For some students, the matter is as simple as removing the social distraction of the other sex. Students in single-sex classes report feeling more comfortable raising their hands and expressing uncertainty regarding a lesson or topic without fear of embarrassment or teasing from the other sex. Some boys are more willing to openly discuss a broad range of literature beyond the typical male adventure and suspense stories and to engage eagerly in literary forms that many adolescent boys would reject outright as "female." Many girls report feeling more comfortable taking risks in math and science and tend to enroll in more advanced courses in those subjects as compared to their coeducated counterparts. And so, even though the data on short-term academic achievement remain inconclusive, the very fact that these programs are expanding students' intellectual horizons in nontraditional directions is a measure of success in itself.

For some students, the critical point may be the early grades, when maturational differences create in students the misperception that they are not programmed to succeed in certain subjects—for girls it is math, for boys it is language. As national data demonstrate, far too many boys in particular lose

Aside from legalities, separate programs

motivation and give up, or are misidentified with learning disabilities.

For others, the critical point may be the middle or secondary school years, when social pressures inhibit some students from succeeding academically or finding a constructive source for developing a positive sense of self. And for at-risk students at any level, the conscious identification with academic achievement and the same-sex role models these programs typically offer prove especially effective. One can reasonably speculate that these short-term benefits will eventually translate into long-term academic gains.

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The new Title IX regulations will not put the debate to rest. Aside from legalities, separate for girls and boys understandably seem socially backward in a post-feminist world. To help that view, educators must now abandon the inflammatory rhetoric of “hard-wired” different language of social development, intellectual growth, and long- vs. short-term goals, thereby the public’s confidence and dispelling the fears of skeptics and critics.

The Education Department’s office for civil rights also must vigilantly enforce the regulator school officials accountable for providing a sound education to all students, one based not on overbroad generalizations of group strengths or weaknesses, but on individual capacities within a small range of real but malleable differences between the sexes.

In the end, my parting advice to my Italian friends, as they initiate this discussion in their country, is to learn from our experience and beware of simplistic arguments that run counter to their own educational instincts.

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