

Schools get full marks for separating the boys from the girls

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Many people are a little perplexed, and more than a little disappointed, about the latest provincial test scores, but the results do offer some suggestions for how they might be improved.

The Foundational Skills Assessment (FSA) tests Grade 4 and Grade 7 students on reading comprehension, writing and numeracy, and the latest results, for 2005-06, suggest that children are doing no better today than they were five years ago.

Nevertheless, there are some bright spots in the province, and other schools could benefit if they emulate the ones that are doing well.

Perhaps the most striking results come from one school in Trail. Until recently, students at Glenmerry elementary school were performing much as students across North America do: They were doing reasonably well, but girls were far outperforming boys.

Then the staff decided to put boys and girls in separate classes, and the rest, as they say, is history. Grade 7 scores on the FSA are now at an all-time high, higher than the average scores in the region and the province.

Furthermore, boys are doing better than girls in some areas, though the performance of both boys and girls has improved: On the math test, boys scored 100 per cent while girls scored 88 per cent; boys averaged 86 per cent in reading and girls, 82 per cent; and both sexes achieved 100 per cent in writing.

While any number of factors could be responsible for the improved performances, the staff at Glenmerry are convinced that the single-sex classes have made a significant contribution, with Principal Kere MacGregor noting that boys and girls use different areas of their brains to learn.

Indeed, there is substantial psychological evidence for this view. According to research, girls' and boys' brains develop at different rates and in different ways, which means a curriculum designed for one sex might not work well for the other. Boys and girls also respond differently to stress, hence they also have different learning styles.

Single-sex classes allow educators to accommodate these learning differences and to design curricula that are better suited to their students. The evidence suggests that these sex specific curricula are good for both boys and girls.

Research from across North America and Europe has discovered that kids in single-sex classes or schools perform better on standardized tests, take a broader array of courses, have higher career aspirations, suffer less from discipline problems and absenteeism, and do better at college.

This doesn't, of course, mean that every child will do better in a same-sex class than in a coed one. But it does mean that we must cease being skittish about acknowledging differences between the sexes, since by refusing to admit such

differences, we could be needlessly condemning both boys and girls to an education that is unresponsive to their needs.

More than anything else, it means that we should provide both boys and girls with the opportunity to avail themselves of single-sex classes if that's what they desire. After all, there are few learning strategies that hold greater promise for both.

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