
Introduction

Defining Single-Gender Education

Choice is opportunity. The choice of single-sex education is affirmative action for the sexes.

—Peter Meyer (2008)

On March 16, 2008, I received the following email from a parent:

I have an 11-year-old daughter who is in sixth grade at XX in XX County. My daughter is gifted, introverted, sensitive, and has hit puberty and middle school—it’s not a good mix! My daughter has always loved school and did fine in elementary. As soon as she hit middle school, I’ve watched with my heart breaking how her quiet, intelligent, sensitive, confident nature is being eroded by boys picking on her. It is especially hard in our society for a female to be quiet and intelligent and confident, and the boys in her middle school seem to already have that sense of “we need to put her in her place,” and I see her struggling so much to the point where she hates school now. I do not even know what to teach my daughter anymore—do I keep teaching her to be herself, as I always have, and suffer the constant pain of rejection and insults and being “different,” or do I teach her to be a “typical” female to fit in and suffer the constant pain of never being who she really is? (Personal communication, 2008)

On that same day, I read the following comment from Elena Silva, Senior Policy Analyst of Education Sector:

But the link between gender and learning is weak. And the assumption that separate schools for boys and girls will make schools and districts better for students is way off the mark. (Silva, 2008)

This is the world of single-gender education, where stakeholders hold widely varying views about gender as an issue in education. There are parents asking for help with their children, teachers reaching out for other ways to reach their students, and students finding avenues of success that may not have been available a few years ago. And, there are policymakers making categorical statements on both sides of the issue. Throughout this book, the terms *single-gender* and *single-sex* are used interchangeably. Both terms are commonly used within schools and the media.

Single-gender education occurs when boys and girls are taught in separate classes during some or all of the school day. This can be a single-sex campus: an all-boy school or an all-girl school. This could also be a “dual academy”: a coed school where boys and girls are in single-sex classes for the entire day. The other form of single-gender education involves a coed school with single-sex classes held during part of the day.

This book is written for administrators, teacher leaders, or parents who are interested in bringing a single-gender format to their public school or to create a public single-sex school. The issues involved with public single-gender education for schools, dual academies, or classes are similar. As such, this book is designed as a resource for each of these groups.

The majority of entry points into single-gender education are single-gender classes that are begun within coed schools. Educators involved in starting an all-girl or all-boy school will find multiple points of support throughout this book that are unique to the gendered aspect of their school. However, aspects related to starting a school, regardless of gender or specific charter school issues, are not addressed. The focus of this book is on the gendered aspects of single-gender programs.

The program organization of public single-gender education varies. For whole school or dual academies, all classes are single gender. In coed schools, single-gender classes could be core academic classes, such as mathematics, science, social studies, or English language arts. Or, the single-gender classes could be related arts, cocurricular or encore classes, such as physical education, art, music, or theater. In addition to or instead of academic class periods, a designated time of day may be single gender, such as breakfast, lunch, recess, or after-school activities. Or, in some cases, all classes and times are single gender, even though the larger institution is coed.

For a program to be designated as single gender, boys and girls must attend separate classes. These classes must be completely voluntary for the parents of students enrolled. Students cannot be forced to remain in a single-gender class if their parents do not want them to be in a single-gender class. We will be examining legal issues later.

SOME BASICS

It's worth making three fundamental points about single-gender programs before exploring the details of philosophy, program design, and implementation.

1. Public school teachers are responsible for teaching the state standards of their own state. In coed and single-gender classrooms, boys and girls must be taught and held accountable for the same set of state standards. Teachers cannot change the standards or decide which part of the standards to teach to boys and which to teach to girls, nor can less rigorous versions of classes be taught to one gender or the other.

Thus, in a single-gender program, the difference is not what is taught, but *how* the state and district standards are taught to boys and girls. The practice of using different instructional strategies to deliver a lesson or meet a standard with different populations of students is commonplace. The same math lesson will be taught differently in classroom A than classroom B because the students are different, whether those classrooms are coed or single gender. The background knowledge of students will be different, the questions that students ask will be different, and the pace at which the students understand the material will be different and will require different emphasis, clarification, or reteaching. Teachers *should* teach differently to different students. The same premise exists within single-gender classrooms.

2. Single-gender schools and classes are designed and designated as single-gender classes; they are not coed classes that happen to end up as single gender because only boys or only girls happened to enroll.

3. Finally, and perhaps most self-evidently: Teachers of coed classes teach both boys and girls. Understanding boys and girls better and learning about educational strategies that may better meet their needs is beneficial for all teachers.