# Single-Sex Education

Austin Explores All-Boys Academy Austin American-Statesman, April 9, 2007

Muskegon May Test Same-Sex Classrooms Muskegon Chronicle, December 13, 2006 Nashville to Test Single-Sex Classes Tenneseean.com, April 4, 2007

More Public Schools Dividing Boys, Girls Houston Chronicle (AP), January 25, 2007

A profound challenge to gender equity in education has been mounted in recent years that threatens to undermine Title IX and hamper future efforts to assure that girls and boys are provided equal learning opportunities in K-12 public schools. This challenge is embodied in regulations issued by the Department of Education in 2006 that vastly expand the circumstances in which schools will be permitted to offer sexsegregated educational programs. Although both Title IX and the U.S. Constitution allow single-sex programs in appropriate circumstances, both require careful safeguards to ensure that these programs, where offered, serve appropriate purposes and do not perpetuate sex discrimination. However, the new regulations lack these safeguards and could encourage schools to establish single-sex programs that turn the clock back to the time when girls were separate and unequal in education.<sup>180</sup>

#### Single-Sex Education and the Law

While single-sex programs can be beneficial and lawful under certain circumstances, the law has always insisted that such programs be undertaken with caution. This is because without adequate safeguards, single-sex programs can actually increase discrimination. When schools offer programs only to students of one sex, they are by definition using the gender of students of the other sex as the sole basis for excluding those students from educational opportunities from which they could benefit. By excluding students of one sex, moreover, schools risk reaffirming stereotypes about the interests, abilities or learning styles of both genders.

Additionally, history has shown that girls' programs typically receive fewer resources than boys' programs, and that girls and women tend to be treated inequitably in other ways when programs are separate. Girls have been steered to programs designed to prepare them for lives as homemakers and boys have been encouraged to pursue higher education and career training. Indeed, the persistence of these inequities can be seen even today in sex-segregated programs. In athletics, for example, where single-sex teams are not only per-

mitted but the norm, girls are subject to inequities in every measurable aspect of the programs.<sup>181</sup>

Both the U.S. Constitution and Title IX have safeguards to ensure that single-sex programs will not be discriminatory. The Constitution requires that any gender-based classification have an "exceedingly persuasive justification," and be "substantially related" to an important governmental objective. 182 Under the decisions of the Supreme Court, such justifications are limited: "Sex classifications may be used to compensate women 'for particular economic disabilities [they have] suffered,'... to 'promote equal employment opportunity,'... [or] to advance full development of the talent and capacities of our Nation's people." The Court has also made clear that the "classification [must be] determined through reasoned analysis rather than through the mechanical application of traditional, often inaccurate, assumptions about the proper roles of men and women." 184

In accord with this standard, prior to 2006, the Title IX regulations allowed schools to offer single-sex classes for instruction in specific areas, such as contact sports or human sexuality, and to promote "remedial or affirmative action" related to ending sex discrimination in education. These exceptions to the general prohibition on gender-based classifications have been used in the past to enhance women's opportunities in fields from which they were traditionally excluded and in which they remain significantly under-represented. For example, the Department of Education's Gender Equity Expert Panel in 2000 recognized the Orientation to Nontraditional Occupations for Women program, which was primarily used for incarcerated women, as an exemplary program.<sup>185</sup>

Safeguards against sex discrimination under the 1975 Title IX regulations were summarized in a 1996 U.S. Government Accountability Office report on "Issues Involving Single-Gender Schools and Programs." As set forth in that report, single-gender classes or programs are justified only if "(1) beneficiaries of the single-sex classes or programs . . .had limited opportunities to participate in a school's programs or

activities due to their sex, (2) less restrictive or segregated alternatives that may have accomplished the goals of the single-gender classes or programs [had] been considered and rejected, and (3) there [was] evidence that comparable sex neutral means could not be reasonably expected to produce the results sought through the single-gender classrooms or programs."<sup>186</sup>

#### The Department of Education's 2006 Single-Sex Regulations

On May 3, 2002, OCR issued a *Notice of Intent to Regulate* that proposed to change the 1975 Title IX regulations to make it easier for schools to offer single-sex programs.<sup>187</sup> Despite receiving numerous public comments opposing this regulatory change, OCR issued a *Notice of Proposed Rulemaking* on March 9, 2004, and requested public comments by April 23, 2004. Although the vast majority of submitted comments opposed any changes to the longstanding Title IX regulations (only about 100 of the close to 6,000 public comments supported the proposed changes),<sup>188</sup> OCR issued final regulations for implementation of the single-sex provisions on October 25, 2006 that were similar to the proposed regulations. The final regulations became effective 30 days later, on November 24, 2006.

The Department's new regulations dangerously expand authorization for schools to offer single-sex programs for their K-12 students. Because they abandon the long-standing legal safeguards that are designed to ensure that single-sex programs will not result in sex stereotyping or discrimination, the new regulations authorize programs that will ill serve both male and female students and that could result in legal liability for the schools that offer them.

- The Department's new regulations throw out the most basic safeguards. Under the new regulations, schools can exclude boys or girls from classrooms or schools based on vague goals such as "improving the educational achievement of students" by "providing diverse educational opportunities" or meeting the particular, identified educational needs of their students. There is nothing in the regulations that prevents schools from acting based on harmful sex stereotypes—for example, that girls cannot learn in fast paced or competitive environments or that separating boys and girls is the only way to remedy sexual harassment. The new regulations would even allow schools to create sex-segregated programs based on parent or student preferences—a practice that would never be allowed were the issue to be segregation on the basis of race.
- The Department's new regulations do not mandate equal treatment for students excluded from a single-sex program. The regulations require only that the excluded gender receive "substantially" equal educational opportunities. But "close enough" is not an acceptable legal or policy standard.
- The Department's new regulations rely on faulty and unproven assumptions about the benefits of single-sex programs. Despite the Department's insistence that educational innovations be premised on "scientifically-based evidence," a major review of the research sponsored by the Department has acknowledged that the evidence that single-sex programs produce more educational benefits than coeducational schooling is "equivocal," at best. Reviews of multiple research studies support this conclusion and fail to support single-sex education proponents' position that separating boys and girls increases educational benefits. In fact, a research review that was issued at the same time the Department of Education was releasing its 2006 changes to the Title IX regulations, found that half a century of research in many western countries has not shown any dramatic or consistent advantages for single-sex education for boys or girls. 190

Recent studies of single-sex education have been poorly designed and inadequate, and few have even looked at gender equity outcomes. For example, the comprehensive research review sponsored by the Department of Education in 2005 reported mixed results on achievement outcomes and no results on

gender equity outcomes.<sup>191</sup> Many studies of single-sex schools failed to control for factors that are likely to affect student performance, such as socioeconomic status of the students, selectivity of admissions, resources invested in the program, and class size.<sup>192</sup>

Furthermore, researchers report negative sex stereotyping associated with single-sex education for both girls and boys. Some studies show that all-boys schools promote sexism and feelings of superiority toward women. Unless programs are carefully designed, girls, as the traditionally subordinated group, may experience a badge of inferiority as a result of being grouped on the basis of sex.<sup>193</sup> Advocates of single-sex education have argued that it will reduce boy-girl distractions and sexual harassment, yet one study on single-sex dual academies in California found that students still experienced teasing and harassment in both the single-sex and co-educational spaces of the dual academies and that students who attended single-sex academies were often labeled as "bad", "preppy" or "gay".<sup>194</sup>

• The Department's new regulations make inadequate provision for accountability. The regulations authorize schools to conduct their own evaluations of their programs, provide no guidance on how schools should make the required assessments, and establish no monitoring role for the Department. There is no required accountability or review of the justifications or results. Nor is there is any requirement that schools separately report the results for the girls and boys, or produce evidence that sex-segregated education meets students' needs or improves educational achievement outcomes any better than mixed-sex education.

"I don't know. To all the moms out there I'd like to let them know that when their girls come home saying that boys want to be a nurse or a dancer, the moms would let them know that it is okay. Because I have actually considered being a dancer myself. Boys have pressure on them too to be all strong and macho and stuff and even though we try we are not always that strong or macho."

3rd grade boy

### "It is hard because there are some things you want to do that parents think that boys should not do like be a teacher or nurse."

### 3rd grade boy

"There are too many gender based rules and expectations of boys. I don't like sports and I'm not obsessed with computers. I am a boy who likes looking good and wants to be a fashion designer, and I always get shoved into statistics with boys who aren't like me at all. I am expected to do tough manly things. Things that I don't do, and don't want to do. It's degrading to me. People need to treat me as a person, not just a boy."

9th grade boy

Quotes from Supergirl Dilemma report<sup>197</sup>

#### **Increased Attention to Single-Sex Education**

Despite the clear vulnerabilities of the Department's 2006 regulatory changes, the number of public schools offering single-sex programs has been growing rapidly in recent years while there have been decreases in many private single-sex schools. As of March 2007, the National Association for Single Sex Public Education reported that for the 2006-07 school year, "at least 262 public schools in the United States were offering gender-separate educational opportunities" and that 52 of those schools were completely single-sex. The others have single-sex classrooms and some coed activities such as electives or lunch. However, the number of single-sex schools and classes is still small compared to the total number of schools and classes in the 16,000 school districts across the country.

There are varied reasons that schools have acted on the Department's authorization of additional single-sex activities. Many educators and parents are in districts that struggle with inadequate resources, large classrooms, insufficiently trained teachers, multiple socio-economic challenges and under-performing students. They may be attracted to sex segregation as a panacea to improve their student outcomes. Other districts find sex-segregated education appealing based on unfounded ideas about how boys and girls learn, assertions that separating the sexes will produce increased learning, and because they see sex-segregated education as promoting diversity of choice. For example, a Connecticut school is designing the girls' classroom with circular seating so they can "have more of a sense of community" and the boys' classroom with "optional sitting" because they believe "studies have shown that boys learn better when standing."196

But, for the reasons set forth above, single-sex education is not the panacea that some may believe it to be. And while there are some differences in male and female physiology and common patterns of socialization, the meaning and implications for most areas of education are highly debatable and far from conclusive. Females and males have multiple ways of learning and there is more variation within the sexes than between them. Importantly, research does not show that gender is an accurate, consistent, or even useful determinant of educational needs.<sup>198</sup> If anything, studies show that gender gaps in academic achievement have been decreasing since the passage of Title IX and that both boys and girls are doing better in school.<sup>199</sup> Given that the commonalities between boys and girls far exceed the differences, the drastic step of separating boys and girls in public schools is not warranted.

Significantly, there are also practical reasons for schools to tread carefully in adopting single-sex programs. First, school districts may be vulnerable to expensive legal challenges if their programs violate their own district policies, state laws, Title IX or the U.S. Constitution. In addition, if implemented properly to decrease sex discrimination and improve desired education outcomes, single-sex education is likely to be more expensive than coeducation. In many cases schools will have additional administrative burdens, teacher training costs, and evaluation and legal costs. Re-directing funding to reducing classroom size, increasing other resources and providing additional training of teachers to meet their students' academic and social and emotional needs and to avoid sex discrimination and stereotyping could well produce better outcomes for distrcts with large numbers of underachieving students.

### Garrett v. Board of Education

The complex problems that some minority males face are widely recognized. However, as stated in a case challenging all-male public schools in Detroit, "while the purpose for which the male academies came into being is an important one, the objectives, no matter how compelling, cannot override the rights of females to

equal opportunities."<sup>200</sup> The court noted that no evidence had been proffered that the presence of girls in the classrooms bears a substantial relationship to the difficulties facing urban males. The judge also found that segregating boys led them to believe that girls were the cause of their educational problems.

#### Profile-The dangers of single-sex education under new regulations

The new Title IX regulations for single-sex education opened the door to practically any program, and dangerous practices have already been seen in the field. In September 2006, Livingston Parish, Louisiana, planned to change a coeducational school into a school where girls and boys were separated in all classes so that the school could teach girls "character education" and boys "heroic behavior." In its plan the parish cited an 'expert' who contended that "boys need to

practice pursuing and killing prey, while girls need to practice taking care of babies. As a result, boys should be permitted to roughhouse during recess and play contact sports to learn the rules of aggression. Such play is more dangerous for girls, because girls are less biologically able to manage aggression." The plan was withdrawn because of a lawsuit brought by the ACLU, and these stereotyped justifications did not prevail.<sup>201</sup>

#### Conclusion

The new single-sex regulations were not official until November 24, 2006, so it is too soon to observe their full impact on increasing single-sex education. However, the 2006 changes gut key non-discrimination provisions of Title IX, and since they were announced there have been more news stories about schools considering and implementing single-sex classrooms and schools. States such as Michigan and Florida and some school districts are now allowing more single-sex education,

and educators have also observed more sex segregation for non-instructional purposes. The proportion of single-sex public education settings in the United States is still small, but without vigilance and increased understanding of the problems with sex segregation, it is possible that the 2006 changes to the Title IX regulations of single-sex education will reverse progress made since 1972.

### **NCWGE RECOMMENDATIONS**

#### **CONGRESS**

- Congress should authorize and fund research and program development to continue to make coeducation more gender equitable and effective by using multiple teaching approaches designed to counteract sex stereotyping and sex discrimination and to meet individual needs of all. Eliminating root causes of educational failure
- resulting from stereotyping, discriminatory treatment and poverty is critical to meeting the needs of girls and boys without segregating them.
- Congress should direct the Department of Education to allow single-sex education only when permissible under the Title IX regulations issued in 1975 and under the U.S. Constitution.

#### **ADMINISTRATIVE AGENCIES**

- The Department of Education should rescind the 2006 changes to the 1975 Title IX regulations. Schools should implement single-sex programs only to the extent consistent with the 1975 Title IX regulations and the standards of the U.S. Constitution and their state and local laws.
- OCR should actively monitor single-sex educational activities using the 1975 Title IX Regulations and take remedial action against any recipients who maintain single-sex education programs that are found to be discriminatory. The Department of Education should work with state and other Title IX coordinators to collect annual information from their schools and districts on all proposed and approved plans, and should obtain implementation and outcome evaluation reports for all single-sex programs. Evidence of the effectiveness of the single-sex
- programs compared to coeducational programs should also be sent for review to the Department of Education's What Works Clearinghouse and should be made publicly available.
- OCR should make it clear to the public that any discriminatory sex segregation should be reported directly to their office for investigation.
- In addition, OCR should provide on its web site a comprehensive annual report analyzing the information it receives on sex segregated activities and evaluations of programs and activities receiving federal financial assistance. OCR should also work with the Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences to facilitate the accumulation of knowledge about what does or does not work related to using Title IX approved sex segregation in publicly supported K-12 education.

#### **EDUCATION PROGRAMS AND ACTIVITIES**

- School districts that allow any single-sex educational programs should have publicly stated policies about standards for implementing and evaluating such programs. They should also have procedures for how the district will make decisions to modify or discontinue the programs if they are found to be discriminatory or no more effective than mixed sex options.
- Where single-sex education is offered, a comprehensive monitoring system is needed to ensure that it does not result in sex discrimination. Title IX Coordinators should work with qualified external evaluators and other gender equity education experts to develop plans, conduct reviews and evaluate outcomes.

### **NCWGE ACTION AGENDA**

This report looks critically at 35 years of progress under Title IX. Probing beyond the headlines in six key areas covered by the law, NCWGE has found serious enforcement gaps and disappointing setbacks. However, looking forward, it has identified key opportunities to continue improving women's and girls' access to educational opportunities. Con-

gress, administrative agencies, and educational institutions all have an important role to play, along with students, parents and teachers, in effectively applying Title IX. NCWGE believes that implementing this action agenda will expand progress toward gender equity in education and lead to more positive headlines in the years to come.

#### **CONGRESS**

Fulfilling the promise of Title IX will further the goal of improving educational opportunities for all students throughout our nation—both female and male. Congress should take the following steps:

- Conduct oversight hearings and call for enhanced agency enforcement, particularly an increase in the number and frequency of compliance reviews conducted by the Offices for Civil Rights (OCRs) in the Department of Education and other federal agencies, to ensure that federally-funded education programs provide equal access and opportunity to all students.
- Restore federal funding to states for gender equity work, including funding for state Title IX coordinators and programs.
- Pass legislation improving protections for equal pay for women and men working at all levels of educational institutions, from pre-K through universities as well as in all other areas of our society.
- Authorize and fund a comprehensive public education campaign to raise awareness of rights and responsibilities under Title IX as well as the importance of gender equity in education among students, parents, teachers and administrators.

- Require increased data collection, including analysis and disaggregation of data by gender, race and other appropriate characteristics, for use in ensuring accountability and progress in attaining gender equity in educational institutions receiving federal financial assistance and require schools to publicize this information. For example, enact the High School Athletics Accountability Act/High School Sports Information Collection Act to require high schools to report key data, including participation numbers, budgets and expenditures, which can be used to gauge schools' compliance with Title IX in athletics.
- Fund research and program development to improve gender equity in education through federal programs such as the Women's Educational Equity Act (WEEA), the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education and the Institute of Education Sciences in the Department of Education.
- Increase funding for programs that focus on attracting and retaining women and girls in nontraditional and STEM careers, including afterschool programs and the National Science Foundation's ADVANCE grants for STEM faculty.

#### **ADMINISTRATIVE AGENCIES**

Title IX applies to every educational institution and activity that receives federal funds. The federal agencies that oversee that funding should implement Congressional mandates and take the following steps to strengthen enforcement of Title IX and further gender equity in education:

 The Department of Education should rescind the March 2005 Clarification allowing email surveys to be used as the sole means to satisfy the third prong of the test for determining whether schools are providing equal opportunity for males and females to participate in athletics programs. It should affirm the 1996 Policy Clarification, pursuant to which surveys are only one of a multitude of factors schools can use to determine whether they are satisfying the interests of their female students.

- The Department of Education should rescind the 2006 amendments to the 1975 Title IX regulations that allow single-sex education without accountability or protections against discrimination.
- In addition to responding to complaints, OCRs in the federal agencies must initiate more compliance reviews of educational institutions and be vigilant in following through to ensure that

- schools implement their compliance plans. Where appropriate, OCRs should deny funding when schools fail to comply with Title IX.
- The Department of Education should reinstate the Gender Equity Expert Panel and support the use of effective replicable gender equity programs.
- Collect detailed data on employment from elementary and secondary school districts and postsecondary institutions to better analyze educator pay rates and promotional opportunities. This data should be used, among other things, to develop programs to promote a wide range of diversity (gender, ethnicity, race, age, sexual orientation, etc.) in teaching, including tenure track jobs and administrative positions.
- Provide technical assistance to schools to help them understand their obligations under Title IX and to disseminate promising practices. Enforce the Title IX requirement that each institution receiving federal funds have a coordinator to ensure proper implementation of Title IX.
- Support high quality evaluation and research on single-sex education, focusing on comparing single-sex education programs with appropriately matched coeducational programs. Fund gender equity organizations to develop and disseminate model criteria, standards and procedures to evaluate single-sex education programs to ensure that they are not discriminatory.

#### STATE AND LOCAL EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS AND ACTIVITIES

All education programs or activities receiving federal financial assistance must comply with Title IX's requirements. The following activities will further compliance and improve educational equity:

- Appoint Title IX coordinators for each educational institution and school district to organize efforts to comply with the law, investigate complaints, and publicize information on patterns of compliance with Title IX. The Title IX coordinators should ensure that all staff and students are educated about their rights and responsibilities under Title IX and that plans are implemented to end sex discrimination.
- Provide all members of the school community, including students, applicants, parents, admissions and recruitment personnel, union representatives, faculty, and staff, with information about Title IX protections, grievance procedures and the name and contact information of the Title IX coordinator at the school, using the Internet and other means.
- The Title IX coordinators should participate in an annual self-assessment of compliance with the 1975 Title IX regulations and subsequent policies and guidances. This assessment should include an examination of institutional policies, procedures and practices for ending gender bias.
- Provide professional development and training to educators and administrators about approaches to counteracting sex stereotyping and sex discrimination to meet the needs of all students and society.

- Continue and expand programs to attract women into career fields relying on science, technology, engineering and mathematics, at every level from career and technical education to higher education. This includes strategies such as educating parents, increasing networking and peer support activities, integrating more hands-on activities into curricula and offering after-school and other informal education programs that can engage women and girls in these fields.
- Work with search committees and personnel departments to effectively address all hiring programs and promote diversity among staff and faculty. Provide employees with opportunities for advancement, such as training and mentoring for administrative positions. Support family-friendly employment policies and provide increased networking opportunities.
- Ensure that female and male students have equal opportunities to participate in athletics and other types of education programs where one sex is under-represented, and ensure equal treatment when students of the under-respresented sex do participate.

With community cooperation and increased enforcement of Title IX, the nation can ensure that the headlines of the future will reflect increased progress in ending sex discrimination in education.

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### **NCWGE Affiliate Organizations**

Academy for Educational Development

American Association for the Advancement of Science

American Association of School Administrators

American Association of University Women

American Civil Liberties Union: Women's Rights Project

American Civil Liberties Union

American Federation of Teachers

American Psychological Association

Association for Gender Equity Leadership in Education

Association for Women in Science

Association of American Colleges and Universities

Association of Junior Leagues International, Inc.

Association of Teacher Educators

Business & Professional Women USA

Center for Advancement of Public Policy

Center for Women's Policy Studies

Council of Chief State School Officers Resource Center on

Educational Equity

Dads and Daughters

Equal Rights Advocates

Federation of Organizations for Professional Women

Feminist Majority Foundation

Gallaudet University

Girl Scouts of the USA

Girls Incorporated

Girlstart

Healthy Teen Network

Leadership Conference on Civil Rights

Ms. Foundation for Women

Myra Sadker Advocates for Gender Equity

National Alliance for Partnerships in Equity

National Association for Girls & Women in Sport

National Association of Collegiate Women Athletic Administrators

National Center for Lesbian Rights

National Council of Administrative Women in Education

National Council of Negro Women

National Education Association

National Organization for Women

National Partnership for Women and Families

National Women's History Project

National Women's Law Center

National Women's Political Caucus

Legal Momentum

NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund

Parent and Teacher Association

Partners of the Americas

Society of Women Engineers

U.S. Student Association

Wider Opportunities for Women

Women Work!

Women's Edge

Women's Research and Education Institute

Women's Sports Foundation

YWCA

