



Single-sex education: the pros and cons

Should boys and girls be taught separately? Does single-sex education boost academic success? Read the arguments for and against.

Single-sex education (teaching boys and girls in separate classrooms or schools) is an old approach that's gaining new momentum. A driving force in the single-sex education movement is recent research showing natural differences in how males and females learn. Putting this research into practice, however, has triggered a debate that extends beyond pure academics. Political, civil rights, socioeconomic and legal concerns also come into play. As the debate heats up, it helps to understand all sides of the issue.

Making the case for single-sex education:

- At certain ages, boys and girls being together in the classroom can be a distraction.
- Boys and girls have different learning styles, and teachers can gear their techniques toward the gender of their students.
- Even the setting can be modified to help students. For example, research indicates that girls learn better when classroom temperature is warm, while boys perform better in cooler classrooms.
- Often times, mixed classrooms only reinforce gender stereotypes, while single-gender schools can break down gender stereotypes. Girls are free of the pressure to compete with boys in “male-dominated subjects” such as math and science (or so says the stereotype). Boys, on the other hand, can more easily pursue traditionally “feminine” interests such as music and poetry without the pressure of being around girls.
- Federal law supports the option of single-gender education. In 2006, Education Secretary Margaret Spellings eased federal regulations, allowing schools to offer single-gender classrooms and schools, as long as such options are completely voluntary. This move gives parents and school districts greater flexibility.

What critics say about single-sex education:

- Few educators are formally trained to use gender-specific teaching techniques. However, it's no secret that experienced teachers usually understand gender differences and are adept at accommodating a variety of learning styles within their mixed-gender classrooms.
- Gender differences in learning aren't the same across the board. For a sensitive boy or an assertive girl, the teaching style promoted by advocates of single-sex education could be ineffective (at best) or detrimental (at worst).
- Students in single-gender classrooms will one day live and work side-by-side with members of the opposite gender. Educating them separately would stunt the progress of this social development.
- The academic disparity between male and female students is far less than the achievement gap between students in different racial, ethnic and socioeconomic groups, with poor and minority students children faring poorly. Bridging that academic chasm, many argue, deserves more attention than does gender.
- Single-sex education is discriminatory. Even if it's only voluntary, the existence of gender-specific classes is an admission that boys and girls are “separate, but equal”, a concept that was often used to defend Jim Crow laws that promoted racial discrimination.