

Separating the Sexes, Just for the Tough Years

1 The middle school years (grades 7 and 8) are known to be the “tough years.” These are the years when the uneven pace of girls’ and boys’ physical, emotional, and cognitive development is most noticeable. Girls are ahead of boys on all counts, and both suffer. Educators debate whether separating boys and girls during these difficult years might improve students’ academic performance. Separate classes are now prohibited in public schools that receive federal funds, but a change in the federal law that prohibits them is under consideration. Although some parents and educators oppose same-sex classes, there is some evidence that separating boys and girls in middle school yields positive results.

2 Opponents of single-sex education claim that test scores of students in all-girl or all-boy classes are no higher than those of students in mixed classes (“Study”).¹ However, the research is inconclusive. Despite the fact that some research shows no improvement in test scores, other research shows exactly opposite results (Blum).² More important, many psychologists believe that test scores are the wrong measuring sticks. They believe that self-confidence and self-esteem issues are more important than test scores. In same-sex classes, girls report increased confidence and improved attitudes toward math and science, for example (“Study”). These are results that cannot be calculated by a test but that will help adolescents become successful adults long after the difficult years of middle school are past. New York University professor Carol Gilligan is certain that girls are more likely to be “creative thinkers and risk-takers as adults if educated apart from boys in middle school” (Gross).³ Boys, too, gain confidence when they do not have to compete with girls. Boys at this age become angry and fight back in middle school because they feel inferior when compared to girls, who literally “out-think” them. With no girls in the classroom, they are more at ease with themselves and more receptive to learning (Gross).

3 Opponents also maintain that separate classes (or separate schools) send the message that males and females cannot work together. They say that when students go into the work force, they will have to work side-by-side with the opposite sex, and attending all-girl or all-boy schools denies them the opportunity to learn how to do so (“North”).⁴ However, such an argument completely ignores the fact that children constantly interact with members of the

opposite sex outside school. From playing and squabbling with siblings to negotiating allowances, chores, and privileges with their opposite-sex parent, children learn and practice on a daily basis the skills they will need in their future workplaces.

4 The final argument advanced by opponents of same-sex education is that it is discriminatory and, therefore, unconstitutional. However, research supports exactly the opposite conclusion: that discrimination is widespread in mixed classes. Several studies have shown that boys dominate discussions and receive more attention than girls and that teachers call on boys more often than they call on girls, even when girls raise their hands (“North”). Clearly, this is discriminatory.

5 It should be evident that the arguments against same-sex classes are not valid. On the contrary, many people involved in middle-school education say that same-sex classes provide a better learning environment. Boys and girls pay less attention to each other and more attention to their schoolwork (Marquez).⁵ As one teacher noted, “Girls are more relaxed and ask more questions; boys are less disruptive and more focused” (“North”). Girls are less fearful of making mistakes and asking questions in math and science; boys are less inhibited about sharing their ideas in language and literature. Furthermore, schoolchildren are not disadvantaged by lack of contact with the opposite sex because they have many opportunities outside the school setting to interact with one another. Finally, discrimination occurs in mixed classes, so discrimination is not a valid argument. Therefore, in my opinion, the law prohibiting same-sex classes in public schools should be changed.