

# CAUTION: SINGLE-GENDER CLASSES



**T**he *Newsweek* (2006) quote, “Girl behaviour becomes the gold standard. Boys are treated like defective girls,” has seized public attention about the plight of boys and fueled the single-gender education debate.

Even *People Magazine* threw its two cents into the debate the following week with a two-page article – complete with glamour photos. But do differing learning styles or brain growth patterns among children warrant single-gender classrooms? Not surprisingly, the media has already determined that segregation is of educational benefit. Newspaper anecdotal comments about freeing youth of gender distractions are very appealing because they parlay into a simple and expedient solution – separate boys and girls.

## On one hand...

**Studies supporting single-gender education** offer data about how segregated learning environments enhance achievement. For example the Australian Council for Educational Research released a longitudinal study of over 250,000 students in 2000, and demonstrated that both boys and girls educated in single-gender classrooms scored on average 15 to 22 percentile ranks higher on a range of achievement outcomes than boys and girls in co-educational settings.

## On the other hand...

**Studies supporting co-educational learning** indicate any potential benefits of single-gender education were undermined because gender stereotypes are only reinforced in single-gender classrooms and in some cases stereotypical behaviors were worsened, as concluded in a recent three-year California investigation. This study concluded that small classes, strong curricula, dedicated teachers, and equitable teaching practices influenced the academic success of both girls and boys more than single-gender learning.

**It can be perplexing to parents and teachers alike** when an educational institution makes wide and sweeping claims about the effectiveness of single-gender classes. The Atlanta School District Website offers a Single Gender Fact Sheet indicating “the research is clear” and claims that in addition to improved academic achievement and graduation rates, the numbers of students attending college increases. They even boldly declare that, “in 100 percent of studies on career aspirations of students, students in single-gender schools set higher goals to attain.” But is the solution to under-achievement among youth as clear as this district professes? Why are copious studies and other experts flagging caution – and even alarm – about separating boys and girls for learning purposes?



## Media Hype:

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**It can be additionally perplexing** when recent new American federal laws – the same laws that protected racial inequality in earlier decades – allow US public schools to now split up boys and girls despite their own acknowledgement that their research of single-gender learning is inconclusive. The American data overwhelmingly supports that race and class are the strongest determinants of achievement. And what do you think about the Australian Principal's Association indicating that, "a gender apartheid approach would fail to recognize the complex nature of gender?" Does the ping-pong discourse about separating children on the basis of gender really help boys and girls achieve in school or does it serve to fuel partisan politics – just the sort of rhetoric the media finds irresistible?

## **The binary gender trap...**

**The framing of this discourse is an ambush.** The trap takes for granted that boys and girls are divisible into two homogeneous groups – that ALL boys learn differently from ALL girls – and that there are two corresponding solutions – to segregate or not to segregate.

## **Staying clear of naive solutions...**

In *Boy Smarts – Mentoring Boys for Success at School* I argue that we need to get beyond bandwagon oratory and not over-generalize about causal links between gender and achievement in our schools. Gender inequalities are interwoven with social class, ethnicity, sexuality, and a variety of differences. Indeed, we would be clever to consider the varied and multifaceted needs of boys and girls and strive to see them as individuals – including unique and diverse expressions of gender. We need to respond across each school community in unique ways that do not pit boys' educational needs against the needs of girls. To address the learning needs of all children, we need a holistic approach.

Does this mean we should shy away from single-gender classrooms? I think not. But I also think that we should not separate boys and girls on gut instinct or because it is a fad. This would be irresponsible. At the same time, ingenuity and innovation in schooling means considering all possibilities and not being afraid to try new approaches

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To listen to other parent views about this topic and my responses visit the [www.MentoringBoys.com](http://www.MentoringBoys.com) website and where you will find a CBC radio interview with Mark Forsythe on BC Almanac.

# DEVELOP A RESPONSE PLAN THAT MEETS THE NEEDS OF YOUR SCHOOL

Consider how your school community might respond to the following questions regarding gender and schooling?



- Are there significant differences between boys and girls achievement levels and at which grade(s)?
- Are teachers responsive to children's varied needs for movement and spatial stimulation?
- Does your school staff manage girls and boys' misbehaviour differently?
- Are children with high kinesthetic needs held in at recess or lunchtime?
- Under what conditions are children suspended or sent home?
- Is there equal representation of boys and girls in behavioural and learning assistance programs?
- Is instructional attention distributed fairly, giving both boys and girls the chance to participate?
- Are opportunities and resources stretched equitably?
- Do boys and girls have equal access to clubs, courses, and athletics?
- Do school policies and practices ensure equality of opportunity for both boys and girls?
- Are there certain subjects where your school community might hypothesize that separation will advance learning for both boys and girls? What are those circumstances?

**Ingenuity and innovation in schooling means considering all possibilities and not being afraid to try new approaches**

**Through reflective dialogue** among parents and teachers about educational needs in your school community you might just possibly discover that there are a variety of topics that call for further investigation – some may even warrant the attention of the wider community. We also need to engage youth in the discussion. Recently on a CKNW radio interview a courageous boy in Grade 7 called in to participate in the single-gender debate and indicated to me that he preferred to work with girls and that an all-boy class would not be of interest to him. As a community you will discover a response to this trendy debate that will go deeper than hasty reactions and develop a responsive and cohesive plan that will undoubtedly strengthen learning for everyone.

**Indeed, our future depends on it!**