

A Case for Coeducation

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Author: Pamela Haag

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After spending decades banging on the doors to get into all-male schools and make them coeducational, girls and women are now banging on the doors to get out. Single-sex education is back, with a vengeance. New regulations by the Department of Education, which are under review, would make it much easier for taxpayer dollars to go toward public single-sex schools, despite Title IX prohibitions against discrimination.

Single-sex education has sparked two debates in the past decade. The first is between researchers who see some benefits in single-sex education and those who do not. The second is between lawyers and politicians who think public single-sex schools are illegal and those who do not. Remarkably, in these debates there has been almost no attempt to articulate why a parent might want to choose coeducation for any reason other than its legality. Surely parents cannot be expected to select a coed school simply because it complies with Title IX or other federal statutes, but evidently this is all that coed schools have to offer. While single-sex advocates produce uplifting anecdotes of "at-risk" girls who sparkle in their new, well-heeled schools, coeducation's only champions appear to be lawyers concerned about gender equity provisions and threatening to sue.

What happened to the noble and eminently democratic dream of coeducation? Apparently we lost the forest of coeducation for the trees of defensive legal maneuvers. For a moment let's suspend the Title IX considerations. Let's stipulate that in some form, single-sex schools are here to stay. If they are not plentiful in the public school sphere, they will always be available in the marketplace of independent schools, which entices ever more parents each year as, tragically, the social and economic commitment to public education wanes. Then, let's set aside the debate about whether single-sex schools are "better" for girls. Like a compass at the North Pole, the research will point in all directions at once and therefore in no particular direction, and the world will always have abundant anecdotal evidence from girls who love or despise their schools.

Instead, let's start making a case for coeducation based on something other than its unimpeachable legality. What does coeducation give children that single-sex schools cannot?

The case for coeducation might begin, as it does for single-sex education, with a mission. At its heart, "coeducation" does not simply denote a mix of males and females. It denotes a philosophy about schooling, learning and equality. A coeducational school that thinks deliberately and seriously about educating girls and boys together, for their work and their lives, has something as profound and compelling to offer parents as a single-sex school that promises to educate their daughters in math, science and technology. But since it has been the default school type for so long, coeducation long ago stopped thinking seriously about why it was ever a good idea in the first place. That is not a luxury that public single-sex schools have. Each day they must articulate and teach according to a purpose and a mission, and that effort has paid off in enthusiastic students, great community support and very rich academic environments.

Girls and boys in coeducational schools interact in work, play and extracurricular activities. Occasionally they even befriend each other, and this is all to the good. When girls succeed as leaders in coed schools, they become leaders for both sexes -- and, what's more, boys see girls in leadership roles or excelling in "male" bastions such as physics. Single-sex schools may protect girls and boys from the distraction of each other, but they also protect them from learning any developmentally appropriate ways of dealing with each other in non-social settings.

When it is a school type that has been deliberately chosen, coeducation can send a powerful message to girls and boys that adults have faith in the fundamental compatibility of difference, equality and achievement. We send a message that classrooms are places to meet, not to avoid, the challenge of ensuring that all students learn, whether they are from Mars or Venus, and that all students learn to treat each other with the basic respect and dignity that we expect in the workplace.

These are but a few of the possible cases to be made for coeducation, but the important thing is simply that proponents of coeducation make some kind of case for themselves, aside from the defensive stance that coeducation is a mandate of federal law. A good coed school is a terrible thing to waste.

The writer contributed to "Separated by Sex: A Critical Look at Single-Sex Education for Girls," published by the AAUW Educational Foundation.