

Separating the boys from the girls

Can separate ever be equal? Single-sex schools draw fire from rights groups who say separate is never equal; proponents say closing the achievement gap requires innovation.

By Gregory A. Patterson

A roomful of boys worked quietly and seriously during their Saturday language arts enrichment class at Claremont Academy in Chicago's tough Englewood neighborhood.

Then, a girl walked in. Boys slumped in their chairs and became less engaged in the work.

"The same level of questioning continued, but the answers changed. The discussion became limited to head nodding and staring," said principal Rebecca Stinson. "All I could think about was how are these students going to learn when academic achievement is secondary to social interaction with peers."

Stinson calls that experience her "aha" moment which pushed her to separate 7th- and 8th-grade boys and girls for their academic subjects, a shift that occurred in fall 2007.

Richard Carter, an 8th grader at Claremont, believes single-sex classes offer a better learning environment. "With girls in the room, we spend too much time thinking about girls ... trying to make girls smile or laugh," he said.

"It's not bad being in segregated classrooms," said 8th grader LaQuasia Harrison. "It helps us to focus more."

After several years, Claremont Academy points to its results on the Illinois Standard Achievement Test as evidence that its approach to learning works for its students: Last year, the composite score of Claremont students meeting or exceeding state standards were 76% higher for 8th graders in math and reading, and 82%



Seventh-grade boys in a language arts class. Their teacher, Keisha Webster said, "We really provide structure for each gender" in the single-sex classes.

Jimmy Fishbein

GREGORY A. PATTERSON (gpatterson@pdkintl.org) is managing editor/content of *Phi Delta Kappan* magazine.

THE EDUCATION OF
BLACK MALES | BY
THE NUMBERS



How well are
black males
reading?

The 2009 NAEP for 8th-grade reading should set off alarm bells: The highest percentage of black males reading at a proficient level is a dramatically low 15% in Kentucky; several states average only in the single digits (Schott, p. 30-31).

Source: Schott Foundation. (2010). *Yes, we can: The 2010 Schott 50-state report on public education and black males*. Cambridge, MA: Author. www.blackboysreport.org

higher for 7th graders in math, reading, and science. (Eighth graders were not tested in science.)

Claremont teachers believe the test score improvement goes beyond simply separating the sexes. They said it's their focus on the students that improves learning. Students have the same four teachers for their academic subjects in 7th and 8th grades, so teachers get to know them over two crucially important academic years. The teachers are a closely knit group who have worked together for six years and frequently discuss students. They said students are surprised when their math teacher talks about their language arts assignments.

Math teacher Tammara Wofford said the boys and girls don't learn differently, "but they do have different interests," which she uses to reach them in teaching. For example, when giving a basic economics lesson to boys, she tells them they'll be the future heads of households and will need to know about money, how to calculate and pay bills, and how to plan a budget. Giving the same lesson to the girls, she tells them they will be the future managers of the household money, so they'll need to know about money, how to calculate and pay bills, and how to plan a budget. "I teach them the same things, they just take it differently," Wofford said.

However, conversations with students also reveal the reality of their lives outside school — the world beyond the three security guards who stand watch at corners of the building each morning as students arrive. In a conversation with a group of Claremont students selected to talk about their single-sex classes, nearly all say their mothers gave birth before turning 18; none of them has an ongoing relationship with their father; and in one way or another, all are affected by local street gangs. They talk matter-of-factly about fathers they see only once in a while, or never, and other relatives shot and killed.

"Puberty is different for children in high poverty," said principal Stinson. Children from low-income families lack the resources and outlets that middle-class kids have, she said, and the consequences of their missteps can be more severe and longer lasting.

The school's 540-student body is 97% black, and 96% come from low-income homes qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch. The school serves all students breakfast, lunch, and a late afternoon meal before leaving for home. More than 40% of the student body will move in or out of the school in any given school year.

Stinson's students and their scores have become a proof point in a broadening argument between adults and institutions over whether single-sex education does more good than harm, or whether it does any good at all. The battle pits the American Civil Liberties Union and women's groups against some who have been frequent allies but are now turning

to single-sex classes in a desperate search for ways to close the cavernous and disturbing achievement gaps between black males and other students. Other single-sex education advocates say girls benefit, too, because educators can steer more of them into math and science programs and careers.

But critics say the only sure thing achieved by separating classrooms is increasing gender stereotyping. Proponents and detractors alike navigate the

Educators are turning to single-sex classes in a desperate search for ways to close the cavernous and disturbing achievement gaps between black males and other students.



Language arts teacher, Keisha Webster talks with 8th graders Jeremiah Fair (left) and Paris Payton, who are coming back to class from lunch. "We talked about making better choices to avoid conflict," Webster said.

sensitive and provocative issues of racial and gender disparities. Do boys and girls really learn differently? Do those differences require separate learning environments? How do you get black boys off the bottom of the heap of standardized tests? All say they want what's best for all children. Each is certain the other side is wrong.

Stinson, who has led the school for all eight years it has been open, recalls a time not long after she arrived that she met with the local police commander. He brought four binders filled with reports of incidents at the school that had required visits from the police. What existed at the school was "a climate of chaos. And once the chaos started it was difficult to stop," Stinson said. "We had to think about how we could create a culture of calm."

A growing trend

Single-sex schools are a growth industry, although



the exact number of single-sex public schools is hard to pin down. The National Association for Single Sex Public Education (NAASPE), a group pressing for more single-sex classrooms, said only a dozen single-sex classrooms existed when it was founded in 2002. At least 506 U.S. public schools now offer single-sex education; about 390 of those schools are coed schools that offer single-sex classrooms.

The schools and districts creating single-sex classrooms don't always do so for academic remediation. In Austin, Texas, the 10-year-old Ann Richards School for Young Women Leaders has routinely been one of the top-performing schools in the state. Now, Austin public schools officials are proposing an \$11-million plan to close two coed middle schools and reopen them as boys- or girls-only schools. In



Jimmy Fishbein

Chicago, Urban Prep Academies, which has expanded to include three all-male, all-black high schools, is among the most prominent such initiatives in the nation. U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has frequently touted it. Its flagship high school is in the same Englewood neighborhood as Claremont Academy and draws students with similar academically deficient profiles. The school drew plaudits when every young man in its first graduating class in 2010 was accepted into a four-year college.

"We live in a culture today that disrespects academic achievement for boys," said Leonard Sax, founder and director of NAASPE and a leading proponent of single-sex education. A former medical doctor, Sax has written three books on the subject and gave up his pediatrics practice to focus on speaking, consulting, and conducting seminars on single-sex schooling. In earlier writings, Sax claimed that boys and girls learn differently and can be more effective learners if they're in separate classrooms. But in recent years he's backed away from those claims. These days, he said, whether single-sex classrooms are the best fit for a child depends on the child, and that public schools should give parents choices of

many types of schooling.

On this middle ground of single-sex education being better for some but not all, Sax is joined by an emerging group of scholars and researchers looking for ways to raise achievement levels of black males. "Single-gender schools present a viable option and an opportunity for boys and young men to learn," said Ron Walker, executive director of the Coalition of Schools Educating Boys of Color (COSEBOC). Walker's organization is building a network and common standards for schools focusing on raising achievement levels for boys of color.



Jimmy Fishbein

Left: *Principal Rebecca Stinson looks over work with 8th grader Johnson Ross. "We are trying to make students accountable here, for what teachers give them and for what they learn," she said.*

Right: *Stinson chats with 6th grader Tyler Pearson during a break from the daily football game the boys play before the morning bell. "We feel like family here," said Stinson.*

Separate and unequal

The number of single-sex programs may be growing, but they do not have universal support.

"The problem with separate but equal is that it is rarely — if ever — equal," said Sara Rose, staff attorney for the American Civil Liberties Union, which argues that single-gender classes or schools violate the equal protection clause of the U.S. Constitution.

Among the situations that the ACLU has challenged is Pittsburgh (Pa.) Public Schools, which offered single-sex classes at Westinghouse High School. The district dropped that program after

the ACLU, along with the Women's Law Project threatened to sue on grounds that it violated U.S. Department of Education guidelines forbidding districts from compelling students to attend single-sex schools and failed to offer those who would opt out an equitable coeducational opportunity.

“Separating girls from boys is not the magic bullet that’s going to close the achievement gap.”

— Galen Sherwin, ACLU

Rose, who worked on the Pittsburgh case, said the school’s single-sex plan, which was initially targeted at black boys, exhibited many inequities, all favoring boys. For example, said Rose, when the district sought to sell the plan to students and families it sent a group of boys on trips to New York, where they took in a Broadway play, and later to Philadelphia. The girls got a trip to Chicago, where they spoke with other students, but didn’t have as rich an extracurricular experience. The boys benefitted from paid mentors; the girls got volunteers. The boys got a summer reading program; the girls got none, said Rose.

Now, the ACLU is pressuring the Madison, Wis., school board to alter a plan to open a sex-separated charter school with an International Baccalaureate focus. Originally the local Urban League, which hatched the plan for the school, had intended to open a boys-only school with plans to open a similar school for girls after a couple of years.

Along with concern over such inequities, single-sex

opponents say there is no benefit to separating classrooms by gender. “There is no evidence that it actually improves academic performance at all,” Rose said. Neither Rose nor any of the others battling single-sex education deny that schools have raised achievement after instituting single-sex alignments. But such stories are anecdotal, they said, and largely the result of schools doing other things proven to raise achievement levels in coeducational schools.

“There’s no question that in general we are in an education crisis particularly with respect to African-American males and low-income students,” said Galen Sherwin, an ACLU staff attorney on its Women’s Rights Project, who also worked on the Pittsburgh litigation. “But separating girls from boys is not the magic bullet that’s going to close the achievement gap.”

What research says

The single-sex movement’s energy is pulling other critics into its orbit. Rebecca Bigler, a psychology professor at the University of Texas at Austin, coauthored an article in prestigious *Science* magazine in September 2011, summing up the indeterminate research on single-sex education this way: “I beat you once, you beat me once, and we tied three times,” Bigler said in an interview. “The literature really looks like there is no benefit to single-sex schooling.”

While the research is inconclusive, Bigler’s group, the American Council for Coeducational Schooling (ACCES), is not. They’re talking down single-sex education all over the country, including at Chicago’s all-black Urban Prep Academies. In a *New York Times* article, ACCES member Richard Fabes said separating boys from girls does what segregation does with race and ethnicity, too: It boosts stereotyping and sexist attitudes (2011). “Rather than promoting gender segregation, public schools should be striving to teach a diverse body of students to work together and to respect each other,” Fabes wrote.

ACCES’s views are classic integrationist. In the American melting pot, all students need to know about each other’s culture because they’ll end up living and working together, Bigler said. “African-American males should be schooled right next to white girls because they would benefit from it. And those white girls need to know and understand the views of other people,” she said.

What’s more, Bigler said, segregating classrooms is a waste of money. She scoffs at the Ann Richards girls’ school in her hometown, which she studied and coauthored a report covering three years of the school’s performance. The key finding was that school’s stellar results were driven more by the strong pool of girls enrolled at the school associating with each other, thereby boosting each other’s performance (Hayes, Pahlke, & Bigler, 2010). Instead of

THE EDUCATION OF BLACK MALES | **BY THE NUMBERS**

Discipline

Black male students are more than twice as likely to receive out-of-school suspensions as white males and three times as likely to be expelled (p. 37).

Source: Schott Foundation. (2010). *Yes, we can: The 2010 Schott 50-state report on public education and black males*. Cambridge, MA: Author. www.blackboysreport.org



College vs. prison

In 2008, black males ages 18 or older were six and half times more likely to be imprisoned than white males. In 2008, black males accounted for 41% of the male prison population ages 18 to 34.

Source: Lewis, S., Simon, C., Uzzell, R., Horwitz, A., & Casserly, M. (2010). *A call for change: The social and educational factors contributing to the outcomes of black males in urban schools*. (Figure 6.9 and 6.10). Washington, DC: Council of the Great City Schools.

spending \$11 million to create separate schools for boys and girls, Bigler suggests investing in strategies already proven to raise achievement, such as professional development or smaller class sizes in coeducational schools.

Moreover, she said, Urban Prep's achievement gains are illusory. She points to test scores showing that only 17% of students met or exceeded state standards on their composite state assessment exams, compared to 29% for the district and 53% statewide. "Taking all your at-risk performers and putting them in the same school is never a good idea," she said.

A case for single-sex

But Tim King, Urban Prep Academies founder and CEO, said the criticism of his school and single-sex education is shortsighted. A better way of looking at it is to consider that when the school's first graduating class arrived in 9th grade, only 4% read at grade level and half of them had reading scores at or below the 6th-grade level. Four years later, that same class achieved 100% college acceptance and 94% enrollment. Now in their second year of college, King expects that three-quarters of those students will still be in school at the end of the year.

Nonetheless, King said there aren't any absolutes for getting kids plugged into education. He grew up in the then-privileged black enclave called Pill Hill in Chicago and attended mostly white private schools, then Georgetown University as an undergraduate and a law student. So, while he's passionate about his all-black, male Urban Prep schools, King is certain there are other ways of educating students.

"African-American males can and should be educated in a variety of types and kinds of schools," King said. Urban Prep wouldn't work for every student, and the ones it works for tend to be of a type — raised in a low-income, single-parent, female-headed household — according to King. They're the ones drawn to Urban Prep Academies' rules and ritual-laden conventions. The intent, said King, is to connect students with their common culture and imbue them with a sense of self-possession and responsibility. That was something King got every day in a two-parent family in a neighborhood of black professionals without having to go to school for it. But at his Urban Prep Academies, for example, every day begins with an all-school meeting called Community where students collect in cohorts of about 25 — called a "pride." They give accolades to groups for jobs well done and admonish kids who commit violations by being tardy or not following the school's uniform dress code. They call students by their surnames, and their pride is held jointly responsible for the actions of one. "If we want them to act differently, then we are going to have to treat them differently,"



Jimmy Fishbein

Claremont Academy posed a tougher environment for students like Devon Ware and Devonte Triplett, above, before it instituted single-sex classes, said Principal Rebecca Stinson. "Our discipline problems have really diminished," Stinson said, while adding, "I don't think that single-gender classrooms all by themselves will make your school successful."

King said. Each school has a black male principal and a black male assistant principal. Black males comprise 40% of the staff.

More than that, though, King sees part of the ritual as competition with gangs and other bad influences. "We recognize the draw and allure of gangs for our students; we also recognize that we adults who care about these students have the power and ability to create an environment that mimics the things about gangs that are attractive to students," he said, adding that gangs require members to perform certain tasks to remain a member of the gang. In a school, "you can create an environment where students are required to perform to remain a member of the school."

And no, King said he doesn't believe black boys will do better just by sitting next to a girl. "I don't think that a boy or a girl is going to achieve more because they are studying with someone of the opposite gender who is smarter than them. I don't believe one supports the other," he said. **K**

References

- Fabes, R. (2011, October 30). What our research shows. *The New York Times*.
- Halpern, D., Eliot, L., Bigler, R., Fabes, R., Hanish, L., Hyde, J., Lynn, L., & Martin, C. (2011, September 23). The pseudoscience of single-sex schooling. *Science*, 333 (6050), 1706-1707.
- Hayes, A., Pahlke, E., & Bigler, R. (2010). *The efficacy of single-sex education: Testing for selection and peer quality effects*. Philadelphia, PA: Springer Science+Business Media LLC.

THE EDUCATION OF BLACK MALES | BY THE NUMBERS

Gifted ed or special ed?

White male students are more than twice as likely to be placed in gifted/talented programs than black male students (p. 37).

But black male students are more than twice as likely to be classified as mentally retarded as white male students, in spite of research demonstrating that the percentages of students from all groups are about the same at each intelligence level (p. 37).

Source: Schott Foundation. (2010). *Yes, we can: The 2010 Schott 50-state report on public education and black males*. Cambridge, MA: Author. www.blackboysreport.org