

Single-sex schools: A good idea gone wrong?

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WASHINGTON - In proposed changes to Title IX, the federal law prohibiting sex discrimination in education, the Bush administration wants to encourage creation of single-sex public schools and classes. Our studies of sexism in America's education system have praised private single-sex schools because they offer the promise that education can transform the future of girls. Girls who attend these schools speak more freely in class, are more likely to major in math and science, and perhaps most encouraging, are more likely to attend college and graduate school.

So, given our past support for single-sex schools, you might expect us to be real cheerleaders for the new Bush administration plan.

But we are not cheering. There is a right way and a wrong way to explore educational innovation, and the Bush administration has chosen the latter. Congress and the public should stop it before the real problems begin.

The *No Child Left Behind Act* promises to avoid fads and to build educational programs based on scientific evidence and research. But, for public single-sex education, the Bush administration has decided we can skip the evidence. This proposal ignores sound educational policy, and is particularly troubling considering that the effectiveness of single-sex education in public schools - which involve different factors from private schools - has yet to be carefully studied.

What we applauded in private single-sex schools was not their gender uniformity, but their educational practices. Many educators, including us, attribute much of the academic successes of these private schools to their smaller class sizes, engaged parents, well-trained teachers, and strong academic emphasis. Other educators believe that single-sex schools work less well for boys than for girls, or that only boys from low-income families benefit. Still others believe such schools may intensify gender stereotypes and homophobia. But so far, the Bush plan does not address these factors.

This is not the first time single-sex schooling has emerged as a quick fix. Pete Wilson, the former Republican governor of California, tried the same thing in the late 1990s, and even sweetened the pot by providing some extra funds to school districts willing to experiment with single-sex schools. A half-dozen created their own single-sex academies.

Did students benefit from the experiment? It's hard to say, because - like the Bush proposal - planning and evaluation were absent. California provided no training for teachers and no clear rationale for the changes, and within a few years most of these schools returned to coeducation. There were anecdotal reports that the girls enjoyed being in an environment free of sexual harassment and classroom interruptions, while the boys' schools degenerated into a disciplinary disaster, becoming little more than magnets for troubled youth. The California experiment was a valuable lesson in how not to go about educational change - a lesson this administration has chosen to ignore.

What the authors of these proposed changes seem to have forgotten is that Title IX is not an educational option, it is a civil rights protection. While Title IX currently permits select single-sex classes - in

physical education or to remedy past discrimination, for example - it doesn't allow schools to segregate students arbitrarily.

There are powerful reasons for this. Whenever groups have been segregated, the least-valued group has ended up with fewer resources and fewer opportunities. Historically that has been a costly lesson for girls (and African-Americans and the poor). The proposed changes do not require equal treatment or equal facilities, but only "substantially equal" programs. As the proposal now stands, a school could provide a single-sex option for boys and not for girls, or cutting-edge science equipment for boys and an up-to-date cosmetology center for girls.

The word "equal" is omitted from the proposed regulations, and replaced with a strange new concept, "voluntary civil rights." The proposed changes to Title IX sidestep many unanswered research questions in order to promote sex segregation, putting three decades of civil rights protections at risk.

What is needed is a thoughtful examination of the diverse single-sex schools that already exist, to see what works and what doesn't.

Single-sex schooling may well provide powerful lessons for improving our public schools. But instead of a thoughtful, controlled study, the Bush proposal gives a green light to 15,000 school districts to segregate students without purpose or preparation, a prescription for disaster.

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