

Making the Case for Girls' Schools

Today's single-sex institutions are separate *and* equal

There are 12 black binders at the U.S. Department of Education in Washington holding public comments on the idea of single-sex public schools — thick, heavy, three-ring binders bulging with more than 5,000 letters and e-mails received last spring. That's twice as many comments, a staff person told me, as the department received in the early 1970s during debate over the original Title IX legislation that banned sex discrimination in education.

This deluge of comments is partly a testament to the ease of Internet lobbying — most of the comments are identical e-mails that were copied and forwarded with less than a minute's effort. But it also testifies to the dogged opposition of America's leading feminist organizations to the idea of K-12 single-sex public schools.

Last March, the U.S. Department of Education issued guidelines that would allow public school districts to easily set up new single-sex classes or schools for the first time since the passage of Title IX in 1972. The country's most respected feminist groups — such as the National Organization for Women, the Feminist Majority Foundation, the American Association of University Women, the National Women's Law Center, even the California Commission on the Status of Women — came out swinging in opposition. They wrote letters of protest and organized the e-mail lobbying efforts that fill those black binders. The heart of their criticism was that single-sex schools would take us back to the bad old days of "separate but unequal" education. The new guidelines "threaten to turn the clock back to a time when women and girls had far fewer, and inferior, educational opportunities," charged the National Women's Law Center.

As I thumbed through those binders of comments recently, my heart wrenched. I am about as feminist as you can get, but I'm also an advocate of girls' schools. It was my feminism, in fact, that led me to co-found an all-female middle school in Oakland, the Julia Morgan School for Girls. I'd written newspaper stories about the paucity of women in engineering and technology careers, and tracked that problem back to the high school gender gap in math and science. I'd watched with dismay as popular culture prodded girls into unhealthy roles — sexual vixens, skinny supermodels — at younger and younger ages. I envisioned a school that would give girls a message that it was OK to be smart and strong — it was OK to be themselves — and that would prepare them to be leaders in fields such as business, politics and science.



Looking at things from a historical perspective, I can understand why feminist groups such as NOW would be skeptical of single-sex schools. There was a time, as recently as the 1950s and early '60s, when many private girls' schools put more emphasis on manners than on math. Single-sex classes within coed schools were based on rigid and oppressive stereotypes — boys had to take shop, while girls had to take home ec. And even the most academically rigorous girls' schools trailed behind their brother schools when it came to facilities and resources. Philadelphia in the early 1980s had two academically selective public high schools, one for boys and one for girls. The boys' school had a campus that was three times larger than Girls High. It had twice as many library books and computers, 2.7 times as many teachers with doctorates, three times as many courses designed for gifted students, and a supporting foundation that provided \$380,000 in funds over a 12-year period — while Girls High relied on magazine sales to raise money. When several girls filed a lawsuit seeking entrance to the boys' school, the judge ruled in their favor. "The two

schools, and in particular the educational opportunities provided, are materially unequal," he wrote in 1983:

But the world of girls' education has changed dramatically in the past few decades. The days of the genteel, second-rate finishing school ended long ago. Few parents today would tolerate their child being forced into a cooking class or auto mechanics class because of gender. And today's girls' schools have reinvented themselves. They focus on helping girls succeed in traditionally male subjects such as math, science and technology. They offer programs in financial literacy where girls learn to balance a budget, invest in the stock market and write business plans for start-up companies. They've developed curricula to help girls navigate tough female-adolescent issues such as body image, eating disorders and sexuality. Above all, girls' schools create a space where young women can focus on their heads and their hearts, not on their looks — giving girls a solid base of confidence and self-knowledge from which to go out and thrive in the coed world.

Today's girls' schools typically avoid using the "f word" to describe themselves — sadly, "feminism" is seen as too controversial for institutions that need to market themselves to a broad range of families. But in their everyday emphasis on helping young women become leaders, girls' schools today are deeply and profoundly feminist.

It's puzzling that groups such as NOW can't seem to recognize this. Individual feminists throughout the country have recognized this — providing the vision, energy and money to help open 35 new girls' schools since 1990. In Chicago, businesswomen banded together to raise funds for a new public high school for inner-city girls that just graduated its first class of seniors. (Their commencement speaker was Oprah Winfrey.) In Mountain View,

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women entrepreneurs and venture capitalists help students at the 6-year-old Girls' Middle School develop business plans for their own start-up companies. Individual alumnae of girls' schools also attest to the empowering nature of their single-sex experience. “Without the distraction of boys, it never occurred to us that girls could not be leaders in whatever field they chose,” a 1969 girls' school graduate wrote in one of the rare comments in those thick Department of Education binders that was not a boilerplate e-mail.

So far, nearly all of the three dozen new girls' schools that have opened in the past 15 years have been private. Efforts to start public single-sex schools have been hampered by legal worries — fears that groups such as NOW would file lawsuits charging sex discrimination. (The Julia Morgan School is a good example: We initially considered starting a public school but took the private route when we saw a new public girls' high school in New York City face a legal challenge from NOW and the American Civil Liberties Union.)

The new federal guidelines will clear up these legal worries and tell school districts how they can launch single-sex programs without violating Title IX. Among other things, the guidelines require that participation in single-sex schools and classes be voluntary — no child can be assigned to a single-sex program against his or her will. They also require school districts to offer comparable programs to both genders. For instance, schools can't offer a girls-only AP calculus class unless there is also a coed or single-sex AP calculus class that is open to boys.

