

ROSALIND C. BARNETT AND CARYL RIVERS

# The coed classroom

THE BUSH administration has just issued new guidelines allowing public schools to be segregated by gender, a move that the Associated Press calls "the biggest change to coed classrooms in more than three decades."

The idea of a "boys' crisis" is fueling the change. Should Massachusetts jump on the bandwagon and set up single-sex classrooms, especially to improve boys' academic performances?

This would be a risky experiment. Though children can learn in different types of classrooms, data show that once allowances are made for the social class of parents and kids, pupil-teacher ratios, and the quality of teachers, there is little difference between the performance of boys or girls in single-sex or co-ed classrooms.

Indeed, if boys-only classrooms are set up on the idea that the sexes learn in radically different ways, they can actually do harm. However, many people accept statements about differences between boys and girls, and these ideas are seeping into education policy.

First, how badly are boys really doing? The picture is complex. According to a report by the think tank Education Sector, which used data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, a federally funded accounting of student achievement since 1971, over the past three decades boys' test scores are mostly up, more

boys are going to college, and more are getting bachelor's degrees.

The report, "The Truth About Boys and Girls," said the boy crisis is greatly overstated. "The real story is not bad news about boys doing worse," the report says. "It's good news about girls doing better."

But, it notes, poor black and Latino boys in urban areas and boys in rural areas are indeed in crisis. Each of the nation's 10 largest public school districts (New York, Los Angeles Chicago, Greater Miami and Houston, among others) fail to graduate more than 60 percent of their students. Within this dismal picture, girls are doing only slightly better overall than boys.

But the popular media is awash in stories claiming that the brains of boys and girls are so different that they need to be taught in completely different ways. Some claim that boys are biologically programmed to focus on objects, making them predisposed to math and understanding systems, while girls are programmed to focus on people and are best suited for relationships. This claim has been widely repeated in news stories, a BBC documentary, Parents magazine, and other places.

This idea was based on one study of day-old babies in which the boys looked at mobiles longer and the girls looked at faces longer. However, according to Eliza-

beth Spelke, co-director of the Mind, Brain and Behavior Interfaculty Initiative at Harvard University, the experiment lacked controls against experimenter bias and was not well designed. Female and male infants were propped up in a parent's lap and shown, side by side, an active person or an inanimate object. Since newborns can't hold their head up independently, their visual preferences might have been determined by the way their parents held them. There's scientific literature that contradicts the study and provides solid evidence that male and female infants tend to respond equally to people and objects.

The sexes see and hear very differently; girls hear 10 times better than boys, says Leonard Sax, best-selling author and executive director of the National Association for Single Sex Public Education. Sax says, "Any time you have a teacher of one sex teaching children of the opposite sex, there's a potential for a mismatch, if only in decibel level . . . If a male teacher speaks in a tone of voice that seems normal to him, a girl in the front row may feel that he is yelling at her . . . Boys do best in school when they are yelled at by female teachers."

However, there is no evidence of such gender differences from peer-reviewed studies, according to Dr. Rachel Keen of the University of Massachusetts, a researcher in the area of sensory perception



in early childhood. "I cannot point to any definitive article in a peer-reviewed journal that supports major differences in gender for audition . . . during infancy and early childhood," says Keen.

As Education Sector warns, "Although our knowledge of the brain and its development has expanded dramatically in recent years, it remains rudimentary. In the future, much of our current thinking about the brain will most likely seem as unsophisticated as the work of the late-19th- and early-20th-century researchers who sought to prove female intellectual inferiority by comparing the size of men's and women's skulls."

The state of California tried setting up single-sex schools to

promote academic achievement in the mid-'90s, but the schools failed to do so.

If some boys in Massachusetts are having trouble with vocabulary, or see literature and learning as "uncool," schools need to tackle such problems. Will all-boy classrooms eliminate such attitudes? Not if they operate on the assumption that boys inherently have inferior verbal skills and have to be "yelled at" to learn. Such classrooms could, in fact, further alienate bright kids from education.

Education Sector warns that honing in on gender differences could sidetrack efforts to put more resources into inner-city and rural schools, where both boys and girls desperately need better schools. "Focusing on closing these racial

and economic achievement gaps would do more to help poor, black, and Hispanic boys than closing gender gaps, and it would also help girls in these groups."

Single-sex classrooms may simply be a poor investment for the state of Massachusetts, gobbling up funds that would best be used in other ways to really improve academic achievement.

*Rosalind C. Barnett is senior scientist at the Women's Studies Research Center at Brandeis University. Caryl Rivers is a journalism professor at Boston University. They are the authors of "Same Difference: How Gender Myths Are Hurting our Relationships, Our Children and Our Jobs."*