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Separating Girls and Boys

In October, the U.S. Department of Education released a controversial set of regulations that will make it easier for districts to operate single-sex public schools or offer sex-segregated classes and extracurriculars. We asked one expert from each side of the issue to give us her best argument on the subject.

Should school districts offer single-sex public schools and classes?



Students at the Young Women's Leadership School of East Harlem.
—YWL Foundation

YES.

This is an approach worth exploring. We don't have empirical findings from this country, but we do have a growing body of anecdotal evidence that these schools carry some benefits for some boys and some girls.

The biggest benefit we can see has to do with at-risk students. A number of schools that have opened up in inner cities around the country have demonstrated phenomenal success. One is the Young Women's Leadership School of East Harlem. It just celebrated its 10th anniversary, and in every graduating class, every girl has been accepted to a college. Many of these girls are the first in their families to attend college.

It seems that some girls—not all girls—report that they are more comfortable in math classes or science classes. Some boys report they are more comfortable in all-boys classes in foreign languages, the arts, or literature. They are more comfortable taking an intellectual risk; they don't fear being embarrassed in front of the other sex.

Single-sex schools for disadvantaged kids are very pro-academic, and it's a very pro-academic choice for parents to send their children there. They give students who ordinarily might not identify with academic success that academic identity.

NO.

I have yet to see any systematic research that shows this is a reasonable thing to do. You can cherry-pick the findings, but if you take a broad look at all the studies, you don't come up with any consistent benefits to single-sex schooling.

If you look at the data on graduation rates and academic achievement, the big differences have to do with poverty. It's true that girls graduate at higher rates than boys, but that's dwarfed by racial differences and economic differences.

We know that at-risk kids are not girls *or* boys. They're boys *and* girls who are in poor, underfinanced, high-density urban schools where teachers aren't trained in their subject areas. If you're going to put resources into something, put money into that. I reviewed the data from the Department of Defense schools. The DOD has a huge school system that serves more than 100,000 students. And although there is still a gender gap, in many measures it is much narrower than in public schools, and they are doing much better by minorities.

Why? They have very well-trained and -paid teachers, very well-

Single-sex schooling is not the silver bullet, but it might make a difference in the lives of some children.

—**Rosemary Salomone**, *professor of law at St. John's University in New York City and author of Same, Different, Equal: Rethinking Single-Sex Schooling*

maintained and -resourced schools. They have a mission that every child is to succeed. They mandate parental involvement.

So we know some things that make schools work. Put the money there. Don't mess around with gender; gender has nothing to do with this.

—**Rosalind Chait Barnett**, *director of the Community, Families & Work Program in the Women's Studies Research Center at Brandeis University*