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### Single-sex schools aren't the educational answer

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As students head back to school, two completely opposite impressions of American education are slugging it out in policy discussions and in the media.

Some see a "boy crisis," in which many schools are using curriculums designed for boys to fail and girls to succeed. The New Republic, for example, cites a "verbally drenched curriculum" - geared to the generally more verbal girls - that is "leaving boys in the dust."

Others see schools more geared to boys, with girls discouraged from taking math and science, and teachers ignoring waving hands of girls to call on boys. They advocate more "girl friendly" classes - noncompetitive, group-oriented - to help girls thrive and gain self-esteem.

Both sides are fueling the growing popularity of the drive for single-sex public school classrooms, a notion supported by the Bush administration. But both can't be right. Are schools shortchanging boys or girls? And are single-sex classrooms the answer? The best available research says overall, neither gender is better or worse off. But the crisis mentality could lead us to very flawed policies.

The most recent - and probably most reliable - word on boys comes from a report using data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, a federally funded accounting of student achievement since 1971. In June 2006, the Washington-based think tank Education Sector reported that, over the past three decades, boys' test scores are mostly up, with more boys going to college than in the past and more getting bachelor's degrees.

Researcher Sarah Mead says, "With few exceptions, American boys are scoring higher and achieving more than they ever have before." Large-scale analyses show boys trail girls only slightly in verbal abilities and reading scores, and boys in affluent suburban schools do not show any drop in reading scores when they enter middle school. Boys are plenty verbal, and the curriculums should encourage, not de-emphasize, reading.

This is not to deny that some - especially inner-city minority boys and rural white boys - are struggling. The students most at risk of dropping out attend public high schools in the largest urban centers. Each of the nation's 10 largest public school districts fails to graduate more than 60



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percent of its students - New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Greater Miami and Houston among others. Within this dismal picture, girls are doing only slightly better overall than boys.

What about girls? Research shows girls and boys like math equally in third grade, but by fifth grade, girls are beginning to see math as "boy turf." Still, from 1972 to 1992, high school girls narrowed the gap with boys dramatically in taking math and science courses and in achievement test scores. More and more, girls realize they will need math and science in an increasingly technological world.

There's been a huge turnaround in girls' academic choices, notes economist Claudia Goldin of Harvard. Today, girls are as likely as boys to take advanced placement calculus in high school and more likely to take advanced biology and chemistry. Large-scale research surveys have shown the differences in ability in math between males and females are trivial.

There is no overall crisis for either boys or girls in school. There is, of course, room for improvement. One study of middle-school girls, for example, found girls did not recognize the relation between the study of math and science and their career aspirations. Girls need to get more early encouragement in math and science. And because boys express less enthusiasm for reading overall than girls, we need to make extra efforts to introduce young boys to the joy of reading.

But the evidence hardly suggests single-sex public schools are the answer. When you account for such factors as parents' income, student motivation, teacher ability and class size, kids in co-ed class and kids in single-sex classes perform about the same. When California set up single-sex schools in the '90s, it failed to improve academic performance. And, says the Ford Foundation, the schools tended to foster gender stereotypes, not helpful to either sex.

Better teachers, more resources, smaller class sizes and more parent involvement are surefire ways to improve schools, a better bet than expensive single-sex classrooms that show no guaranteed benefit. Such classrooms may be the latest educational fad, one that will prove to be both costly and ineffective.

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