

## AEI Debates: Should Single-Sex Education Be Eliminated (Part 2)?

By Christina Hoff Sommers 11/09/2013 03:00

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**Single-sex education has a long history of success and provides parents with choice.**

*On August 28, AEI and the Independent Women's Forum cosponsored a debate on single-sex education. The debaters were Lise Eliot, associate professor in the Department of Neuroscience at the Chicago Medical School and author of *Pink Brain, Blue Brain: How Small Differences Grow Into Troublesome Gaps – And What We Can Do About It* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt) and Christina Hoff Sommers, resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute and author of *The War Against Boys: How Misguided Policies Are Harming Our Young Men* (Simon & Schuster). Dr. Eliot spoke first and her introductory remarks were published in *The American* on September 9, 2013. Dr. Sommers's remarks appear below. You can watch the full debate [here](#).*

Should single-sex schooling be eliminated? Absolutely not. Millions of students have flourished intellectually and socially in these schools. As Senators Barbara Mikulski (D-Maryland) and Kay Bailey Hutchison (R-Texas) wrote in the *Wall Street Journal* in 2012, "To take single-sex education away from students who stand to benefit is unforgiveable." They are right.

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Wealthy families have always had the option of sending their children to all-male or all-female schools, but parents of modest means have rarely had the choice. That changed in 2001, when four female senators sponsored legislation that sanctioned single-sex classes and academies in public schools. Today, there are more than 500 public schools that offer single-sex classes and 116 public all-girl or all-boy academies. Many are in low-income, at-risk neighborhoods — and many have proved to be hugely successful. The Irma Rangel Young Women's Leadership School in Dallas opened in 2004 and enrolls 473 girls in grades 6 through 12. More than 70 percent of the students are from economically disadvantaged homes and more than 90 percent are minority. In less than a decade, the school has won multiple awards and, according to *U.S. News and World Report*, is one of the top public schools in Texas.

In 2011, Dallas opened a comparable academy for young men: the Barack Obama Male Leadership Academy. At this academy, the boys wear blazers and study a foreign language, including Latin and Mandarin. More than half the teachers are male and there is massive focus on areas where boys need extra help: organizational skills, time management, self-control, perseverance, and above all, academic achievement. The principal, Nakia Douglas, has found that boys will go to great lengths to avoid letting down their team. So he divided the academy into four houses that compete against one another for points. Students earn points by getting good grades, doing community service, and reading books. If a student misbehaves, he has to explain to his team members what he plans to do to earn back the lost points. It is still too early to fully document the school's success, but its students' test scores are already well ahead of state averages.

Single-sex academies like the two Dallas schools not only benefit the students fortunate enough to attend, but they are a part of the solution to the growing boy gap in education and the persistent girl

gap in math and science. Today, millions of American boys are languishing academically. Boys in all ethnic groups and social classes are far less likely than their sisters to feel connected to school, to earn good grades, or to attend college. Girls, by comparison, are thriving academically, but they are still far less likely than boys to enter fields in science and technology. These academies can provide important lessons on how we can educate our children more effectively.

So why would anyone want to eliminate them? Today, single-sex classes and schools account for less than 1 percent of public grade school and high school enrollment. Only about 4 percent of private schools are single-sex. There is no prospect that single-sex education will become the new American norm. But some parents and students prefer them, so why should they not have that choice? What explains the determination of critics to ban them? We have heard several arguments from Professor Eliot. Let me briefly respond.

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When single-sex schools are effective, she says, it is because of some feature other than the gender configuration. According to Professor Eliot, there are no well-designed studies that show that separating by sex is academically effective. That is not so. There are many such studies. A recent article in *Demography* showed significant advantages to the single-sex model for both men and women. A 2008 German study found that young women in female-only physics classes developed more confidence and interest in the subject than their counterparts in coed classes. When a group of researchers at Stetson University compared single-sex and coed classes in a Florida elementary school, they documented large gains for both boys and girls — but especially for boys. Over the four years of the study, 55 percent of boys in coed classes scored proficient on the FCAT (Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test), compared with 85 percent of boys in the all-boys classes.

Not only is there substantial research in favor of single-sex education, but some of the research discrediting such schools is also blatantly ideological. To bolster her claim that a California experiment in single-sex education failed, Professor Eliot cites a 2001 research paper by Amanda Datnow and Lea Hubbard. But these researchers did not use a scientifically recognized methodology. As they explain in their introduction: “Drawing upon feminist theory, we provide a critique that illuminates how power... positions subjects within ideological matrixes of constraint and possibility.” True to this murky goal, they devote most of the study to critiquing parents, teachers, and students for their “gendered perceptions” and evaluating how effectively they challenge “oppressive power relations inherent in traditional education.” An eccentric ideology vitiates much of the research against single-sex education — including the studies by Ms. Eliot and her colleagues.

What Professor Eliot should have said is that the research is mixed. One of the best and most thorough reviews of single-sex education was carried out by the Department of Education in 2005. What it found was a tangle of contradictory results. Some studies find academic benefits in the single-sex model, others do not. But keep in mind that most of the research on classroom effects is unsettled. Look at the literature on longer versus shorter school days, more homework versus less, large versus small schools — advocates on either side can find vindication in the research. The literature on the value of small versus large classes is almost as polarized as the research on single-sex schools. Schools offer parents all sorts of reasonable choices that lack rigorous scientific support: gifted and talented programs, small classes, after-school activities, school orchestras, field trips. To say that such programs should be forbidden until all the research lines up in one direction would be a prescription for paralysis and mediocrity. How best to educate children is not an exact science. Serious and objective education researchers know this, and warn against over-interpreting

their findings. Professor Eliot and her colleagues have set an insuperable evidentiary standard for a policy they do not happen to like.

### Coed Schools Today

What about the claim that such schools are *socially* harmful? Professor Eliot says they promote sexism and reinforce traditional gender roles. Defenders of single-sex education say just the opposite. After all, in such schools girls cannot rely on boys to dissect the frog, and boys cannot depend on girls to edit the school newspaper. In 2007, a large-scale, well-designed British study found that “Gender stereotypes are exacerbated” in coed schools and “moderated” in single-sex schools. Girls in the single-sex schools were more likely to focus their studies on math and science; boys were more likely to study language and literature. And there was also this attention-grabbing finding: “For girls ... single-sex schooling was linked to higher wages.”

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The long list of highly successful people who attended single-sex schools would seem to refute the notion that they fail to prepare students for active engagement in the coed world — Hillary Clinton, Condoleezza Rice, John McCain, John Kerry, Joe Biden. For generations, millions of Americans have attended Catholic and Jewish grade schools and high schools and gone on to be active citizens and civic leaders in all walks of life. In short, a school doesn't need to be a microcosm of the real world in order to fulfill its essential function of educating young people. And the effort to associate single-sex schools with failure needs to confront the manifest problems of our predominantly coed public schools.

In the debate on the merits of the single-sex education model, it is important to be realistic about what is happening in many coed schools. These schools are leaving millions of girls and boys — but especially boys — totally unprepared for the world ahead. According to a 2011 report from the College Board, “Nearly half of young men of color, age 15 to 24, who graduate from high school will end up unemployed, incarcerated, or dead.” Working-class white boys are faring somewhat better, but their prospects are hardly bright. When economist Andrew Sum and his colleagues at the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University examined gender disparities in Boston public schools, they found that among blacks and Hispanics in the class of 2007, there were 188 females for every 100 males attending a four-year college or university. For white students, there were 153 females to every 100 males. Schools like the Obama Academy are trying to improve those odds. They are trying to turn the young men in their care into responsible, honorable, well-rounded, and effective human beings, and it appears to be working. Their parents certainly think so. These schools are not for everyone, but they are clearly pursuing one effective strategy and it would be folly to shut them down.

This evening's discussion on single-sex education is more than an intellectual exercise. Dr. Eliot is communications director of an eight-professor advocacy group called the American Council for Co-Educational Schooling (ACCES). ACCES, along with the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), is trying to stop programs like those in Dallas, and they are succeeding. The ACLU rarely wins these cases against schools when they go to court, but they are intimidating school officials who feel they cannot afford extended litigation. They have already stopped several viable and valuable programs.

As I noted above, when the U.S. Department of Education reviewed single-sex education, it found the research to be ambiguous and equivocal, and recommended *tolerance*. Let the parents choose.

Professor Eliot, with her ACCES and ACLU colleagues, looked at the same evidence and advised *intolerance* — do not give parents that choice. In defense of the ACCES position, Lise Eliot wrote in the Wall Street Journal: “The issue isn’t whether we should offer families choice in public education. The issue is which choices to offer. School districts must not waste resources on options already proven ineffective.” Well, no one has “proven” single-sex schools ineffective.

### **An Ideological Agenda**

But this debate is not really about evidence or research. Even if there were decisive evidence that gender-specific education improved student performance, both ACCES and the ACLU would still be opposed. They have persuaded themselves that separating by sex is just as wrong as segregating by race. The comparison is preposterous. Race and sex are different, as the U.S. Supreme Court has emphasized and as most everyone recognizes. Mandatory racial separatism demeans human beings and forecloses life prospects. Single-sex education is freely chosen and has helped millions of pupils flourish intellectually and socially. No sensible person thinks that Wellesley College, the Girl Scouts, or Barack Obama Leadership Academy are oppressive institutions — comparable to segregated schools in the Jim Crow South.

**When the U.S. Department of Education reviewed single-sex education, it found the research to be ambiguous and equivocal, and recommended tolerance. Let the parents choose.**

Earlier, I noted the eccentric motives of the two researchers who evaluated the California single-sex program. What drives the passionate ACCES crusade? These professors are not only opposed to gender-specific schools and classrooms, they even counsel teachers to avoid gender-specific language such as “Good morning, boys and girls,” or “Let me have your attention, ladies and gentlemen.” One ACCES member explained to Education Week that teachers saying “Good morning, boys and girls” is like saying, “Good morning, whites and Latinos.” ACCES members view “male” and “female” as arbitrary and invidious categories that should be eliminated.

But the gender distinction is neither arbitrary nor invidious — and there is not a large constituency in favor or its elimination. As Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg observed in defense of men’s and women’s colleges, the sex difference is “cause for celebration.” The teacher who begins the day with “Good morning, boys and girls,” is being friendly and conventional, not invidious and oppressive.

ACCES and ACLU activists have persuaded themselves that they are on the cutting edge of a new civil rights movement — overcoming the gender distinction. But overcoming a distinction most human beings find natural and meaningful can be a recipe for zealotry and intolerance. Consider what has happened in a Swedish school informed by the same principles ACCES embraces. Egalia, a state-sponsored pre-school in Stockholm, is dedicated to the total obliteration of the male and female distinction. There are no boys and girls at Egalia — just “friends” and “buddies.” Classic fairy tales like Cinderella and Snow White have been replaced by tales of two male giraffes who adopt abandoned crocodile eggs. “Egalia gives [children] a fantastic opportunity to be whoever they want to be,” says one excited teacher. Yet not exactly. As observers have found, such schools provide a fantastic opportunity for adults to coerce, micromanage, and police children who tend to lapse into conventional “gendered play” as soon as they are out of the sight of adults. The ACCES/ACLU should reconsider their mission. And those evaluating the merits of their research and lawsuits should keep that mission in mind.

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Girls will be hurt if the ACLU and ACCES succeed in their campaign to shut down single-sex classrooms. But boys will lose the most. The activist professors and lawyers may believe that “male” and “female” are superficial distinctions best ignored. But here is one glaring gender distinction we ignore at our peril: boys are seriously behind girls in school, and the gap is increasing year by year. We do a far better job educating girls than boys and we must find out why. All-male schools and classrooms may not be panaceas and are certainly not for everyone, but they have produced many substantial and positive results. Turning a blind eye to real differences and dogmatically insisting that masculinity and femininity are irrelevant distinctions poses serious dangers of its own.

The campaign to ban single-sex education waged by ACCES and the ACLU is misguided, coercive, and destructive. So, ladies and gentlemen — oops, I mean friends and buddies — if you believe in educational diversity, pluralism, and freedom, you should support the continued availability of single-sex education.

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***FURTHER READING:*** Lise Eliot introduced us to this debate yesterday in “AEI Debates; Should Single-Sex Education be Eliminated?” Christina Hoff Sommers looks into our school’s history classes in “Immigration and America’s Broken Civics Education System” and asks more questions about women and science in “Why Can’t a Woman Be More Like a Man?” Michael R. Strain wrote an education review analyzing “Single-Sex Classes and Student Outcomes: Evidence from North Carolina.” James Pethokoukis graphs the educational gender gap by addressing “How Schools Can Produce More Female Economists and Engineers.”

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