

# Single-gender classes score success in Stetson, public school experiment

By Cheryl Downs '79

Teachers in single-gender classrooms are trained to use boys' natural boisterousness and competitiveness to advantage. One student may tackle his math assignment while sprawling under a classroom table; another might be hard at work sitting cross-legged at the mouth of a papier-mâché "cave." It's fine with their teacher that they like motion and noise — as long as they're learning. Across the hall, a girls-only classroom is often quieter. Girls can sit still longer and work well in groups. The boys' classroom style could easily alienate girls who, according to many experts in gender differences, learn best in another way.

Single-gender classes at DeLand's Woodward Avenue Elementary School began, in partnership with Stetson University, as an experiment in 2004-05 when boys' standardized test scores were lagging. Stetson Teacher Education professors and Woodward teachers teamed up to develop single-sex education teaching strategies based on research that shows marked differences in the development sequences, brains and genes of girls and boys. Now after three years, the experiment continues to yield strong evidence that single-gender education, for many children, leads to higher achievement. Current test results actually show positive gains for students in all classes at Woodward. Educators from across the country continue to call and visit Woodward to gain insight into the success of the Stetson-Woodward experiment.

JoAnne Rodkey, principal of Woodward Avenue

Elementary School, is understandably pleased with results of the collaboration with Stetson. "We offer single-gender classes in each grade level, K through 5, and the format is entirely voluntary for parents, teachers and students. It's all about meeting the needs of students. The focus is on what they need to be successful," she said.

But teaching in a single-gender setting requires specific training and skills. "An enormous amount of planning goes into creating single-gender classes," said Dr. Bette Heins, a professor of Teacher Education and director of the Hollis Institute for Educational Reform at Stetson, who works closely with Rodkey and her teachers. "First, support and commitment by the Volusia County School District and school leaders were essential. Secondly, parents and teachers had to be given the choice."

The Hollis Institute helped provide Woodward Avenue Elementary with resources to implement a single-gender education plan and continues to

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— Dr. Leonard Sax



Photo by Terry Fogleman

Second graders, from left, Carter Long, Noah Sapp, Benjamin Hans and Marcus Graham work on their assignments between exchanges with single-gender education expert Dr. Leonard Sax. The bright-blue tent in Mary Michaels' classroom is a favorite spot for her active-learner students.

support the experiment. Professional development is ongoing for teachers, which includes book studies, conference attendance and presentations, as well as discussion groups. "While the curriculum is identical in classes, the strategies and pacing of lessons is varied to meet the unique learning styles of girls and boys," Heins said.

"There are fundamental, hard-wired, genetically programmed differences in how boys and girls learn," said Dr. Leonard Sax, a research psychologist, family physician and nationally-known proponent of single-sex education. Last November he shared results of his research while giving The Betty Batson Bell Brain and Learning Lecture at Stetson. He also spent an entire morning at Woodward Avenue Elementary last November observing and interacting with students and talking with teachers in single-gender classes. He maintains that the single-gender format yields striking educational, social and interpersonal benefits. His best-selling book, "Why Gender Matters," received national media attention and won praise from many – but clearly not all – educators. Sax, who is executive director of the National

Association for Single Sex Public Education, will return to Stetson in early summer to conduct workshops for single-gender classroom teachers.

In interviews with fifth graders in single-sex classes, students were asked what they like about their learning environment. Their answers revealed a common theme: There are no boys (or girls) to "bother" us, they said.

"I learn more in class now because no girls come up and talk to me," said a confident Germaine Denton, who's completing his first year of single-gender studies and used his classes as the topic for a recent speech assignment. "Boys just want to get their work done; then we can play dodge ball. Our teacher says getting to play

ball isn't going to be given to us; we have to earn it."

Asked what stands out as a valuable classroom lesson, he said he's glad to know more about good manners. "Having a firm handshake, squaring corners, saying 'yes sir' and 'no sir,' being a gentleman – that's very important."

Another fifth grader, Christopher Oliphant, joined his class in January this year and quickly became a believer. "At my old school, the girls annoyed us," he said. "Boys have the same goals and when I asked a boy to tell me something when I first came here, he'd tell me." With a proud grin he conceded that his initial Woodward progress report wasn't especially good, "but now I have six A's and one B."

Girls also aren't shy about why they find same-sex classes appealing. "I have more friends this year at Woodward in my all-girl classroom," Jasmine Rodriguez said as she neared the end of her first year in the program. "There are no boys to bother you and I'm really learning more than before. I especially like math."

Jasmine's classmate, Christy Bennett, an aspiring writer and teacher, suggested that being in an all-girl class has extra perks. "We can talk about girl stuff and no boys bother us," she said. "Sometimes we have special days when we can bring a doll or stuffed animal and it's fun to talk about them. Boys wouldn't like that and then they'd bother you some more."

Christopher is the son of Drs. Becky and Gary Oliphant, associate professors in Stetson's School of Business Administration. "He has thrived at Woodward and we're thrilled and delighted with his progress," said Becky Oliphant. "When I make treats for his class, I make enough for the girls as well. He's quick to point out that I really don't have to include the girls, but I do."

Photo by Terry Fogleman



**A senior English major at Stetson and work-study student at Woodward Avenue Elementary School, Kari Kopko goes to a favorite vantage point of first graders Liam Wall, left, and Kyle Ferrell – their classroom floor.**

Photo by Terry Fogleman



**Dr. Leonard Sax observes the all-girls kindergarten class of Stetson alumna Karen Medlin '83. The girls typically are orderly and listen attentively to their teacher.**

Photo by Terry Fogleman



**Jessica Quinby, a Stetson senior majoring in Elementary Education, works closely with second grader Alec Rodriguez.**