

Single-Sex Classrooms Are Succeeding

by Michael Gurian, Kathy Stevens, and Peggy Daniels

Educators at single-sex schools already get it: equality is the goal, and there may be more than one path to the destination.

—Karen Stabiner, journalist and author

Over the past decade, the Gurian Institute has trained more than forty thousand teachers in more than two thousand schools and districts, both coed and single-sex. Our trainers have worked with public and private schools, Montessori schools, and a variety of charter and independent schools in fifteen countries; we have therefore been able to see what is working and not working around the globe. In this essay, we will feature some of the schools and communities that have utilized our resources to help set up and maintain their successful single-sex programs.

The resurgence of single-sex instruction is one of the most powerful educational innovations of the past decade (also one with a long history across the globe). People who advocate for single-sex instruction do not generally claim it to be the only successful way to teach boys and girls, and they are very clear on its mission: gender equality. As they employ this innovation, they often find that it can be an effective way to teach many boys and girls in certain subjects or in certain communities, and that it is especially effective as a response to the ongoing cultural need to discover measurable and substantial achievement gains for both genders.

A Short History of the “New” Single-Sex Option

Broad-based single-sex programs have been available in independent schools, unrestricted by federal regulation, for centuries. From those schools, many with long-established programs, a number of single-sex instructional models have been maintained, many using the same instructional strategies for years. Day schools

have offered single-sex classes schoolwide, or in particular divisions (usually lower or middle school), or only in specific grades. Some boarding schools serve only boys or girls; others may serve both boys and girls, but in separate facilities.

Prior to 2006, single-sex classes in public schools were generally limited to physical education and sex education classes, but a growing gender gap in performance and achievement has led public schools to reexamine single-sex possibilities. As public schools looked at piloting single-sex classes, legal challenges arose. Schools and districts, such as Southside Junior High School in Denham Springs, Louisiana, were taken to court. With the support of the ACLU, a parent legally challenged Southside's plan to implement single-sex classes in fall 2006, delaying the program a year.

In October 2006, the U.S. Department of Education announced changes in Title IX regulations, expanding opportunities for public schools to legally offer the option of single-sex instruction. Within certain parameters set out in the final Title IX single-sex amended regulations, public schools are now allowed to include single-sex classes as a part of their educational program, if they believe those classes will improve student learning and achievement. (Document 34 CFR Part 106, the complete Title IX regulations, is available and may be downloaded directly from the Department of Education Web site: www.ed.gov/index.jhtml.)

Today, in increasing numbers, public and independent schools are investigating the option of single-sex instruction to further support and improve the educational growth of boys and girls. This option is proving to be an exciting alternative for improving academic performance and for creating classrooms that are more boy- and girl-friendly.



Helping Boys and Girls Succeed—The Logic of Single-Sex Instruction

At the classroom level, single-sex instruction offers specific gender-friendly opportunities for enhancing learning by directly addressing many of the challenges and stressors in boys' and girls' educational and personal lives.

Single-sex programs, whatever their scope or size in a school, have pursued those potential outcomes and collected success data. Some of the schools and teachers who have utilized Gurian Institute resources and training in *Boys and Girls Learn Differently* have shared their success data with us so that we could share it with educators who consider the single-sex option, make your case for the option in your community, or continue to maintain your already-vital program.

Different Approaches and Success Data from a Variety of Schools

No two school districts or schools are the same; thus there are many approaches to creating single-sex environments in schools. Some districts choose to start single-sex academies; some public schools decide to implement single-sex programs only in their core classes; some private schools are already single-sex or, if coed, decide to implement single-sex classes in certain grades.

Here are examples of success in these different modalities. Readers can view other schools and districts that have had success in different single-sex modalities on www.gurianinstitute.com/Success, or on the National Association for Single-Sex Public Education (NASSPE) Web site, www.singlesexschools.org.

A Public School District in Atlanta: Two Single-Sex Academies

After several years of planning, the Atlanta Public Schools transformed a struggling middle school into two single-sex academies. The B.E.S.T. Academy at Benjamin Carson, the boys' school, and the Coretta Scott King Young Women's Leadership Academy both opened on separate campuses in fall 2007, initially serving sixth-graders, with a plan to expand through twelfth grade. The B.E.S.T. Academy was championed by Robert Haley, at the time president of The 100 Black Men of Atlanta, which committed support and mentoring for the school, its students, and their families. Five Atlanta chapters of The Links, Incorporated—one of the oldest and largest volunteer service organizations of women committed to enriching, sustaining, and ensuring the culture and economic survival of African Americans and other persons of African ancestry—partnered with the girls' school, providing similar support. Both organizations provided substantial assistance, including purchasing uniforms for the charter

class of 2007–2008. Many other community organizations also partnered with the Atlanta Public Schools to support the initiative.

The staff of the boys' school focused on closing the achievement gap in literacy, recognizing that reading skills would affect every content area for their students from sixth grade through high school graduation and into college. Implementing best-practice single-sex strategies proven to help boys succeed, the teachers and administrators at the boys' school are excited about the strides their students have already made and will make in the future.

The staff of the girls' school focused on increasing the girls' use of technology. The teachers used Promethean Boards in the areas of math and science, overhead projectors, thin client computers, digital cameras, iPods for podcasting, and LCD projectors. In addition, students created PowerPoint presentations and podcasts for social studies units and concept-based units. Daily, students gathered in the media center, doing research for an event, a project, or a debate.

The struggling students have used the Internet daily to participate in the Achieve 3000 program, a content-based reading program. Principal Melody Morgan said, "I boast that several of the students entered the program as nonreaders and have made significant gains this year. We projected gains of 25 percent in this program, and the students actually had an achievement gain of 74.2 percent. They are proud!"

The use of technology is crucial in the global market; encouraging girls' engagement in technology will prepare them to be part of the future economy. A single-sex environment can greatly increase girls' desired participation.

As the schools enter their second year and expand to grades 6 and 7, many lessons learned will help make the second year an even greater success.

A Statewide Initiative: South Carolina

The South Carolina Department of Education was the first to create a state-level position to lead a statewide single-sex initiative. In July 2007, David Chadwell was appointed director of single-gender initiatives. Chadwell is responsible for facilitating the development of single-sex programs across South Carolina, including training teachers; advising program creation; facilitating implementation; hosting informational sessions for faculty, parents, and community members; and maintaining a network of people interested in or already working in single-gender education.

As of April 2008, there were 97 schools in South Carolina offering some form of single-sex programs across the age levels, with

another 214 schools exploring single-sex options. Seventy school districts and nearly 30 percent of the schools in South Carolina are involved in the program, the highest percentage (59 percent) being in middle schools.

Researchers nationwide are watching South Carolina's initiative; it is a great opportunity to learn about the success of single-sex programs as the schools collect and evaluate their data.

A Public, Coed Elementary School: Woodward Avenue Elementary

In 2003 Jo Anne Rodkey, now-retired principal of Woodward Avenue Elementary School in DeLand, Florida, began an opt-in experiment in single-sex instruction, primarily because the boys in her school were lagging significantly behind the girls in reading. The boys were also, by far, the predominant sex in the school's special education classes.

Rodkey began the process by training her teachers, sending them to related professional development workshops and conferences, and supplying them with the latest research on gender learning differences. They started the program in their kindergarten, second, and fourth grades. As an opt-in program, teachers were able to volunteer to teach in the single-sex classes. To be selected, they had to agree to be purposeful as they planned for instruction, making sure they were using practices suggested from research on brain and gender learning differences. Parents could also choose the program for their children, but it was a guided choice, because Rodkey wanted to maintain a heterogeneous balance of race and academic ability in the classroom.

Woodward now has optional single-sex classes in grades K-5. The program is successful: individual student gains are noticeable for both boys' and girls' single-sex classes, and both groups do as well or better than the school's regular coed classes. Academic progress being made by the boys includes learning the fundamentals, the basic skills, to help them become good readers. Rodkey adds that although improving discipline was not a reason Woodward chose to implement its program, she saw fewer problems, especially with boys-only groups. There were fewer office referrals, and she credited this to the fact that the boys' teachers were able to be much more tolerant of boy energy and boy behavior without girls in the classroom.

A Public Middle School: Roosevelt Middle School

Roosevelt Middle School in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, serves nine hundred students in grades 6-8. One hundred percent of Roosevelt's students qualify for free lunch and 75 percent are

minority. In 2005, Roosevelt had a gender gap of 17 percent in reading achievement; 72 percent of Roosevelt's eighth-grade girls scored satisfactory on their state assessment tests, but only 55 percent of eighth-grade boys scored satisfactory.

Principal Marilyn Vrooman began looking for alternatives that would correct the problem. After researching single-sex options, she determined the strategy should be given serious consideration. The teachers agreed, the parents agreed, and after appropriate professional development for all teachers, Roosevelt separated the boys and girls in language arts, math, and technology education.

At the end of the 2005–2006 school year, Roosevelt's boys scored 71 percent satisfactory on the reading CRT and the girls scored 80 percent, narrowing the achievement gap to 9 percent in one year. The 2006–2007 school year was the first year Roosevelt had been off the state's "at risk" list in four years.

A Public Middle School: Wolfe Middle School

Wolfe Middle School in the Center Line School District in Center Line, Michigan, implemented single-sex core courses for sixth-graders in language arts, math, social studies, and science during the 2007–2008 school year. They began by receiving training in how boys and girls learn differently (the subject of one chapter in *Successful Single-Sex Classrooms*, and a crucial starting place for any efforts to close gender and achievement gaps). After one year of single-sex classes, they determined that the significant improvements of both boys and girls in language arts and social studies justified a continuation of single-sex classes in those content areas for 2008–2009. They further decided to move sixth-grade single-sex teachers with their students for seventh grade, a practice known as "looping."

A Public High School: Hope High School

Hope High School in Hope, Arkansas, is a school of approximately eight hundred students in grades 9–12. Assistant Principal Renee Parker works specifically with the ninth and tenth grades, and she saw her ninth-grade students, especially the males, struggling with the transition to high school—failing course after course and spending numerous days in the detention room for immature behavior that disrupted classes.

Hope operates on a straight 4 x 4 block schedule in which all students have four ninety-minute-long courses per semester. At the end of the semester, students change to a new set of four courses and have the potential of earning eight credits per year.

In January 2006 Parker looked at her data and found that 12 percent of students in the ninth grade, primarily males, had failed all four courses for the fall semester. Those students had placed themselves in serious jeopardy of not graduating with their class, and Parker knew that there had to be some way of making this transition from junior high to high school more successful.

Parker and her colleagues researched gender and learning and obtained professional development for all faculty and staff. Hope High School piloted single-sex classes in the ninth grade in 2006. In January 2007, when the data on student achievement were next gathered, there were no ninth-grade students who failed all four courses, only two had failed two courses, and only eleven had failed one course. Furthermore, discipline referrals for the ninth-graders had decreased by 35 percent from the previous fall and the attendance rate had increased by 15 percent.

A Boys' School: Crespi Carmelite High School

Crespi Carmelite High School in Encino, California, is a non-profit, Catholic, four-year, college preparatory school for young men. In 2005, looking at their performance data and seeking ways to increase student achievement, Father Paul Henson, Crespi's principal, began a two-year process that greatly enhanced the school's ability to establish and maintain a boy-friendly environment. He designed and implemented a two-year professional development plan that included both on-site training for all faculty and staff and sending designated faculty to intensive summer training, thus developing in-house expertise.

Although Crespi had been focused on teaching boys since its founding in 1959, the school was committed to incorporating the latest research on gender and learning into every classroom in the school. Adding to their already-deep knowledge base of how to educate boys in a single-sex environment, Crespi's commitment to training has allowed them to increase performance scores to higher levels than before and to decrease discipline referrals even further.

Crespi, like many boys' schools, approaches developmental issues from a boy-friendly perspective and implements schoolwide strategies that constantly enhance students' level of success.

A Coed Independent School: Carolina Day School

Carolina Day School is an independent, college-preparatory school serving grades Pre-K–12 in Asheville, North Carolina. In fall 2004, Carolina Day engaged in a spirited discussion regarding the possibility of implementing single-sex education in the middle

school. School administrators listened carefully to parents, students, and faculty; they reviewed research on the topic; they consulted with experts and practitioners. There were differing opinions of considerable merit and, in the end, the community was convinced that Carolina Day should implement single-sex classes in the sixth grade for fall and winter 2004–2005, then expand the program to include sixth and seventh grades in 2005–2006.

Research convinced Carolina Day that the best advantage would come from having this program for their younger middle school students. They continued coed classes for eighth grade to provide “transitional experiences in preparation for the upper school.” Dr. Beverly Sgro, Head of School, supported the administration’s efforts to provide initial intensive onsite training for teachers in grades 5–8 and follow-up training for all lower and upper school faculty.

The middle school of Carolina Day School implemented single-sex instruction in its core classes for sixth and seventh grades in fall 2004. Faculty and administrators have stayed current with their training, which began in spring 2004.

The single-sex program has been very successful, producing positive academic results for both gender populations, as well as significantly better dynamics and less social anxiety.

After four years, the middle school at Carolina Day reports these key outcomes:

- Stronger mentoring relationships
- An environment that promotes greater trust and sense of belonging among students
- Teachers who feel more connected with students and with each other
- A greater understanding of how boys and girls learn differently and an emphasis on providing instruction that supports these differences
- More direct ways to deal with students’ social and emotional pressures
- Classroom instruction that provides for more teaching and quality learning experiences
- A new energy that causes teachers to be more creative with their ideas and more reflective with their practice

As these and other schools succeed in providing single-sex instruction, their staffs have shared testimonials with us. Following are some powerful testimonials of the kind of immediate shifts in student learning and teacher enjoyment that can occur in single-sex classes.

Success Testimonials from Teachers

During the 2007–2008 school year at Winder-Barrow Middle School, a math teacher, Michael Lofton, piloted a single-sex math class for boys and Erica Boswell piloted a single-sex math class for girls. Lofton told us,

Since I have been teaching an all-boy math class this year the experience has been very different from my mixed-gender classes. One of the first things that stand out is the camaraderie of the class. I was quick to recognize this because of my coaching experience. In the beginning we discussed the need for the students to be successful in the math class this year due to the pass/fail criteria of the state standardized test CRCT (Criterion-Referenced Competency Test). We also discussed the need for the class as a whole to be successful.

To meet our goals, we bonded as a team. Early on the boys started encouraging each other. We created teams among our team and had inner competition with study games and activities. The groups changed often so everyone helped and encouraged each other to work harder and study more. We made a phone list so anyone in the class could call another student if they need any help with homework or studying. We also spent a few days in the computer lab learning how to use our textbook online resources. Students with computers and online access helped others without online ability.

It wasn't long before I noticed that grades and comprehension of skills were on the rise. Parents stopped me at football or basketball games telling *me* how much their son loved the class and was really trying to do well in math.

One student in Lofton's class shared, "The difference between last year and this is that he doesn't yell at us as much as we got yelled at last year." This student is making B's in Lofton's class after a long year of D's in 2006–2007.

"They feel free to make mistakes, and they feel free not to make mistakes," Boswell said of her female students. "A lot of time girls don't want to look too smart. It's a shame that girls have to feel that way at all, but they do. In here, they can feel free to raise their hand for every single question and no one's going to look at them funny."

Dave Curtis, a fifth-grade teacher at Kenowa Hills Public Schools in Michigan, reports:

We have a grade 5–6 building. Each grade has ten classrooms and last year we turned two of the fifth grades into single-gender classrooms, leaving eight others for coed classes. Those students moved up to sixth grade and as a result of parent and student requests, this year our building has four single-gender classrooms in sixth grade and two in fifth. . . . From the onset we heard comments like, “My son finally likes going to school” or “He finally comes home happy and discusses his day.” The same was true for the girls’ classrooms and we knew we had provided something desirable for our students and parents.

This letter was sent to co-author Peggy Daniels by Blake Smith, a high school counselor, several weeks after her school incorporated single-sex education:

Dear Peggy,

Just wanted you all in the middle school to know that if you could step back from all the action and see/hear what is happening in the middle school this year—there is something incredible taking place. Parents at the upper school parents’ night program commented on the fantastic atmosphere in the middle school this year, and upper school teachers have been talking about what a fun-loving group of teachers the middle school has. The students who roll through the Nash Athletic Center and pass by my office are energized and obviously loving the year so far. It is like we are on a month-long pep rally or spirit day.

I think this is a reflection of several things (single-sex classes, single-sex advisory, efforts with differentiation and vertical teaming), but mostly a result of the teachers’ creativity and enthusiasm, which has been encouraged and supported by the middle school leadership to a degree that I haven’t seen in another school yet. By taking some new chances (especially the single-sex instruction), risking long debates with parents, and asking teachers what they think about policy, planning, and pedagogy, there is a contagious excitement in the air that gets passed down to our students. It’s not just me—I am hearing it across divisions—and I’m glad to be a part of it too. I don’t know if all of you in the middle school can see it as much because you’re in it all day—but I suspect you can sense the great energy happening this year.

At Woodward Elementary in Deland, Florida, a wife and husband, Deborah and Jim Roberts, teach together and separately in coed and single-sex classes. In the first year of single-sex classes at Woodward, they co-taught a full-inclusion, single-sex class of fourth-grade boys. The class included 40 percent minority students, 23 percent general education students, and 12 percent exceptional education students. It was a challenging group, but by the end of the year the test scores for this group of boys were outstanding. On the Florida Writes test, they had some of the highest scores in the district, even outperforming many girls.

The following year, Deborah and Jim Roberts looped with this group to fifth grade, and in the third year of the program, Deborah was asked to teach a group of fifth-grade girls while her husband kept the boys. This, too, worked well for both teachers and students. Deborah said, "The changes in the boys and girls, and the challenges for us as teachers, have been very positive. It would be hard to go back to coed classes for these students."

Piri Taborosi, a teacher in New York, shared this story:

In 2002, when a new charter school opened in Syracuse, New York, I was its first principal. During the first three days of school, our fifth-grade numbers stabilized into a group of six girls and twenty-two boys. All of these students were at-risk; many had failed grades before; most of them had behavior problems; with the exception of two or three, all of them were reading significantly below grade level. As I contemplated what to do with this group, I made a decision which the company backed me in.

We had two third-grade rooms and had hired two teachers; unfortunately, we only had a total of twenty-two students. I combined the two classes and assigned a full-time teacher assistant to work with the teacher. The other teacher who had been hired to teach third grade was a male, a military man. He was willing to teach fifth grade. Rather than separating the six girls into two groups, with parental support, I kept the girls together and added a few boys. The other class was totally boys and was taught by the male teacher.

All students were tested at the beginning of the year and near the end of the year. Teacher and principal bonuses and pay raises were tied to student achievement. All our students did very well in the school, but we were not prepared for the phenomenal growth of the boys who were in the single-sex class. This group was also monitored by a local newspaper

reporter, who eventually wrote a five-page article about the boys and their class.

Those are just a few of the individual testimonials we are hearing from professionals and parents who are opting to innovate in single-sex instruction. Students themselves also speak up about what they are experiencing. Here are examples from a boy and a girl.

In science we talk more this year because the boys aren't there. I like it when we [girls] get to talk things out. I understand things better when we can talk and share. (Sophie, middle school girl)

We are not distracted by girls and we don't feel so self-conscious. If I say something a little "off," I don't feel as stupid as I would in front of girls. (Nathan, middle school boy)

Single-Sex Classrooms Can Really Work!

We hope this essay has provided you with data and testimonials you can use to gain support for single-sex classes in your school or community. As you make your case for single-sex instruction, you may find that resistance lessens when clear data are shown. Data can be a first major tool of persuasion, as well as a real confidence builder for you as a teacher or parent, as you move through the steps to establish a single-sex program.

The second major tool of persuasion, and an important confidence builder, is an understanding of how boys and girls learn differently. Teachers in coed classes who gain training in male-female brain differences report that both their boys and girls are learning and performing better. Teachers in single-sex classes generally find themselves better able to focus on the brain-gender spectrum for their specific students, giving both girls and boys more of the brain-friendly environment in which they can thrive.

Michael Gurian, the author of twenty-five books, is the co-founder of the Gurian Institute. Kathy Stevens, the co-author of several books, is the executive director of the institute. Peggy Daniels, an educator for more than thirty years, is a master trainer at the institute.

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