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## Same-sex classes show test, behavior success

### Some warn single-gender education is discriminatory

*By Anna Lee*  
*Staff writer*

Green gingham curtains cover sun-soaked windows and bright pink flower pots line the tops of tidy shelves in an all girls classroom at Taylors Elementary School. As their teacher walks around the room, stopping now and then to offer words of encouragement, the girls quietly discuss the characters in their new reading book, "Chrissa Stands Strong."

Down the hall, rows of first-grade boys stand on top of their chairs as they recite the week's spelling list. Their teacher's style is direct and full of volume, and at her urging, three-letter words ring through a sports-themed room, where baseball jerseys dangle from the ceiling and bean bag chairs are pushed off to the side.

A walk through the school presents similar scenes: boys in one class, girls in the other. Since introducing the idea last year, Principal Vaughan Overman has expanded the school's single-gender program to 16 classes, and she said parents are clamoring for more.

"Parents are seeing their children happy and thriving and making some progress," Overman said. "Our discipline referrals went down and our MAP (Measures of Academic Performance) scores increased."

Schools in the area also are finding similar results with their single-gender classes a year after the district has implemented the program. Although some criticize that same-sex education is based on disturbing and antiquated gender stereotypes, local schools are seeing students becoming more confident and more excited about learning.

One former educator cautioned that the evidence single-gender education proponents are touting of the program's success can be misleading and that same-sex classrooms aren't for everyone.

Dr. Lorin Anderson, professor emeritus of educational leadership and policies at the University of South Carolina, said he "wouldn't put a lot of faith" into the data that advocates of single-gender education have collected so far.

"These people are salesmen. These people aren't researchers. They want to get enough data to convince you that this is the answer," Anderson said.

But the 11 public schools that now offer single-gender classes in Greenville County are seeing students better behaved with higher test scores than those in the coed classroom, and administrators are singing its praises.

At Blue Ridge Middle School, students who took same-sex classes as a whole outscored their coed peers. Single-gender sixth-graders scored 17 points higher on the math section of the MAP test and 21 points higher in language arts. Single-gender seventh-graders had a 59 percent decrease in out-of-school suspensions.

Disciplinary referrals also were down at Northwest Middle School in Travelers Rest and at Cherrydale Elementary in Greenville, where only seven out of 60 single-gender students were sent to the principal's office the entire school year.

Classroom by classroom, single-gender education is spreading across the state and nation, thanks in large part to Dr. Leonard Sax, founding director of the National Association for Single Sex Public Education.

A psychologist and author of "Why Gender Matters" and "Boys Adrift," Sax has spent the past eight years traveling around the county to speak to parents and educators about why single-gender education works.

It all boils down to the simple fact that boys and girls learn differently, Sax explained. By separating the two sexes, teachers can focus on learning styles that best fit their students' needs.

"There are all different kinds of girls, all different kinds of boys. One size does not fit all," he said.

In a coed classroom, some girls are reluctant to show how smart they are, and some boys slack off because it seems cool, said Lee Givins, principal at Northwest Middle, which was one of the first schools in Greenville County to test the waters of same-sex education in 2007.

By separating the genders, social distractions and peer pressure are reduced, especially at the middle school level where the relentless focus is on who's cute and how you look, Sax said.

But in the eyes of the American Civil Liberties Union, sex-segregated education in public schools goes against the federal Title IX education act and is therefore illegal and discriminatory.

"Single-gender education can deny equal educational opportunities to children, especially if school resources are limited," said Victoria Middleton, executive director of the South Carolina ACLU.

Among her many criticisms, Middleton said boys and girls need to learn competition and cooperation, and they especially need to learn from each other.

"Same-sex education does not equip children to work together or compete in the real world. Teachers need to help students learn and develop as individuals, and students need to understand and learn to deal with individual differences," Middleton said.

David Chadwell, the state Department of Education's single-gender initiatives coordinator, is familiar with the "real world argument," as he calls it, and said coed socialization happens before school, after school, at lunch and at recess, as well as in the hallways.

"We're not going back to the days of single-sex boarding schools, and you end up in trouble if you look at someone of the opposite sex," he said.

Sax said the ACLU is against giving parents a range of choices when it comes to their child's education.

"They think they know better than the parents (and) are opposed to single-sex education even when parents want it," Sax said.

At Taylors Elementary, parents receive a letter in the mail and can opt in or out of a single-gender classroom. Robin Broumas, president of the school's PTA, couldn't be happier with her choice.

Her daughter Rachel "is really feeling secure and good about herself at school, and that's what I want," Broumas said. "It helps keep her focused and on track and less likely to do things she wasn't

supposed to be doing.”

Anderson, the professor emeritus from USC, said parents need to talk to their children so they can make an informed decision about the single-gender program, adding that it’s an alternative that must be appropriately matched with the needs of the students.

He wouldn’t recommend same-sex education to students unless they’re “failing miserably” in the coed environment.

“This is an alternative that certainly has the potential of benefiting students for whom it’s appropriate,” Anderson said. “If I have people who are very successful in the more traditional classroom, why mess with that? If they’re getting good grades, if their scores on their various tests are high, then leave them alone.”

Meanwhile, first-grade teacher Susan Zaebst said single-gender education has curbed the behavioral problems with her boys because they’re allowed freedom of movement and aren’t penalized for not being able to sit calmly and quietly like their female counterparts.

“In the very traditional (classroom) setting, boys who are active are looked at as having behavior issues or having ADD or ADHD (attention deficit disorders),” Zaebst said. “Here I encourage movement. We’ll take five minutes between subjects to do jumping jacks or do toe touches.”

And because brain research shows that movement stimulates boys, Zaebst emphasizes hands-on experiences, using Play-Doh to create shapes and sand to spell words.

“They’re very kinesthetic learners, not so much auditory or visual,” she added.

Girls learn better when they can work in groups and have a lot of opportunities to talk, according to Carrie Bunnell, a second-grade teacher at Taylors.

“Having the desks in groups is a key thing when you’re teaching all girls, because it promotes teamwork,” Bunnell said, adding that being able to talk allows girls to process information better.

The ACLU is not convinced.

“Single-gender education is based on dubious ‘brain’ science that reinforces outdated stereotypes of behavior,” Middleton said. “The U.S. Department of Education has said that there is no clear evidence to justify using different methods and curriculum in teaching boys vs. girls.”

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