



PF March 2014 Con Analysis

The current NSDL (formerly known as NFL) Public Forum resolution is **Resolved: Single-gender classrooms would improve the quality of education in American public schools**. Today, we're going to look at how you might begin to build your con case on this topic.

Let's start out by doing a little resolitional analysis. All of the terms in this topic are pretty straightforward, so you should not have to do a lot of definitions legwork. However, there are a couple of things you should be aware of. If you already read the pro analysis, you can skip to page 2.

First, understand the distinction between biological sex and gender, and be careful with which term you use. "Sex" refers to a person's biology and anatomy, whereas "gender" typically refers to the performances associated with maleness or femaleness (i.e. how a person dresses, how they speak, how they carry themselves, etc). Gender is typically understood as socially constructed (in the sense that, for example, girls wear pink dresses because society considers those things "girly"; there is nothing inherently connected between being biologically female and wearing a pink dress). Pay attention to how you use these terms. If you conflate them, you will open yourself up to lots of kritiky arguments about biological determinism and identity politics that most of you would probably prefer to avoid.

Next, be aware that the phrase "improve the quality of education" implicitly requires a comparison: "would a world with single-gender classrooms be better than a world without them?" This means that a pro team cannot win simply by establishing that there are upsides to single-gender classrooms; they must win that the benefits of single-gender classrooms outweigh the costs, that it is overall superior.



So, as the con team, your job will be to win that the costs of single-gender classrooms outweigh the benefits. Let's look at a few strategies you can use to advance this argument.

First, there is the obvious question of whether data supports the idea that single-gender classrooms improve measurable education outputs (such as grades or test scores). As the con team, you'll be happy to know that the answer is mostly "no." As you do your research, you will probably encounter plenty of evidence pointing out that there is no statistical proof that single-gender classrooms are better for learning, grades, or test scores.

Here is some of that **evidence**:

(Diane F. Halpern et al, psychologist & past-president of the American Psychological Association & Dean of Social Science at the Minerva Schools at KGI, Science Magazine, Vol. 333 no. 6050 pp. 1706-1707, <http://www.sciencemag.org/content/333/6050/1706>, September 23 2011)

In attempting to improve schools, it is critical to remember that not all reforms lead to meaningful gains for students. We argue that one change in particular—sex-segregated education—is deeply misguided, and often justified by weak, cherry-picked, or misconstrued scientific claims rather than by valid scientific evidence. There is no well-designed research showing that single-sex (SS) education improves students' academic performance, but there is evidence that sex segregation increases gender stereotyping and legitimizes institutional sexism.



Here is an even better piece of **evidence**, which additionally argues that single-gender classrooms lead to gendered stereotyping, and that the idea that boys' and girls' function very differently is pseudo-scientific and inaccurate:

(Marie Diamond, special projects & communications director at TFA, Teach for America, "Point/Counterpoint: Boys Have Cooties! The Trouble With Separating The Sexes," <https://www.teachforamerica.org/blog/pointcounterpoint-boys-have-cooties-trouble-separating-sexes>, July 27 2012)

While the number of gender-segregated schools and classrooms remains small, they are growing fast. In 2002, only a dozen schools had single-sex classrooms, but today as many as 500 in 40 states do. Are these classrooms good for kids? The evidence suggests no. Last year *Science* magazine published a comprehensive review of existing research that concluded "there is no well-designed research showing that single-sex education improves students' academic performance." What's more, separating boys and girls "reinforces stereotypes and sexism" because it "makes gender more salient." Segregation, whether race-based or gender-based, "undermines rather than promotes equality," the paper says. The *New York Times*, writing about the same study, points out that there's even disagreement about the degree of success at Chicago's Urban Prep, one of the schools that Erin mentions in her post.

We should all be bothered by the pseudo-scientific evidence that's often invoked to justify single-sex schooling—antiquated ideas like "girls innately learn math and science differently than boys and so must be taught differently." Margaret Talbot points out in the *New Yorker* that although there are differences in how men and women acquire knowledge, "those differences are relatively small [and] there is a great deal of variability among individuals." All kids learn differently, and the approach that's best for them can't be predicted or assumed based on their sex.

You can specifically leverage this evidence against pro claims that single-gender classrooms will increase gender equality. It argues that segregation reinforces stereotypes about people are "undermines rather



than promotes equality.” This directly turns many common pro arguments, which will be very useful for debaters on the con side.

Similarly, here is **evidence** arguing that gender-segregated classes increase sexism:

(Jill Filipovic, lawyer & columnist, Al Jazeera America, “Why do we still segregate kids by sex?”, <http://america.aljazeera.com/opinions/2014/2/single-sex-educationgirlsboyschoolsstem.html>, February 18 2014)

We cannot discuss the virtues and downsides of single-sex education — or pass wholesale judgment on its existence — without also weighing the different types of single-sex schooling that exist.

Because not all single-sex classrooms are created equal. Some schools were built from a feminist mold, espousing a “You go, girl!” ethos that prioritizes success, nontraditional careers and a critique of patriarchal power structures.

But others, many of them private and religious or public but in conservative school districts, reinforce those structures, cordoning off girls from boys under the theory that our brains naturally operate differently, feeding into traditional gender roles and underscoring the idea that we are fundamentally different. For girls, that means an emphasis on quiet learning and subservient behavior.

For boys, it means underscoring their supposedly natural leadership and desire for physical activity. (All-boys schools are much less likely than all-girls institutions to focus on gender equality.) In a paper for the White House Conference on Helping America’s Youth, Judith Kleinfeld, director of the Boys Project, a nonprofit aimed at decreasing the so-called gender gap in educational achievement, argues that conventional co-educational classes “shut boys down” and that, in contrast, single-sex classrooms allow for “boy-friendly teaching strategies” — from removing desks and encouraging boys to mill around to instilling the value of “manly virtues.” The fundamental problem, in her view, is that we are too quick to label “the rough and tumble play characteristic of all juvenile male primates ‘violence and aggression’ ... (and) immature attempts at romance ‘sexual harassment.’”



There are surely benefits to focusing on areas where male students lag. But I would argue that an educational philosophy that emphasizes gender difference (to the point of putting “sexual harassment” in scare quotes) does not prepare young men for real-world interactions with their female peers.

According to organizations that oppose same-sex education, including the American Civil Liberties Union, this latter type of classroom can do more harm than good. In two complaints filed in 2012, the organization paints a picture of sex-segregated public schooling that looks downright Victorian (and directly reflective of Kleinfeld’s ideal classroom): Male students sit on bouncy balls or move around the room, teachers instruct boys on “being a man,” and local business leaders are brought in as career examples. In female-only classrooms, girls are told to sit quietly at their desks and punished if they speak out of turn, the teacher talks in soft soothing tones, and no role models are brought in.

Sex segregation also raises issues of inclusion for students who may be in the early stages of developing a gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender identity. The idea that single-sex education keeps students from being distracted by the opposite sex is premised on the assumption that the students are heterosexual. And a transgender kid may wind up in a single-sex classroom that does not match his or her developing needs, putting a child who identifies as female in a boys’ classroom or vice-versa. Single-sex education assumes there are significant, unbridgeable differences between boys and girls; it seeks to harness and cater to those differences in the classroom. This can make an already-vulnerable child who feels she is not actually the gender she was assigned at birth feel even more out of place.

The real world

Opponents of single-sex education often argue that it doesn’t equip students for the real world, where they will have to interact with people of the opposite sex. Of course, an educational environment is by design divorced from the real world. And, as Angyal says, “Just because there aren’t boys in the room doesn’t mean boys aren’t in the room.” That is, while girls may be more opinionated and outspoken without male classmates around, the same dynamics of competing for male attention and sniping about body size and physical attractiveness remain in play.

In the university setting, segregation of the sexes has a different set of implications. Prep schools and elite colleges are where lifelong connections are forged and, often, the foundations of professional networks built. Just look at this list of successful entrepreneurs and where they met their business partners: The co-founders of Google, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, DropBox, Yahoo and YouTube all met at elite institutions of higher learning (and they are almost all male).

So, while women certainly make connections among themselves and build their own networks, it is hard to deny that there are lost opportunities when you do not have access to a full range of students who will someday be your professional peers. Perhaps there are also lessons to be learned when you share a dorm floor or classroom with the kind of lucky young men who assume they have a right to be there — or anywhere.

There are lessons for boys too. Kim Gandy, a former president of the National Organization for Women, points out that “a boy who has never been beaten by a girl on an algebra test could have some major problems having a female supervisor.” A boy who learns at school that inappropriate sexual behavior is all



in good fun will have bigger problems than that. And while the so-called girl-power feminism of progressive all-girls schools and the inclusion of women's histories in the curriculum at Smith College may serve girls and young women well, shouldn't boys and young men be learning about women and gender too — and not simply that they are fundamentally different?

You may also want to make the argument that any data the pro team presents supporting a correlation between single-gender classrooms and better educational outcomes comes from poor studies that lack control groups. This means there is a **self-selection bias**, where parents/students/teachers who try different methods (including, but not limited to, single-gender classes) *are already likely to be more engaged than individuals who don't seek new solutions*. This means the factor increasing performance is likely to be *investment and motivation*, not gender segregation itself.

This **evidence** supports that point:

(Daniel Willingham, director of graduate studies in psychology at the University of Virginia & author of numerous books on education, The Washington Post, "Kids don't learn better in single-sex classes — meta analysis," <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/wp/2014/02/11/kids-dont-learn-better-in-single-sex-classes-meta-analysis/>, February 11 2014)

The idea that students would learn better in single-sex classrooms seems logical. The typical arguments include:

- Boys find girls more distracting in class than they find other boys. Likewise, girls find boys more distracting.
- Sex differences in math and science achievement are a product of social influence. Those influences will be reduced or eliminated if girls are in classrooms only with girls.
- Boys dominate classroom discussion, and so girls are denied practice in articulating and defending their views.



- Boys and girls have different brains, and therefore learn differently. If they are taught separately, teachers can tune their instruction to the way each sex learns.

The last of these is frequently overwrought and over-interpreted, but generally, these reasons seem plausible. But that obviously doesn't prove that single-sex education confers any advantage to students.

A 2005 report written for the Department of Education (Mael et al, 2005) reported mixed effects, but generally a positive conclusion for single-sex classrooms in short-run academic outcomes. There was no indication of a boost to longer-term outcomes.

A new study (Pahlke, Hyde, & Allison, 2014) reports a meta-analysis of 184 studies representing 1.6 million students in K-12 across 21 nations. The authors place considerable emphasis on the problem of control in this research. They end up concluding that, with proper controls, analyses show that single-sex classrooms don't help students much.

The challenge in this sort of work is that comparisons of single-sex and coed classrooms often do not use random assignment. Students (or parents) choose a single-sex classroom. So for this review, the authors distinguished between controlled experiments (the original study either used random assignment or made some attempt to measure and statistically account for associated variables) and uncontrolled studies.

In controlled studies, there were statistically reliably, but numerically quite modest positive effects of single-sex classrooms for both boys and girls in mathematics achievement, science achievement, and verbal achievement (Hedges *g* in all cases less than 0.10). Girls showed an edge in single-sex classes for math attitude, science achievement, and overall academic achievement, but again, the gains were modest. If one restricts the analysis to U.S. students, virtually all of these small effects disappear.

There was no effect for attitudes towards school, gender stereotyping, educational aspirations, self-concept, interpersonal relationships, or body image.

There were not enough controlled studies to examine aggression, body image, interpersonal relations, interest in STEM careers, science attitudes, or victimization.

It's also notable that there was no dosage effect: the advantage was no larger when all classes within a school were single-sex classes, compared to when a single class was.

The authors were also interested in evaluating whether single sex classes were effective for boys of color. They reported that there were not enough controlled studies to answer this question, but even restricting the analysis to uncontrolled studies, the effects were minimal.



Here is more **evidence** making a similar argument—that many of the innovative teaching methods used in single-gender classrooms are beneficial to all students (and not because of gendered reasons):

(Margaret Talbot, staff writer, The New Yorker, “The case against single-sex classrooms,” <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/comment/2012/07/single-sex-education.html>, July 12 2012)

Back in the mid-nineties, when I was reporting on single-sex classrooms, evolutionary psychology was hot, and “hardwired” was the new buzz word, injected like a vitamin shot into weak arguments. Men were hardwired for sleeping around and math, women for monogamy and English. Most people didn’t know much about brain science, but that didn’t stop them from trotting out vaguely recalled findings based on a handful of M.R.I.s showing that men and women thought differently.

In one way, the fashion in single-sex classrooms has not changed at all. The evidence wasn’t very good then for a gap between the genders’ learning styles so significant that it would mandate separate instruction, and it hasn’t gotten any better. Of course there are psychological and intellectual differences between men and women, but meta-analyses of the best studies show that those differences are relatively small, that there is a great deal of variability among individuals, and that, as the neuroscientist Lise Eliot writes, “fundamentally, men and women are more similar than different.” In an article called, bluntly, “The Pseudoscience of Single-Sex Schooling,” which was co-authored by Diane Halpern, a research psychologist at Claremont McKenna college, and published in *Science* magazine this fall, Halpern et al. conclude that “there is no well-designed research showing that single-sex education improves students’ academic performance.” As Halpern and her co-authors point out, there are some excellent single-sex programs, and some can point to real gains, but often these can be attributed to selection bias—the children involved were more committed students—and to the motivation and sense of mission among teachers and staff.

When I was reporting on single-sex education experiments in the nineties, one of the things I noticed was that teaching methods enthusiastically billed as better for girls, like hands-on science demonstrations, or mixing word problems in with more standard equations, would be better for anyone without a natural bent for math or science. A woman whose daughters attend one of the West Virginia middle schools with boys’ and girls’ classes contributed an article this week to the A.C.L.U. Web site in which she pointed out that her school’s all-male classes operated on the humane assumption that many kids concentrate better if they’re permitted to move about a bit. In the boys’ classes, students could lounge in beanbag chairs and run around outside sometimes to “blow off steam.” She thought, reasonably enough, that some girls might benefit from a little of the same freedom.



However, to really strengthen your case, you don't only want to provide *defense* to educational achievement arguments. You also want to advance arguments that are *offense*, reasons why single-gender classrooms are not just *not better*, but are actively *worse*.

We already discussed how stereotyping arguments can be used to create offense surrounding gender equality. However, there is also another simple route you may want to pursue: social skills and real-world preparation. The argument is that schools need to do more than teach children "reading, writing, and 'rithmetic," they also need to teach them to be well-developed individuals with good social skills who can function comfortably in society and the workplace. Single-gender classrooms, you can argue, interfere with this goal.

Here is **evidence**:

(Marie Diamond, special projects & communications director at TFA, Teach for America, "Point/Counterpoint: Boys Have Cooties! The Trouble With Separating The Sexes," <https://www.teachforamerica.org/blog/pointcounterpoint-boys-have-cooties-trouble-separating-sexes>, July 27 2012)

The thing is, sparing students from having to deal with members of opposite sex in school doesn't spare them from having to deal with them in life. And it might make it more awkward and complicated when they do. My friends who went to single-sex schools consistently said they felt like they had missed a critical life lesson in becoming comfortable interacting with the opposite sex. When they went on to the next steps in their lives—generally co-ed colleges or the workplace—gender was a stumbling block for them to navigate in a way it simply wasn't for their peers for whom learning with boys and girls had long been the norm. No matter where we grow up, we all have to interact with members of the opposite sex throughout our adult lives. Isn't it better if we start practicing early?



But the thing about separating boys and girls in school that makes me saddest is how it deprives kids of the chance to have more friendships with members of the opposite sex. It isn't impossible to have friends outside of school, of course, but school friends are important. Many of my best buddies growing up were boys in my classes. My school experience would have been a lot bleaker without them.

More evidence:

(Ovetta Wiggins, The Washington Post, "Students at Prince George's school learn in single-gender classrooms," http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/boys-and-girls-learn-separately-at-prince-georges-school/2014/02/10/8e242ec2-8eac-11e3-b46a-5a3d0d2130da_story.html, February 10 2014)

But a report released last week by the Psychological Bulletin — which reviewed 184 studies to compare the outcomes of learning in single-sex and coed classrooms — raised questions about whether there are any real advantages to single-sex classrooms.

Janet Shibley Hyde, one of the report's co-authors, said there was no evidence to support the contention that boys do better verbally or that girls improve in math and science when in single-sex settings.

Shibley Hyde, a professor of psychology and gender and women's studies at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, said she thinks that separating students might not adequately prepare them for college and careers.

"One of the major purposes of school is to prepare students for the adult world, and that world is coed," Shibley Hyde said. "I think we do a disservice to students by not preparing them for the adult world."



You might also be interested in making arguments about children who are gay or transgender. The assumptions made about these children in a gender-segregated environment may be inaccurate and damaging. Here is **evidence**:

(Jill Filipovic, lawyer & columnist, Al Jazeera America, "Why do we still segregate kids by sex?", <http://america.aljazeera.com/opinions/2014/2/single-sex-educationgirlsboyschoolsystem.html>, February 18 2014)

Sex segregation also raises issues of inclusion for students who may be in the early stages of developing a gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender identity. The idea that single-sex education keeps students from being distracted by the opposite sex is premised on the assumption that the students are heterosexual. And a transgender kid may wind up in a single-sex classroom that does not match his or her developing needs, putting a child who identifies as female in a boys' classroom or vice-versa. Single-sex education assumes there are significant, unbridgeable differences between boys and girls; it seeks to harness and cater to those differences in the classroom. This can make an already-vulnerable child who feels she is not actually the gender she was assigned at birth feel even more out of place.

In addition to crafting your own offense, you will also want to be prepared to defend against pro arguments. One common pro argument will surround "achievement gaps," that is, when one group of students consistently significantly outperforms another group in one or more subjects. Some might discuss girls underperforming in STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering, and math), while others might talk about the "crisis of American boys" (that they are falling behind—a number of news outlets have ran alarmed articles making this claim in the past few years). You can answer these arguments about gender gaps using all of the arguments above.

Some other pro teams might make achievement gap arguments about racial or ethnic minorities, or socio-economically disadvantaged students. While there isn't much evidence supporting increased



performance overall in single-gender classrooms, there is some limited data suggesting that young boys of color, especially those from low-income families, do better in single-gender classrooms. Again, many of the arguments we have already discussed will answer this argument. However, you may also want to prepare to address this point specifically.

Here is **evidence** answering both the “boys in crisis” argument, as well as arguing that focusing on gender trades off with better solutions for boys of color:

(Sara Mead, Senior policy analyst at Education Sector, independent nonprofit nonpartisan education think tank, “The evidence suggests otherwise: the truth about boys and girls,” http://www.educationsector.org/usr_doc/ESO_BoysAndGirls.pdf, June 2006)

If you’ve been paying attention to the education news lately, you know that American boys are in crisis. After decades spent worrying about how schools “shortchange girls,”¹ the eyes of the nation’s education commentariat are now fixed on how they shortchange boys. In 2006 alone, a *Newsweek* cover story, a major *New Republic* article, a long article in *Esquire*, a “Today” show segment, and numerous op-eds have informed the public that boys are falling behind girls in elementary and secondary school and are increasingly outnumbered on college campuses. A young man in Massachusetts filed a civil rights complaint with the U.S. Department of Education, arguing that his high school’s homework and community service requirements discriminate against boys.² A growth industry of experts is advising educators and policymakers how to make schools more “boy friendly” in an effort to reverse this slide. It’s a compelling story that seizes public attention with its “man bites dog” characteristics. It touches on Americans’ deepest insecurities, ambivalences, and fears about changing gender roles and the “battle of the sexes.” It troubles not only parents of boys, who fear their sons are falling behind, but also parents of girls, who fear boys’ academic deficits will undermine their daughters’ chances of finding suitable mates. But the truth is far different from what these accounts suggest. The real story is not bad news about boys doing worse; it’s good news about girls doing better. In fact, with a few exceptions, American boys are scoring higher and achieving more than they ever have before. But girls have just improved their performance on some measures even faster. As a result, girls have narrowed or even closed some academic gaps that previously favored boys, while other long-standing gaps that favored girls have widened, leading to the belief that boys are falling behind. There’s no doubt that some groups of boys— particularly Hispanic and black boys and boys from low-income homes—are in real trouble. But the predominant issues for



them are race and class, not gender. Closing racial and economic gaps would help poor and minority boys more than closing gender gaps, and focusing on gender gaps may distract attention from the bigger problems facing these youngsters. The hysteria about boys is partly a matter of perspective. While most of society has finally embraced the idea of equality for women, the idea that women might actually surpass men in some areas (even as they remain behind in others) seems hard for many people to swallow. Thus, boys are routinely characterized as “falling behind” even as they improve in absolute terms.

Overall, remember that these debates are always a *comparison*. It is not good enough to simply read a couple of cards establishing that there is a problem with single-gender classrooms. You must engage the pro team’s argumentation, and provide a rationale for why your costs outweigh their benefits. Why are the arguments they isolate false, or less important than yours? You should be providing this analysis to your judge in every single speech.

Keep in mind, also, there are always arguments you could make that are not discussed here. You are encouraged to do your own research and pursue your own ideas. This guide is only an introduction; I’m sure you can come up with numerous other arguments. Don’t be afraid to get creative!

Now you should be ready to go craft an excellent case and win all of your con debates! As always, you can email completed cases to **Rachel.Stevens@NCPA.org** for a free case critique. Don’t forget to also join the discussion in the comments below, and keep checking back for more Debate Central postings about this month’s PF topic. Good luck!