



## PF March 2014

### Pro Analysis

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The current NSDL (formerly known as NFL) Public Forum resolution for March is **Resolved: Single-gender classrooms would improve the quality of education in American public schools**. Today, we're going to look at some of the basics of building a pro case on this unusual 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.

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**.



So, as the pro team, your job on this topic is to argue that schools will, overall, achieve superior educational results in an environment where boys and girls are educated separately. Let's take a look at some of the arguments in favor of that.

The most obvious argument you may want to make is that **single-gender classrooms improve academic performance and close achievement gaps**. For example, a common argument is that girls underperform in math and science due to the perception that those are "boy subjects," resulting in teachers who do not push girls to excel in these classes, or who assume "she must just not be good at this" instead of helping her work through it. Single-gender classrooms, then, could eliminate this teacher-attention discrepancy.

Here is **evidence** on this point:

*(National Education Association (NEA), "Research Spotlight on Single-Gender Education," <http://www.nea.org/tools/17061.htm>, no date given)*

In 1993, American University professors Myra Sadker and David Sadker published their research in *Failing in Fairness: How America's Schools Cheat Girls*, which describes striking discoveries about fairness in American schools. During a three-year study, trained observers visited more than 100 elementary school classrooms in Connecticut, Maryland, Massachusetts, Virginia, and the District of Columbia and noted student-teacher interactions, including the following:

- Boys called out eight times as often as girls did. When a boy yelled out, the teacher ignored the "raise your hand" rule and usually praised his contribution. Girls who called out got reminders to raise their hands.
- Teachers valued boys' comments more than girls' comments. Teachers responded to girls with a simple nod or an OK, but they praised, corrected, helped, and criticized boys.



- Boys were encouraged to solve problems on their own, but teachers helped girls who were stuck on problems.

Male dominance in the classroom may come as no surprise to advocates of single-gender education who suggest that boys and girls are regularly treated differently in coeducational settings and that both boys and girls could both benefit from single-gender classrooms. Studies suggest that when boys are in single-gender classrooms, they are more successful in school and more likely to pursue a wide range of interests and activities.

Girls who learn in all-girl environments are believed to be more comfortable responding to questions and sharing their opinions in class and more likely to explore more “nontraditional” subjects such as math, science, and technology. In addition, advocates believe that when children learn with single-gender peers, they are more likely to attend to their studies, speak more openly in the classroom, and feel more encouraged to pursue their interests and achieve their fullest potential.

In addition to gender biases in teaching styles, you can also claim that **differences in brain development between boys and girls demand different teaching styles.**

Here is **evidence**:

*(David Chadwell, South Carolina Department of Education single-gender initiatives coordinator, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD), “Single-Gender Classes Can Respond to the Needs of Boys and Girls,” <http://www.ascd.org/ascd-express/vol5/512-newvoices.aspx>, 2014)*

Offering single-gender classes is an effective response to school-level data that shows achievement gaps between males and females, where students are not achieving at expected levels, or as a way to engage parents by offering a choice. Educators thinking boys and girls learn differently isn't



justification for offering single-gender classes. Rather, gender differences are a further reason for teachers to embrace differentiated instruction within coed as well as single-gender classes. Although experience clearly affects the development and wiring of the brain, growing evidence suggests that gender also seems to be a contributing factor in brain development. In general, researchers agree that

- Boys have a higher physical activity level and develop self-control later than girls.
- Girls seem to show stronger verbal skills and demonstrate empathy more readily than boys.

This means that there are probably more boys who are more active more often in the classroom and more girls who more often show strengths in using words verbally and in writing. Learning about gender differences can help teachers of single-gender and coed classes meet the needs of students more effectively. In single-gender classes, building a community and implementing strategies may be easier.

Be aware, of course, that if you make arguments that are based on biology (such as the physiology of the brain), versus cultural differences, you may have to have a debate about whether or not these brain differences truly exist, or if they're simply the product of sexist biases in research. The "nature versus nurture" debate, especially as it pertains to gender, is highly controversial. There is plenty of evidence out there suggesting that the bio-neurological differences observed between males and females are unimportant. Of course, there is evidence on both sides of that issue. Stay cognizant of this when you're formulating your pro case, and write excellent frontlines if you are planning on making controversial statements.

As you are conducting your own research on this topic, you will probably discover that the data addressing whether or not single-gender schooling actually improves test scores is pretty inconclusive. You may have a hard time definitively proving there is a measurable academic benefit to the single-gender model, when considering all students. Grades and test performances aren't the only ways to measure "quality of education," though. **Personal development, social skills, and emotional health** are also important.



Here is **evidence** claiming single-gender classrooms improve these personal and social outcomes:

*(David S. Benders, Educational Studies Unit @ Union College, "A Review of Gender-Segregated Classrooms in Public Schools," [http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2011781](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2011781), February 17 2012)*

Interestingly enough, the overall trend among the chosen studies indicated that girls thrived better in gender-segregated classrooms than did their counterparts. Though test results rarely increased for either sex with the implementation of gender segregation, girls showed notable improvement in areas such as self-esteem, peer relationships, and attention/interaction within the classroom. Haag (2000) noted that self-esteem was increased in almost every sub-category, including academic, athletic, and social esteem. Likewise, a study conducted by the US Department of Education showed that girls received greater benefits in peer interactions, academic behaviors, socio-emotional aspects, safe behavior, and displaying order and control (Riordan, Faddis, Beam, Seager, Tanney, DiBiase, 2008). In interviews conducted among parents, concern that eating disorders might increase among gender-segregated classes abounded. However, subsequent data proved that behavior, conduct and self-esteem improved among single-sex classrooms (Mael, Alonso, Gibson, Rogers, Smith, 2005). Another congruent trend showed a greater inclination among females toward male dominated subjects such as math, science and computer (Mael, et al, 2005). Boys, on the other hand, showed little difference in academic responsiveness to segregation in almost every study. The only consistent and note-worthy improvement was that of behavior. Wills, Kilpatrick and Hutton saw a strong improvement in self-discipline, accountability, motivation and commitment to schoolwork among boys (2006). Riordan, et al, observed that boys in segregated classrooms were less likely to cause disruptions, interacted more positively with one another and showed greater respect for their teachers (2008). As a negative, boys who had classes taught predominately by females responded adversely to gender-segregation, citing a decreased sense of wellbeing (Haag, 2000).



More **evidence:**

*(Erin Teater, director of teacher leadership development with TFA, Teach for America, "Point/Counterpoint: No Girls Allowed! The Case For Gender-Segregated Schools," <http://www.teachforamerica.org/blog/pointcounterpoint-no-girls-allowed-case-gender-segregated-schools>, July 26 2012)*

Data supporting or contesting single-sex schools varies, depending on who you ask, so I will only speak to my experiences and what I have seen. When the opportunities are leveraged, I have seen tremendous things come out of all boys and all girls schools. Simply segregating the sexes does not alone close the achievement gap. Sorry, it's not that easy. You still need all that other stuff (you know, strong teachers, high expectations, purposeful leaders, etc.).

However, when the focus is on character development, leadership, and culture building, these schools surpass every other model I have seen. Chicago graduates less than half of its young black men. 44%. That's it. This keeps me up at night. It keeps the folks over at Urban Prep up at night as well, and that is why they founded three campuses in some of Chicago's most struggling neighborhoods.

For the past three years, 100% of their graduating seniors have been admitted to college. How's that for a proof point? With a narrow focus on educating African American males in urban neighborhoods, Urban Prep is able to tailor their curriculum to the unique needs of their students and invest them in shifting the assumptions of others by defying the odds.

I also recognize that separating boys and girls can limit perspectives at times, which is why I also adore another model coming out of Chicago: that of the Noble Network. Instead of separating boys and girls for the entire day, they offer advisories that are gender specific and led by teachers of the same gender. This advisory model provides students with a daily opportunity to discuss all of the "extra" stuff: study skills, personal goal setting, behavior accountability, leadership development, and general character development in a safe space where they feel comfortable being vulnerable and open with their advisor and peers.

The advisors are tremendous role models for the kids, and they are able to build a special camaraderie fostered among people of the same gender. There is an openness and honesty that comes from women speaking to women about female-specific challenges, and men speaking to men about male-specific challenges. These advisories become an integral part of the development of Noble students into self-advocating scholars.



When making these types of arguments, it is important to include some discussion of why the judge should evaluate criteria other than grades/test scores/etc when considering what makes up a “quality education.” This should not be difficult to prove. School does not exist simply to force students to memorize historical dates and algebra equations; it exists to prepare children to become healthy, productive adults capable of functioning in modern society. You can claim that single-gender classrooms best foster this kind of personal development.

Another way to carve out offense is to make the debate about **specific groups** for whom single-gender classrooms *do* seem to improve academic performance. There is data suggesting that single-gender classrooms particularly improve performance in young boys of color, who statistically suffer the greatest gaps in educational achievement relative to other groups.

Here is **evidence**:

*(David Chadwell, South Carolina Department of Education single-gender initiatives coordinator, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD), “Single-Gender Classes Can Respond to the Needs of Boys and Girls,” <http://www.ascd.org/ascd-express/vol5/512-newvoices.aspx>, 2014)*

Every year, we administer student, parent, and teacher surveys at schools with single-gender classes with regard to self-confidence, motivation, participation, and desire to complete hard work. Last year's results show that an average of 60 percent of the students' self-reports indicate that these characteristics increase by being in single-gender classes. Another 20 percent of students indicate "no change," while 20 percent perceive a decrease in those traits. It is important to note that within the student surveys, generally, African American students indicate the highest levels in increase across characteristics, a possible indication that gendered classrooms could be part of a response to



the current achievement gap. Overall, about 75 percent of teachers and 68 percent of parents responded that they had seen an increase in those positive traits among their children involved in single-gender education.

**More evidence:**

*(Erin Teater, director of teacher leadership development with TFA, Teach for America, "Point/Counterpoint: No Girls Allowed! The Case For Gender-Segregated Schools," <http://www.teachforamerica.org/blog/pointcounterpoint-no-girls-allowed-case-gender-segregated-schools>, July 26 2012)*

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If you choose to make this argument, you will want to support it with some evidence about racial educational discrepancies in the United States. These cards are plentiful and will not be difficult to find. Making arguments about how specific underserved demographics benefit from single-gender classrooms is strategically useful, since (as we previously discussed) it will not always be easy to win that





there is an overall academic benefit across all students (existing research doesn't necessarily support that claim). However, if you can make the argument "even if all students don't benefit from single-gender classrooms, certain students (who are currently being left behind by the system) do benefit," you will be in much better shape.

Overall, the key to this topic will be remembering that these debates are always a *comparison*. It is not good enough to simply read a couple of cards isolating a benefit to single-gender classrooms. You must engage the con team's argumentation, and provide a rationale *for why your benefits outweigh their costs*. 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 pro 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!