

BOYS' BRAINS VS. GIRLS' BRAINS: WHAT SEX SEGREGATION TEACHES STUDENTS

Why are so many public schools experimenting with single-sex education today?

While school districts institute sex segregation for different reasons, an increasingly popular reason for separating boys and girls in school is the notion that boys' brains and girls' brains are so different that boys and girls can't both succeed in the same classroom.

Do boys and girls learn differently?

The best answer is that *all* students learn differently. These differences are based on many factors, and do not break down simply along gender lines. A teaching strategy that helps one girl may not help another, and an approach that one boy responds well to may not work for another boy.

What are proponents of sex-segregated education saying about how boys and girls learn best?

Two of the most influential advocates of the theory that sex-segregated education is best for students are the writers Leonard Sax and Michael Gurian. Sax is a psychologist; Gurian is a corporate consultant, novelist, and counselor. Neither performs his own scientific research. Both of them train teachers in public school districts experimenting with sex segregation. In other words, many of the public school teachers teaching single-sex classes rely on the theories and methods that Sax and Gurian promote. For this reason, in trying to figure out whether sex segregation in public schools is a good idea, it makes sense to look a little more closely at their influential theories.

These are a few of the things that Sax tells teachers:

- Teachers should smile at girls and look them in the eye. However, teachers must not look boys directly in the eye or smile at them.¹
- Boys do well under stress, and girls do badly, so girls should never be given time limits on a test. Girls should take their shoes off in class because this helps them relax and think better.²
- Literature teachers should not ask boys about characters' emotions, and should only focus on what the characters actually did. But teachers should focus on characters' emotions in teaching literature to girls.³
- Boys should receive strict discipline based on asserting power over them. Young boys can be spanked. Girls must never be spanked. Girls should be disciplined by appealing to their empathy.⁴
- A boy who likes to read, who does not enjoy contact sports, and who does not have a lot of close male friends has a problem, even if he thinks he is happy. He should be firmly disciplined, required to spend time with "normal males," and made to play sports.⁵

These are some of the things Gurian tells teachers:

- Boys are better than girls in math because boys' bodies receive daily surges of testosterone. Girls have similar skills only during the few days in their menstrual cycle when they have an estrogen surge. Because of this estrogen surge, "an adolescent girl may perform well on any test, including math, a few days a month." Boys can do well any day.⁶
- Boys are abstract thinkers, and so are naturally good at things like philosophy and engineering. Girls are concrete thinkers and do better in math and science if teachers give them objects that they can touch, such as beans or buttons, to illustrate the lesson.⁷
- Boys should be given Nerf baseball bats with which to hit things so they can release tension during class.⁸
- "Pursuit of power is a universal male trait. Pursuit of a comfortable environment is a universal female trait."⁹

Can sex segregation encourage teachers to treat boys one way and girls another way?

Yes. As the examples above show, teachers around the country are being encouraged to treat girls and boys differently, based on overgeneralizations about the differences between boys and girls. The proponents of these theories use lots of language about brain structures and hormones that sounds scientific, but in the end, they are simply arguing that the old stereotypes about what boys are good at and what girls are good at are accurate. In our own lives, however, we all know lots of people who don't fit neatly into these gender stereotypes.

Sex segregation based on theories of gender differences is the wrong approach because it encourages educators to oversimplify the issue of learning style differences, and to ignore the more nuanced needs of both girls and boys. The better solution is to give all teachers the training and resources to reach students with a variety of learning styles, regardless of students' gender, and to discourage teachers from relying on imprecise stereotypes about how boys and girls learn.

For more information about sex segregation in public schools, contact the ACLU Women's Rights Project.

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¹ Leonard Sax, *Why Gender Matters: What Parents and Teachers Need to Know About the Emerging Science of Sex Differences* 86 (2005).

² *Id.* at 88-92.

³ *Id.* at 108-112.

⁴ *Id.* at 179-83, 188.

⁵ *Id.* at 218-28.

⁶ Michael Gurian, *The Boys and Girls Learn Differently Action Guide for Teachers* 100 (2003).

⁷ *Id.* at 17, 90-92.

⁸ *Id.* at 75.

⁹ Gurian Institute, Teacher Training Materials, "How Boys and Girls Learn Differently" (2006).