**Single Sex Classes Popular As More Public Schools Split Up Boys And Girls**

**    |  By    JESSIE L. BONNER and HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH**

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**MIDDLETON, Idaho** -- Robin Gilbert didn't set out to **confront** [call out] gender stereotypes when she split up the boys and girls at her elementary school in rural southwestern Idaho.

But that's exactly what happened, with her Middleton Heights Elementary now among dozens of public schools nationwide being targeted by the **American Civil Liberties Union** [an organization that fights for people’s equal rights] in a bitter struggle over whether single-sex learning should be continued. Under pressure, single-sex programs have been dropped at schools from Missouri to Louisiana.

"It doesn't frustrate me," Gilbert said of the criticism, "but it makes the work harder."

While Gilbert's school is believed to be the only one in Idaho offering single-sex classes, the movement is widespread in states like South Carolina, which has more than 100 schools that offer some form of a single-gender program.

Single-sex classes began **proliferating** [rapidly increasing] after the U.S. Education Department relaxed restrictions in 2006. With research showing boys, particularly minority boys, are graduating at lower rates than girls and faring worse on tests, plenty of schools were paying attention.

In 2002, only about a dozen schools were separating the sexes, according to the National Association for Single Sex Public Education, an **advocacy** [public support] group. Now, an estimated 500 public schools across the country offer some all-boy and all-girl classrooms.

Proponents argue the separation allows for a **tailored** [customized] instruction and cuts down on gender-driven distractions among boys and girls, such as flirting. But critics **decry** [criticize] the movement as promoting harmful gender stereotypes and **depriving** [preventing] kids [from] equal educational opportunities. The ACLU claims many schools offer the classes in a way that conflicts with the U.S. Constitution and Title IX, a federal law banning sex discrimination in education. Researchers also have **weighed in** [given their opinion].

Diane F. Halpern, a former president of the American Psychological Association, co-authored a review of studies last fall in the journal Science that found research doesn't support the benefits of single-sex education. Additionally, there are lots of problems whenever you segregate people into groups, Halpern said.

"Stereotyping increases so we really do have lots of data that says it's just not supported," she said.

However, proponents have put out their own studies, showing the benefits of separating students. Middleton Heights Elementary cited the research when it first **piloted** [started] single-sex classes in a few grades. The goal was to address the struggles boys were having in reading.

The idea proved so popular that single-sex classes have expanded throughout the school. Parents can **opt out** [choose not to participate], a choice required by law, if they want their kids in a traditional co-ed classroom.

In the single-sex classes, teachers use microphones that allow them to electronically adjust the tone of their voice to match the level that research suggests is best for boys. When preparing for a test, the boys may go for a run, or engage in some other activity, while the girls are more likely to do calming exercises, such as yoga.

On a recent tour, Gilbert peeked into a classroom of third grade boys, who had decorated their walls with a camping theme, complete with construction paper campfires and a sign that read "fishing for books."

Next door, the third-grade girls **opted** **for** [                       ] an "under the sea" **motif** [theme].  When they spotted Gilbert in their classroom door way, a few of the girls jumped from their seats and ran to give her a quick embrace.

They learn the same curriculum, they still lunch and play at recess together, but the differences in their learning environments are **apparent** [clear], from the blue chalkboards in the boy classrooms, to the red paper hearts that decorated the wall of one of the girl's classrooms.

These environments are driven by student interests and what they're learning at the time, Gilbert said.

Dr. Leonard Sax, the founder of the Pennsylvania-based National Association for Single Sex Public Education, **contends** [argues] the movement is about breaking down gender stereotypes, not promoting them.

"We want more girls engaged in robotics and computer programming and physics and engineering," Sax said in a telephone interview. "We want more boys engaged in poetry and creative writing and Spanish language."

For advocates like Sax, the increase in this form of learning is exciting, but it's troubling for others.

The ACLU launched a national campaign, Teach Kids, Not Stereotypes, in May and sent **cease-and-desist** [demand to stop] letters to school districts in Maine, West Virginia, Alabama, Mississippi and Virginia. The group also asked state officials to investigate single-sex programs in Florida, while sending public record requests to schools in another five states, including to Gilbert's school in Idaho.

Doug Bonney is legal director of the ACLU of Kansas and Western Missouri, where he successfully challenged single sex classes in Missouri's Adrian R-III School District. He argues there's no proof single-sex classrooms work while there's plenty of evidence they actually enhance gender stereotypes and lead to sexism.

"This isn't the right step to address higher dropout rates by boys," Bonney said. "They promote false stereotypes about sex-based differences that don't exist. Promoting sex stereotypes can harm both girls and boys."

Both sides agree the idea is not new and has a long history in private schools. But Galen Sherwin, staff attorney with the ACLU Women's Rights Project, said its history in public schools is much darker and has roots in the South, where it was broadly instituted in an effort to **evade** [sneak away from] … desegregation requirements ... to try "to prevent black boys from being in the same room as white girls."

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*Hollingsworth reported from Kansas City, Mo.*