

SINGLE-SEX PHYSICAL EDUCATION CLASSES

INTRODUCTION

In October 2006, the Bush administration changed the Title IX regulations as they pertain to single-sex education, allowing schools more leeway in creating and justifying single-sex classes. These regulations stirred much controversy within the gender equity community regarding whether single-sex education is permissible or desirable. The following guidelines reflect the Women's Sports Foundation position on single-sex and co-education in the context of physical education.

I. WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO ENSURE THAT GIRLS HAVE ACCESS TO QUALITY PHYSICAL EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES IN SCHOOLS?

POSITION: Girls reap positive benefits from physical activity at a young age in terms of psychological and physical well-being and academic and career success later in life. For many young girls, physical education class is their first and only exposure to physical activity.

Girls who are physically active have better body imageⁱ, more confidenceⁱⁱ and self-esteemⁱⁱⁱ, experience greater academic^{iv} and career success^v, and have a reduced risk of obesity^{vi}, diabetes^{vii}, heart disease^{viii}, osteoporosis^{ix}, breast cancer^x, depression^{xi}, teenage pregnancy^{xii} and anxiety^{xiii}. With the pervasive, but preventable, obesity epidemic in the United States, we cannot afford to not give young girls quality physical education classes. Furthermore, the need for transportation to sports facilities, concerns for safety and the expense of after-school sports and physical activity programs are participation deterrents. School physical education is the most cost-effective mechanism for delivering quality movement programs to the greatest number of children.

II. WHEN IS IT NECESSARY OR APPROPRIATE FOR SCHOOLS TO REQUIRE BOYS AND GIRLS TO PARTICIPATE IN SEPARATE PHYSICAL EDUCATION CLASSES?

POSITION: Mandatory single-sex physical education is never appropriate. Schools should offer co-educational physical education.

Physical education is not the same as elite level sports. Its primary purpose is not competition. Rather, physical education is instructional, and there is no justification for sex segregation in programs in which the purpose is instructional. Segregating sexes based on such criteria would invite discrimination. Given historical discrimination and more than three decades of efforts to remedy such inequities in athletics, it has been demonstrated that the risk and likelihood of inequality is greater when the sexes are kept separate. The development of single-sex curriculum offerings authorizes general and unproven assertions as adequate justifications for sex segregation in the classroom. These often lead to unequal distribution of support, instruction, facilities and academic resources, or an unbalanced presentation of educational opportunities and the perpetuation of gender-biased stereotypes. Boys and girls are better served when they learn, play and engage in sports and other physical activities with and against other. Research demonstrates that girls who participate in physical activity with boys at an early age grow up to be more resilient.

III. ARE THERE INSTANCES WITHIN COED PHYSICAL EDUCATION WHEN ACTIVITIES SHOULD BE SEPARATED ON THE BASIS OF SEX?

POSITION: No. Skill practice and instructional activities do not require separation of the sexes. If competitive games are used as culminating activities as part of instructional classes, physical education teachers should always be aware of the need to match students by size, strength and skill level in order to create safe competitive situation, even in contact sports.

Just as academic courses are co-educational and may be divided by ability and skill level (advanced math, etc.), physical education classes should be similarly offered (beginning softball, intermediate basketball, advanced soccer) so that students of similar skill and experience are participating together. When class activities include competition, teams should be designated by the instructor in order to create match-ups between players of similar size, strength and skill level, not arbitrary stereotypes based on gender. Unlike competitive sports, in physical education classes, the teacher has total control over who goes into which level of play and thus can place students in appropriately matched skill groups that maximize participation and safety. For example, in a teacher-organized game of three-on-three basketball, the teams would be comprised of students with commensurate skill levels, size and strength to equalize play. This might include having games comprised of beginner, intermediate and advanced teams.

IV. DOES THE RESEARCH THAT SHOWS PHYSIOLOGICAL AND DEVELOPMENTAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE SEXES JUSTIFY A SINGLE-SEX LEARNING ENVIRONMENT?

POSITION: No. There are more significant physiological and developmental differences within each sex than between the sexes. There is not enough research to support a finding that either co-educational or single-sex physical education classes are better for students. Also, the research supporting single-sex classes that has been published is inconclusive.^{xiv}

Physical differences between the sexes that do exist are not substantial enough to justify single-sex classes for all students because development among individuals varies so greatly during adolescence that physical differences between members of one sex are actually greater than the average difference between the two sexes.^{xv} Furthermore, social cognitive theory posits that individual factors such as biology, personal attitudes and preferences, environmental factors such as societal pressures and role models, and behaviors from experiences influence gender development, and this suggests that differences in athletic ability may be a result of learned behavior and not innate traits.^{xvi} Fortunately, teachers who want to change the learning environment in their classes to create a more equitable experience can do so.

V. WILL CREATING CO-EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENTS ADEQUATELY ADDRESS THE DISCRIMINATION GIRLS FACE IN PHYSICAL EDUCATION CLASSES?

POSITION: No. Co-educational physical education is just one of many steps necessary to address girls' discrimination in physical education.

To improve the quality of physical education, classes need to be integrated in a way that creates a forum for success. This includes smaller class sizes, better teacher training, increased funding, more parental involvement, better disciplinary policies and better quality of curricula.^{xvii} Learned gendered behavior must be consciously addressed in this mixed-gender environment through practices and policies that demonstrate successful integrated play. Physical education teachers must play a role in actively decreasing sex stereotypes, not reinforcing traditional sex-segregated activities, and increasing high expectations and the appeal of lifelong exercise for all.^{xviii}

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Endnotes

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^{xviii} *Handbook for Achieving Gender Equity through Education* chapters, 18 on "Gender Equity in Physical Education and Athletics" and 7 "The Treatment of Gender Equity in Teacher Education."