

Heroic Behavior vs. Wedding Cakes

Excerpt from “Gender Segregation: Separate but Effective?”

—David Holthouse

Separating boys and girls is a longstanding tradition at private and parochial schools. The concept began to gain traction in American public schools earlier this decade as schools began to experiment with SSPE in oft-desperate attempts to reduce disciplinary problems and improve test scores. The Department of Education accelerated the trend in 2006 by altering the Title IX provision of the No Child Left Behind Act to ease restrictions on gender-segregated education in public schools.

Since then, advocates like Dr. Sax, a child psychologist who never set foot in a classroom as a teacher, have stepped up their promotion of SSPE as a panacea for public education. With scant evidence backing them up, they herald SSPE as the most effective way to narrow the achievement gaps between rich and poor students and black and white students that persist eight years after the passage of No Child Left Behind.

Although SSPE programs are now in place at schools in 39 states and the District of Columbia, they are particularly popular in urban districts with large minority populations, and most concentrated in the Southeastern U.S. South Carolina has 173 SSPE schools, by far the most of any state.

Last year, the largest school system in Alabama, the Mobile County Public School System, with 66,000 students, implemented SSPE programs in eight of its 93 schools with no parental notification. The most extreme program was at Hankins Middle School in Theodore, Alabama, where boys and girls ate lunch at different times and were prohibited from speaking to one another on school grounds.

Hankins teachers were directed to create “competitive, high-energy” classrooms for boys and “cooperative, quiet” classrooms for girls. Boys were to be taught “heroic behavior.” Girls were to learn “good character.” Sixth-grade language arts exercises called for boys to brainstorm action words used in sports. Girls were instructed to describe their dream wedding cake. Electives were gender-specific. Boys took computer applications. Girls took drama. No exceptions.

Mark Jones, whose son Jacob attends Hankins, said that when he complained to the principal about the changes, she told him they were necessary because “boys’ and girls’ brains were so different they needed different curriculum.”

“Segregating boys and girls didn’t make things any better for our children. In fact they made things worse,” Jones said. “Our kids were basically being taught ideas about gender that come from the Dark Ages.”

Another parent, Terry Stevens, also objected. “The real world is integrated, and it’s important to both me and my son that he learn in a coed environment,” Stevens said.