



Editorial/Opinion

Posted 3/28/2006

Single-sex schools can work

Hortense and Nelson Bruno raise two boys in a tough Brooklyn, N.Y., neighborhood not known for its schools. Anthony, 7, landed a spot in the all-boys Excellence Charter School of Bedford Stuyvesant. Emanuel, 8, remains in the regular neighborhood school, too old to qualify for the K-2 charter school.

Emanuel's teacher asks the class to do things that aren't boy-friendly. His latest assignment: Build a "feelings chart" for

Little Red Riding Hood showing who's happy or sad throughout the book. Anthony spends twice as much time on literacy skills, none of it describing "feelings."

Already, Anthony has turned into an accomplished reader and writer. Ask him to read from his journal, and you'll learn plenty about elephants. His mother has a message for the rest of the country: Single-sex education can work.

Hortense Bruno's message is about to become more important. Before the start of the next school year, the U.S. Department of Education is expected to release final rules for how public schools can experiment with single-sex education.

Currently, single-sex public schools are hard to find, mostly because Title IX generally prohibits single-gender education except for gym, sex education and chorus. But giving single-sex schools the legal OK isn't enough. Parents won't accept them until they learn the answers to two key questions:

- Are single-sex schools discriminatory? Dividing by gender is unlike separating by race. Boys and girls learn at different paces and different ways, research shows. By contrast, black and white children learn the same way. Single-sex school discriminate only if one gender gets short shrift.

- Are single-sex schools any better? Here the evidence is mixed, and more experimentation and research are needed. Minorities, for example, might benefit more than middle-class white children could, an Education Department review suggests. Successful single-sex schools must do more than merely separate boys from girls. Succeeding with boys, for example, requires shifting the reading material, changing the pacing frequently and making learning competitive.

In the past, single-sex schools have focused more on girls. But given boys' slide in academic performance, more school districts are likely to look at starting all-male schools.

The 2-year-old Excellence Charter School, located on a third-floor walk-up atop a Pentecostal church, doesn't look fancy. But founding principal Jabali Sawicki has cobbled together what's needed to get the 135 African-American boys here excited about education.

From Boston's Roxbury Preparatory Charter School, where he once taught science, Sawicki took the winning math curriculum. From the highly regarded KIPP schools, where he received leadership training, he adopted the cheers that keep antsy boys focused. From the Milwaukee College Preparatory School, he borrowed oft-repeated maxims: "Excellence is not an act but a habit!"

Stir in dozens of other teaching techniques aimed at boys, and you have a school that appears to hum with learning. After the new federal regulations come out, educators considering an all-male school should make the trip up the stairs here. If you run into Hortense Bruno, she's got a story for you.