

CHAPTER ONE

Rethinking Gender Equality

When I first learned that a growing number of public schools teaching grades kindergarten through twelfth across the United States were experimenting with single-sex classes to address issues ranging from low self-esteem among adolescent girls to academic underachievement among at-risk boys, I was more than a little surprised. Of course I was aware that some parochial schools, as well as a handful of elite private schools, remained committed to the idea of educating girls and boys separately. Nonetheless, it was hard for me to comprehend how single-sex education could be on the rise in U.S. *public* schools. In its landmark 1954 decision *Brown v. Board of Education*, a unanimous Supreme Court resoundingly rejected the doctrine of “separate but equal,” declaring unconstitutional a state law establishing racial segregation in Kansas public schools.¹ In the ensuing decades, *Brown* has proven critical not only in efforts to address race discrimination in education but also in confronting discrimination in public schools related to sex, socioeconomic status, disability, language, sexual orientation, and religion,

among other categories of difference.² And while classifications based on sex still are not officially subject to the exacting degree of judicial scrutiny reserved for cases in which racial and other “suspect” classifications are at play, single-sex public education has faced an increasingly inhospitable legal environment in the decades since the *Brown* decision.

In 1972, Congress passed Title IX of the Civil Rights Act, guaranteeing that “no person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.”³ With Title IX in place, it seemed unlikely that separate classes for girls and boys in U.S. public schools would be able to survive legal challenge—an expectation borne out in several high-profile lower-court decisions concerning sex-based admission policies. By the late 1980s, single-sex public education for students in grades K–12 had virtually disappeared from the educational landscape of the United States. In 1996, when the Supreme Court issued its decision in a closely watched case declaring unconstitutional the male-only admissions policy at the state-run Virginia Military Institute, Justice Antonin Scalia bitterly proclaimed single-sex education “functionally dead.”⁴

The seemingly imminent demise of single-sex public education wasn’t just something I had read about: I had lived it. In 1983, as a fifteen-year-old high school sophomore, I had suddenly found myself in the position of being the first girl in a class of nearly 300 boys at Central High School of Philadelphia, the second-oldest public high school in the United States. That year, Pennsylvania’s highest court ruled in *Newberg v. Board of Education* that Central’s all-male admissions policy violated the state constitution’s Equal Rights Amendment.⁵ The *Newberg* decision

turned on a finding that Central High's long-standing sister school, the Philadelphia High School for Girls, afforded substantially inferior educational opportunities to female students. I was already several days into my sophomore year at Girls' High when the *Newberg* decision was announced. My initial response was elation. As an entering freshman at Girls' High, I had hoped that the strength of the academic program and the supportive friendships I expected to form with the other girls would be enough to compensate for the absence of the camaraderie I had always enjoyed with male peers in school. These hopes, however, had been quickly dashed. What I encountered in my first year at Girls' High stands in sharp contrast to the inspiring images of sisterly empowerment frequently summoned in discussions of single-sex education.⁶ While all-girls schools are touted as places where young women can escape the damaging sexist stereotypes that discourage achievement in fields like math and science, my own experience was very different. As a ninth grader, I encountered a curriculum that often subtly, and sometimes not so subtly, *reinforced* gender stereotypes (although I was hardly inclined to object when informed by our biology teacher that we girls could be excused from that most dreaded of high school rites of passage—frog dissection). With more than a touch of adolescent hyperbole, I regarded my ninth-grade year in an all-girls high school as akin to serving time in prison. In hindsight, the analogy strikes me as apt, not so much because both are forms of involuntary confinement, but rather because social life behind bars—as in other sex-segregated social institutions—frequently is structured around the performance of masculine and feminine roles even when members of only one sex are present.

I was understandably delighted when, returning home from school one afternoon just a few days into my sophomore year at

Girls' High, my mother greeted me with some exciting news. An article about the *Newberg* decision had appeared in the local newspaper that morning. Those seeking more information were encouraged to call the Women's Law Project, the organization that had brought the suit on behalf of three girls, now entering their senior year of high school, who previously had been denied admission to Central.⁷ My parents were intrigued, and they called the Women's Law Project lawyers right away. After a brief conversation, the lawyers confirmed that I was entitled to join the six brave young women who had the previous week become the first females in a school of over 1,000 male students in grades nine through twelve. And so, the next morning I set out for school as I normally did—except that instead of getting out of the subway and walking up the stairs to Girls' High, I continued down the block to approach our “brother” institution, Central High. The plan was simple enough, but it was not long before I realized things were going to be more complicated than I ever could have anticipated. As I approached the entrance to Central High that September morning, I was greeted by a phalanx of television cameras and news reporters covering a school walkout being staged by some 150 incensed male students. What followed from that day forward was three intense years in which I experienced the force of opposition to integration in the most personal ways imaginable. Still, by the time the graduation ceremony for my senior class finally rolled around, it was evident that Central's staff, students, and even many alumni were ready to embrace the dawn of a new era rather than bitterly mourning the passage of an old one. A few months after I graduated, Central High welcomed an incoming class of ninth-graders that was over 50 percent female. At the time, I assumed that in the coming years some kind of merger between Girls' High and Central

was all but inevitable, and that the last remaining vestiges of single-sex public education in the United States would quietly fade away.

THE RISE OF SINGLE-SEX EDUCATION

Far from disappearing, in the years since I graduated from Central High, single-sex education has made a striking debut in K–12 public school classrooms across the United States. Contrary to Justice Scalia’s dire prediction, with hindsight it is evident that the *United States v. Virginia* decision marked not the end of single-sex public education but, rather, only a strategic turning point for advocates, who have since redirected their lobbying efforts to focus more intensively on the legislative and regulatory arenas—an approach that has proven remarkably effective. Since the early years of the new millennium, advocates have campaigned vigorously to alter existing civil rights laws that prohibit sex discrimination in public schools. Responding to these efforts, in 2006 the U.S. Department of Education amended its Title IX regulations to ease restrictions on schools that separate students on the basis of sex—the first major change in those regulations in over thirty years since the law originally was passed.

Less than a decade later, experts estimate that there are nearly eighty single-sex public schools across the country, up from just three in 1990.⁸ In addition, an estimated one thousand public schools in the United States offer separate instruction for boys and girls in academic subjects such as language arts and math.⁹ Today, there are single-sex programs all across the United States, from inner-city Los Angeles to rural Maine, from Seattle to Atlanta. South Carolina leads the nation in promoting single-sex education, with over seventy public schools in the

state supporting “single-gender” programs; the highest concentration of K–12 single-sex programs is found in southern states.¹⁰ On an almost daily basis, there is news of another community considering single-sex options in the desperate search for alternatives to the dismal failure of the status quo approach in public education.

A growing number of school districts in the United States are investing their limited resources in experimental single-sex initiatives despite a conspicuous lack of research evidence establishing the benefits of separating girls and boys during the school day. In 2005, the U.S. Department of Education undertook a systematic review of existing research on single-sex education. After an “exhaustive search” of the literature that initially identified over twenty-two hundred published studies, researchers found that fewer than ninety quantitative studies, and just four qualitative studies, met standard criteria of validity.¹¹ The existing data on outcomes in single-sex versus coed learning environments is problematic not only because it is so meager: it also happens that some of the most commonly cited research studies on the subject are among the most shoddy. An often-mentioned study undertaken at Stetson University in Central Florida is a particularly telling example in this regard.¹² In 2001, a team from Stetson launched a three-year-long pilot project that compared test scores in two classes at a local public elementary school: one single-sex and one coed. It has been widely reported by single-sex education advocates, as well as in news media accounts, that the Stetson study found significant improvements in the academic performance of students assigned to single-sex classes. After three years, 37 percent of boys in coed classes reportedly achieved a score of proficient or above on state assessment exams, whereas 86 percent of the boys in the

single-sex classes did. For girls, the reported figures were 59 percent and 75 percent, respectively. These results certainly are intriguing. But those hoping to learn more about these findings will quickly discover that the Stetson study has yet to appear in any peer-reviewed research journal—or indeed, to be published anywhere at all. Nonetheless, the Stetson study was featured in a segment of the *NBC Nightly News* report, in 2008, about the promising results of single-sex public schooling initiatives, and it continues to be cited in news reports as evidence that single-sex education works.¹³

Efforts to address the paucity of reliable research on single-sex education long have been hampered by the fact that the Department of Education does not track the number, let alone the location, of single-sex public schools and classrooms. In the course of researching this book, I have experienced the frustration shared by many who seek answers to even the most basic questions about the status of single-sex education in U.S. public schools. Some years ago, I contacted the National Center for Education Statistics, the data collection agency that operates within the U.S. Department of Education's Institution of Education Sciences, for assistance in determining the exact number of single-sex K–12 public schools in the United States operating at the time. I was directed to consult with a member of the team working in the Common Core of Data division. The analyst I spoke to by phone helpfully offered to create a spreadsheet for me listing all single-sex K–12 schools in the country based on the National Center for Education Statistics' own most recent data. The table he generated based on the 2008–9 data listed over one thousand institutions, the vast majority of which turned out to be detention centers and other nonqualifying schools.¹⁴ After combing through the list, I eventually identified sixty-nine single-sex

public schools, thirty-five serving female students and thirty-four serving male students. However, in the course of reviewing the list of schools, I noticed that Western High School in Baltimore had been tagged in the National Center for Education Statistics data as a “male” school, when I knew Western to be an all-female school—founded in 1844, Western has the distinction of being the nation’s oldest public high school for girls. When I pointed out the error to the analyst in the Common Core of Data division, he suggested the mistake might be due to an “error in my programming logic” and acknowledged that he could not confirm the accuracy of any of the other data he had provided.¹⁵ Beyond making it more difficult for interested researchers to identify single-sex programs, this lack of administrative accountability points to the federal government’s broader abdication of its mandated obligation to monitor single-sex programs for discriminatory practices.¹⁶

The failure of the federal government to oversee single-sex schools and classrooms has led many journalists and researchers to rely on information provided by a partisan advocacy group, the National Association for Single Sex Public Education.¹⁷ The organization was founded in 2002 as a nonprofit to promote single-sex initiatives in K–12 public schools. For many years, it maintained a website featuring the most comprehensive list available of single-sex public schools and schools with single-sex classrooms in the United States. However, in 2011 the organization’s leadership decided to take the list down after learning that the American Civil Liberties Union was using the website to identify single-sex programs that might be operating in violation of federal and state laws.¹⁸ More recently, a coalition of research scholars formed the American Council for CoEducational Schooling. The mission of the organization is to “improve

and promote coeducation in schools,” and a central focus has been to dispel popular myths about the nature and educational significance of biological sex differences.¹⁹ With the launch of a user-friendly website, the American Council for CoEducational Schooling aims to become a serious challenger to the National Association for Single Sex Public Education (now known as the National Association for Choice in Education) as the leading national clearinghouse for information about single-sex public education.

A growing number of researchers are turning their attention to single-sex education in an effort to assess the educational impact of alternatives to coeducation. While there remains a pressing need for rigorous research in this area, the analysis presented here is not primarily concerned with questions concerning the relative efficacy of single-sex learning environments in comparison to coeducational settings. Instead, in the following pages, I consider what twenty-five years of debate over single-sex public education might reveal about popular understandings of gender difference. In the wake of feminist activism and legal reforms in the 1960s and 1970s, the U.S. “gender order” clearly has undergone significant transformations.²⁰ Nonetheless, while it may no longer be controversial to insist that women and men receive equal treatment in the eyes of the law, gender continues to be regarded as a mark of fundamental difference. Indeed, “Venus and Mars” thinking has proven exceptionally resilient, even as the legal landscape has been substantially reworked.²¹ The single-sex public education debates present an occasion to consider whether, and how, an insistence on the truth of gender differences can be reconciled with an increasingly expansive legal recognition of sex equality. Reflecting on more than two decades of advocacy for single-sex education, this book asks:

What claims about gender differences have gained traction with policy makers, educators, parents, and the public over the past twenty-five years? On what grounds have some women's rights organizations and other civil rights groups challenged single-sex initiatives? What role have courts played in setting the terms of gender discourse in education policy debates during this period? And what does the struggle over single-sex education suggest about contemporary understandings of gender in the United States? Following gender theorist Judith Butler, I aim here to "understand why the terms [sexual difference, gender, and sexuality] are considered so important to those who use them, and how we might reconcile this set of felt necessities as they come into conflict with one another."²² I am particularly interested in exploring the "institutional possibilities" that discourses of gender difference both "open and foreclose" in the context of recent public-education-reform debates.²³

Before proceeding, a word about terminology is in order. As is often the case when discussing hotly contested issues, an act as simple as word choice can communicate volumes about one's stand on an issue. We are all familiar with the way the debate over abortion (or should I say reproductive justice?) is marked by a sharp linguistic divide between those who prefer the term *fetus* and those who insist on the phrase *unborn child*. Educators and researchers generally use the words *coeducational* or *coed* to describe school settings in which girls and boys are educated in the same classroom, and "single-sex" to describe settings in which girls and boys are separated for instruction. More recently, however, those proclaiming the benefits of separate learning environments for girls and boys have adopted the term *single-gender* over the more traditional *single-sex* label. To be sure, education reformers are hardly alone in using the term *gender* in

place of *sex*—a similar terminological shift can be observed in the realms of law, medicine, and public discourse more generally. Not long ago, it was standard on forms to check a box indicating one’s “sex.” Today, that same box likely is labeled “gender.” This shift undoubtedly attests to an enduring discomfort with the intimation of sexual activity (rather than merely sex identity) connoted by the word *sex*.²⁴ Sociologist Steven Epstein observes that in the last decades of the twentieth century, “policymakers and commentators tended to use the term *gender* to refer to both biological and cultural aspects of the differences between men and women and avoided the term *sex* altogether, often out of fear of confusion with sexuality.”²⁵ Anxiety about the specter of sexuality likely is heightened in the case of education reform debates, where children are the central subjects.²⁶

But while the term *gender* sidesteps the potentially awkward ambiguity of *sex* as a way of designating both an identity and an activity, the use of the word *gender* as a polite synonym for *sex* risks confusion of its own. Many gender scholars suggest that the term *sex* be used to refer to a biological status as male or female, while *gender* be understood to describe social relations organized around prevailing norms of masculinity and femininity. From this perspective, the problem with reliance on gender as a catch-all term is that this usage reinforces the idea that gender identity is a natural and necessary expression of biological sex. By maintaining a linguistic distinction between sex and gender, feminist theorists and researchers in particular have played a critical role in drawing attention to the social construction of gender.

In recognition of the analytic usefulness of distinguishing sex from gender, I generally use the term *single-sex* rather than *single-gender* to designate all-boys or all-girls learning environments. The programs I discuss separate students on the basis of

a student's legal status as female or male, regardless of a student's gender identity or whether the student has been determined to have a correspondingly "feminine" or "masculine" learning style. In addition to avoiding the term *single gender*, I generally do not use the label *sex segregation* or *gender segregation* to characterize programs that separate students on the basis of sex. The term *sex segregation* does appear frequently in legal discussions of single-sex education, particularly in considerations of whether a girls-only or boys-only admissions policy constitutes sex discrimination. Outside the legal arena, the term *gender segregation* increasingly is used by advocates and opponents alike to describe single-sex arrangements. However, because of the strongly negative connotations associated with the word *segregation*, I use alternative terms like *all-boys*, *all-girls*, and *sex-separate* to identify learning environments in which students are separated on the basis of sex.

ADVOCACY OF SINGLE-SEX PUBLIC EDUCATION

Poised on the brink of extinction, single-sex education began to attract national attention in the late 1980s as a promising antidote to an epidemic of violence, psychological disturbance, and academic underachievement afflicting "at-risk" youth, particularly Black boys and young men living in the nation's faltering urban centers. At the time, several school districts initiated single-sex programs for inner-city boys. However, all-male admissions policies quickly were abandoned in the face of legal challenges brought on behalf of the also "at-risk" girls excluded from these promising public education reform initiatives. In the wake of these early battles, advocacy of single-sex public education shifted course. Building on interest generated by the release of the 1992

report by the American Association of University Women, *How Schools Shortchange Girls*, single-sex education began to garner visibility as an intervention to achieve gender equity for girls in school. All-girls classes were promoted as an effective strategy for countering bias and “subtle sexism” in the classroom while building girls’ confidence and self-esteem. In 1996 the Young Women’s Leadership School of East Harlem was launched, quickly earning a reputation as a model public school and serving as an inspiration to public education reformers across the country. A few years later, Senator Hilary Rodham Clinton (D-NY) joined forces with Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison (R-TX) in a bipartisan effort to make single-sex educational options available to K–12 public school students nationally. In a watershed victory for proponents of single-sex education, a provision was added to the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001 making federal funding available for experimental single-sex programs serving students in grades K–12. While the provision in no way altered the prevailing Title IX restrictions, its inclusion nonetheless signaled that the tide was turning in favor of giving single-sex education another try.

Once a show of federal support for single-sex education had been secured, a new justificatory rhetoric for single-sex public education rose to the fore. In the controversy surrounding single-sex public schooling initiatives in the early 1990s, issues of racial and economic injustice had been central. A decade later, prominent proponents of single-sex education adopted a scientific rhetoric of “natural,” “hardwired,” “genetic,” and “biological” sex differences. Since that time, single-sex education has been insistently promoted to educators, policy makers, and parents on the grounds that “boys and girls learn differently” owing to underlying biological factors, including hormone levels, neurological function, and even hearing ability.²⁷ In scores of U.S. public schools serving

students in grades K–12, “brain-based research” is cited to justify sex-differentiated pedagogies.²⁸ Despite the shaky empirical basis for many of these claims, it has been estimated that by the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century, nearly 80 percent of public schools experimenting with single-sex approaches were “coming at this from a neuroscience basis.”²⁹

As interest in single-sex initiatives has grown, there has been an outpouring of materials marketed to parents, teachers, and policy makers promoting “gender-sensitive” pedagogical practices. Popular authors encourage “brain-based” teaching interventions supposedly rooted in an “emerging science of sex differences.”³⁰ Leonard Sax, a practicing pediatrician who holds an MD as well as a PhD in psychology, is regularly paid to travel across the United States and abroad to consult with teachers and local school officials about implementing single-sex programs based on his account of innate gender differences. Meanwhile, author and self-described “social philosopher” Michael Gurian has trained tens of thousands of public and private school teachers in “brain-based teaching with a gender focus.”³¹ While many proponents of “brain-based learning” favor single-sex education, “gender-sensitive” pedagogies and curricula are being promoted in coeducational environments as well, extending the influence of the campaign for single-sex public education far beyond those classrooms in which students are being separated by sex.

SAMENESS AND DIFFERENCE

In considering nearly three decades of debate over single-sex public education in the United States, this book offers insight into the shifting ways that gender differences are being defined and accounted for in an era of formal legal equality for men and

women. We live in a time governed by an “equality norm”—one that sometimes has been invoked to deny the ongoing nature of sexism.³² Beneath this apparent egalitarian consensus lies profound disagreement over what sex equality means in theory and what it entails as a practical matter. When it comes to education in particular, a central issue is whether sex equality requires that all students be treated alike, or whether there might be a legitimate place for recognizing gender differences in the classroom.

This dilemma is hardly new. Indeed, matters of “sameness” and “difference” long have been at the very center of discussions of sex equality in the United States, from struggles over women’s right to vote, seek higher education, and work outside the home in the nineteenth century to more recent debates over employment protections for pregnant women and the right of women to serve in military combat positions. In the 1980s, the so-called “sameness/difference debates” reached a fever pitch among a deeply divided community of feminist theorists and legal scholars. On one side were those who hoped to build on important legal victories of the 1970s by continuing to emphasize the right of women to be treated as the equals of men in the eyes of the law. In 1971, the Supreme Court determined that laws and policies that treat one sex differently from the other would be subject to a higher than usual standard of judicial review. While the new standard was not as rigorous as the strict scrutiny brought to race-based classifications, by 1976 the court made this standard explicit by requiring that any sex-based classification bear a substantial relationship to an important governmental purpose. Mere convenience no longer would suffice to justify different treatment for women and men.³³

Without questioning the important gains that have been won by insisting that women be accorded the same state benefits and responsibilities as men, some feminists nonetheless have been

wary of endorsing the premise that women must prove they are “just like men” in order to have rights recognized. Particularly in areas such as pregnancy discrimination, the concern has been that an argument from equality will lead to women getting lesser benefits, not more equitable treatment. Nonetheless, others have remained convinced that official recognition of gender differences inevitably will reinforce damaging stereotypes and justify discriminatory practices. The intensity of the sameness/difference debates attests to the challenge posed by what legal scholar Martha Minow has dubbed the “dilemma of difference”: how to find a middle course between holding women to a standard they cannot, or should not, be measured against (i.e., the male norm) and stereotyping females and males in the name of recognizing group differences.³⁴ Indeed, if there is one point upon which feminists of virtually all stripes can agree, it is that there is no easy path to equality to be found.

The controversies sparked by local single-sex public schooling initiatives draw our attention back to the unresolved debates that occupied feminist legal theorists in the 1980s: What forms of gender bias emerge under the guise of equal treatment? When does special treatment stigmatize difference, and when does it counter disadvantage? Viewed in this light, the intensity of debate among feminists over single-sex public education would seem to confirm the existence of an enduring divide between those who insist on the fundamental significance of gender difference and those who vigorously deny it. I suggest, however, that the single-sex public education debates also reveal some of the limitations of the sameness/difference framework in capturing the nature of disagreements among feminists on this issue and others. As historian Joan Scott wisely observes, it is time to “stop writing the history of feminism as a story of oscillations

between demands for equality and affirmations of difference,” for “this approach inadvertently strengthens the hold of the binary construction, establishing it as . . . inevitable by giving it a long history.”³⁵ The following chapters illustrate Scott’s claim, for conflicting positions on the issue of single-sex education cannot be wedged into the “neat compartments” of affirming or denying sameness and difference.³⁶ On the one hand, not all of those who support single-sex education believe in essential gender differences; indeed, many embrace single-sex education to counteract what they consider to be the detrimental effects of differential gender socialization. At the same time, opposition to single-sex education has been equated with an unwillingness to acknowledge any meaningful differences between the sexes at all. However, as I demonstrate throughout this book, the most vociferous challenges to single-sex public schooling initiatives have emanated not from dogmatic commitment to gender neutrality but rather from the empirically grounded charge that even the most well-intentioned single-sex initiatives open the door to rampant gender stereotyping. Still, as I explain in the following chapters, the debate over single-sex public education too often has been reductively represented as a controversy pitting those who acknowledge gender differences against those who deny the basic facts of human nature.³⁷

THE “BOY CRISIS”

Recent controversies sparked by single-sex public schooling initiatives echo debates that gripped feminist legal theorists in the 1980s, but with a decidedly new spin. Perhaps the most obvious difference is that it often is boys, rather than girls, who are positioned as the disadvantaged class in the single-sex public education debates of

the past twenty-five years. As I demonstrate throughout this book, the claim that boys are the victims of structural bias in an education system designed to favor students who do what girls supposedly do best—sit still and follow directions—is a centerpiece of recent “boy crisis” rhetoric as it has been incorporated in the debate over single-sex public education. Note that I place the words “boy crisis” in scare quotes here, and throughout the book, to indicate my critical interest in the distinctive way the situation of boys has been discursively framed in media reports and education reform debates. To be sure, it is not only rhetoric about the “boy crisis” that has proven controversial but its factual basis as well. Some researchers contend that the evidence paints a much more complex, and ultimately more ambiguous, portrait of boys’ and girls’ achievement than those heralding the “boy crisis” would allow. Notably, while boys lag behind girls in many significant measures of academic achievement, overall *both* boys and girls have made educational gains in the past two decades.³⁸ At the same time, racial and economic inequalities are much more strongly associated with educational outcomes than is sex, a fact easily obscured when gender differences are the central focus.³⁹ Yet other observers contest the pointedly antifeminist agenda undergirding much “boy crisis” rhetoric.⁴⁰ In this book, I use the term *boy crisis* specifically in reference to the distinctive narrative adopted by many of the most visible proponents of single-sex public education—a narrative I aim to distinguish from alternative ways of thinking about the nature and causes of the struggles today’s boys undeniably face.

Contemporary “boy crisis” discourse can be traced to the late 1990s, when proclamations of a “boy crisis” captured national headlines. As education scholar Marcus Weaver-Hightower notes, “From Canada to Wales, England to Australia, and New

Zealand to Japan, anxieties over boys' faltering literacy scores and grim social indicators . . . gripped the attention of the media, parents, administrators, teachers, and politicians.⁴¹ As I explain in the next chapter, however, the 1990s was not the first time a boy crisis had been declared in the United States. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there was a great deal of popular hand-wringing over the emasculating influence on boys purportedly exerted by members of the predominantly female teaching profession. Many of the changes in the organization of public high schools seen in the twentieth century, from the introduction of shop classes for boys and home economics for girls to the investment of significant financial resources in athletics programs, reflected anxiety that boys would lose their competitive edge over girls in employment and civic life if they could not secure a position of dominance in school.

When the rhetoric of a "boy crisis" was revived in the waning years of the twentieth century, it was propelled by a "backlash" discourse that blamed the second-wave feminist movement for the plight of the nation's boys.⁴² Author and former philosophy professor Christina Hoff Sommers emerged as a leading herald of this brand of "boy crisis" discourse, and her popular book *The War against Boys* fueled a campaign to save boys from the damaging effects of a feminism judged to have gone too far. Since Sommers's book first appeared, backlash thinking has been embedded in the very foundations of "boy crisis" rhetoric amid an avalanche of reports warning that boys today are "falling behind" girls in school and beyond.⁴³ Leonard Sax, an advocate of single-sex public education, contends that "since the mid-1970s, educators have made a virtue of ignoring gender differences. The assumption was that by teaching girls and boys the same subjects in the same way at the same age, gender gaps in

achievement would be eradicated. That approach has failed.”⁴⁴ In the same spirit, *New York Times* columnist David Brooks indicts U.S. schools for favoring students who are “feelings-centered, risk-averse, collaboration-oriented and sedentary”—in other words, girls.⁴⁵ Commentary such as this implies that an overzealous campaign to address sexism and gender bias in the past has resulted in a hypocritical educational culture that privileges the distinctive needs, aptitudes, and interests of girls over boys under the guise of promoting equality for all.

“Boy crisis” discourse has played a central role in advancing the case for single-sex public schooling initiatives. *The Separation Solution?* probes “boy crisis” discourse to consider how gender difference is characterized by those who warn that boys are “falling behind” girls in the wake of second-wave feminist activism.⁴⁶ While the discussion that follows offers at times a critical assessment of recent “boy crisis” discourse, this is in no way meant to minimize or deny the very real struggles facing too many boys and young men today, most especially those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds. As I argue, however, improving the educational experiences and life prospects of boys requires us to more carefully scrutinize some of the key premises of “boy crisis” discourse and to consider alternative approaches to addressing the challenges boys face.

INTERSECTIONALITY

“Boy crisis” discourse portrays *all* boys—regardless of class or race—as disadvantaged with respect to their female counterparts in schools. Nonetheless, the plight of poor boys and boys of color in particular is commonly foregrounded in “boy crisis” discourse to illustrate just how dire the situation of boys every-

where is. In the single-sex public education debates, even those who emphasize the biological basis of gendered behavior frequently center the stories of racially and economically disadvantaged boys.

As I detail in chapter 2, the revival of single-sex public education began in the late 1980s with efforts to address the dismal life prospects facing young Black men, particularly those living in urban areas. Starved of resources, public schools were failing their communities. In an effort to address the alarming deficit in educational opportunity in several of the nation's predominantly Black school districts, a handful of reformers across the country initiated plans for all-male public schools organized around an Afrocentric pedagogy. By the early 1990s, however, these efforts hit a legal roadblock after a court determined that the exclusion of girls from a new public school initiative in Detroit constituted unlawful sex discrimination. At the time, many in the community expressed outrage that civil rights laws had been invoked to challenge a promising program for precisely those students thought to be most disadvantaged by legacies of racial injustice in this country. In the aftermath of the Detroit decision, Republican senator John Danforth of Missouri proposed a provision that would have allowed for the suspension of Title IX enforcement in limited cases by way of affording greater latitude to experiment with single-sex approaches in the most troubled school districts.⁴⁷ Presented as a plan to address the failure of public schools serving low-income students of color, the proposal failed to win congressional support owing to concerns about the inherent dangers of slackening existing civil rights protections, no matter how well-intentioned the motive for doing so might be.⁴⁸

A few years later, the Supreme Court would declare the all-male admissions policy at the Virginia Military Institute

unconstitutional. Significantly, the decision fell short of declaring a categorical prohibition on separating the sexes in public schools, leaving open the possibility that an appropriately designed single-sex program could pass constitutional muster. Indeed, in the majority opinion, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg explicitly endorsed the use of sex-based classifications “to compensate women ‘for particular economic disabilities [they have] suffered,’ . . . to ‘promote equal employment opportunity,’ and . . . to advance the full development of the talent and capacities” of all persons.⁴⁹ Drawing a distinction between those generalizations about the sexes that perpetuate pernicious stereotypes, and group-based claims made in the interest of addressing inequality, the *United States v. Virginia* holding gave single-sex public schooling advocates a powerful incentive to highlight the benefits for disadvantaged kids in particular. Since that time, the “affirmative” intent of single-sex initiatives created for inner-city students of color frequently has been cited by proponents as a primary justification for separating the sexes in educational settings. And while Afrocentrism no longer remains a prominent feature of single-sex public schooling initiatives, economically disadvantaged students of color continue to be disproportionately represented among those students enrolled in single-sex programs in K–12 public schools.⁵⁰

In examining the complex interaction between claims about racial and economic inequalities on the one hand, and assertions concerning the nature of gender differences on the other, *The Separation Solution?* contributes to a growing body of social science research emphasizing the importance of intersectional analysis.⁵¹ Intersectional research considers “the relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formation.”⁵² The term *intersectionality* commonly is

traced to the galvanizing work of legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, whose two now-canonical law review articles, published in the late 1980s and early 1990s, played a pivotal role in stimulating academic inquiry into complex identity.⁵³ As originally articulated by Crenshaw, intersectionality presented a trenchant critique of the assumptions underlying the sameness/difference debates of the 1980s. Reflecting some two decades later on these early writings, Crenshaw explains that the objective was to “uncover the paradoxical dimension of the sameness/difference rationales that undergirded antidiscrimination law more broadly. By these logics, Black females are both too similar to Black men and white women to represent themselves and too different to represent either Blacks or women as a whole. Although Black male and white female narratives of discrimination were understood to be fully inclusive and universal, Black female narratives were rendered partial, unrecognizable, something apart from standard claims of race discrimination.”⁵⁴ In “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics” (1989), Crenshaw provides an incisive account of the way the voices, experiences and interests of Black women have been marginalized by legal logics premised on “one-dimensional” accounts of identity.⁵⁵ Crenshaw argues that “the single-axis framework erases Black women in the conceptualization, identification, and remediation of race and sex discrimination.”⁵⁶ Crenshaw uses terms like *erase*, *silence*, and *obscure* throughout the article to describe the way single-axis frameworks position those “who are multiply-burdened.”⁵⁷ Reflecting on controversy in the Black community surrounding the film *The Color Purple*, for example, Crenshaw explains how concerns that the film would reinforce “negative stereotypes of

Black men ... seemed to compel the subordination of certain aspects of the Black female experience in order to ensure the security of the larger Black community.”⁵⁸ In “Mapping the Margins,” Crenshaw develops her account of the production of social marginalization. Examining efforts to address violence against women of color, Crenshaw shows that the needs, interests, and experiences of “the most marginal” women are often the least likely to be taken into account. As she explains, sometimes even the most well-intentioned efforts have “reproduced the subordination and marginalization of women of color,” for example, by limiting access to shelters and support groups to English-speaking women.⁵⁹

Much of the scholarship conducted under the banner of intersectionality over the past two decades has focused on the way the multiply burdened are silenced and erased, not only in legal settings, but also within antiracist and feminist academic and activist settings.⁶⁰ But while contemporary intersectional analysis continues to highlight the production of silences and erasures, *The Separation Solution?* draws attention to some of the less-explored political dynamics associated with complex identity. In her classic 1988 essay “Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of a Black Feminist Analysis,” sociologist Deborah King provides a useful schema for thinking about the full range of intersectional political dynamics:⁶¹

To the extent that any politics is monistic, the actual victims of racism, sexism, or classism may be absent from, invisible within, or seen as antagonistic to that politics. . . . That is, Black and/or poor women may be marginal to monistic feminism, women’s concerns may be excluded from nationalistic activism, and indifference to race and gender may pervade class politics. This *invisibility* may be due to actual exclusion or benign neglect, while *marginality* is

represented in tokenism, minimization, and devalued participation. *Antagonism* involves two subordinate groups whose actions and beliefs are placed in opposition as mutually detrimental [emphasis added].⁶²

The analysis of recent controversies sparked by single-sex public schooling initiatives presented in the following pages confirms the tendency of single-axis frameworks to render “multiply-burdened” subjects “invisible” and “marginal,” to use two of King’s terms. For example, the lack of educational opportunities for poor girls of color is obscured not only in education reform debates framed around a campaign to address the plight of young Black males but also in mainstream feminist efforts to address sexism and bias against girls in the classroom. To illustrate what King calls marginalization, I show how references to the special plight of boys of color within “boy crisis” discourse can undermine efforts to address the racial and economic injustices that produce these dire circumstances in the first place.

While identifying instances of invisibility and marginality, my analysis places special emphasis on the dynamic King identifies as “antagonism.” The debate over single-sex public education has been presented in the media as an issue pitting those who advocate on behalf of economically disadvantaged children of color against the feminist legal establishment. When single-sex education is promoted as an affirmative intervention for disadvantaged kids, opposition to new initiatives is equated with indifference to the education crisis in low-income communities where public schools predominantly serve students of color. This way of framing the debate has enabled the ready dismissal of those who have raised questions about sex discrimination and sex-role stereotyping in single-sex public school settings. What’s more, by leveraging demands to address the lack of educational

opportunities for racially and economically disadvantaged kids, advocates for single-sex public schools have opened the door to experimental programs that promote highly traditional gender ideologies.

By addressing the antagonism dynamic, *The Separation Solution?* builds on the important work of those scholars who have focused most explicitly on the political dimensions of intersectionality.⁶³ As Crenshaw observes, “What makes an analysis intersectional—whatever terms it deploys, whatever its iteration, whatever its field or discipline—is its adoption of an intersectional way of thinking about the problem of sameness and difference and its relation to power. This framing—conceiving of categories not as distinct but as always permeated by other categories, fluid and changing, *always in the process of creating and being created by dynamics of power*—emphasizes what intersectionality does rather than what intersectionality is” (emphasis added).⁶⁴ In emphasizing the focus on politics in intersectional analysis, Crenshaw takes issue with those who dismiss intersectionality as “a theory primarily fascinated with the infinite combinations and implications of overlapping identities”; indeed, Crenshaw is confounded that such a distorted view has come to be associated with an idea so evidently “concerned with structures of power and exclusion.”⁶⁵ And what makes this misunderstanding particularly vexing is that it has been perpetuated even by commentators who present themselves as sympathetic to the project of intersectionality.

Taking Crenshaw’s generative approach as a critical touchstone, this book insists that intersectional analysis entails more than the simple recognition that identity is complex; it demands consideration of the distinctive political dynamics and social effects engendered by identity-based claims-making. The single-

sex public education debates present a valuable opportunity to explore intersectional politics at work. The goal of this project, however, is not only to demonstrate the analytical purchase of intersectionality in explaining the rise of single-sex public schooling but also to further the ongoing development of intersectional theory itself. Toward this end, in what follows I draw attention to the diverse agendas served by a contemporary politics of recognition, with the goal of prompting further consideration of the conditions under which identity-based claims-making advance or impede social justice. In a telling observation, political scientist Ange-Marie Hancock notes that “most intersectionality scholars share the logic that multiple marginalizations of race, class, gender, or sexual orientation at the individual and institutional levels create social and political stratification, requiring policy solutions that are attuned to the interactions of these categories.”⁶⁶ The story of the movement to bring single-sex education to U.S. public schools serves as a potent reminder of the risk of unintended consequences in demanding official recognition of difference—risks that invite closer consideration of the assumption, pervasive in intersectional scholarship, that social marginalization is best addressed through institutionalized forms of recognition.⁶⁷

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

The controversy surrounding single-sex public education provides an illuminating vantage point from which to examine shifting popular and expert beliefs about the nature and significance of gender differences in the shadow of second-wave feminist activism and legal reforms. In the following chapters, I consider how the issue of single-sex education has been framed by

diverse social actors, including education reform advocates, feminist legal organizations, teachers, policy makers, academic researchers, and others. Social movement scholars commonly use the term *framing* to describe the way meaning is constructed in policy struggles and other public domains.⁶⁸ This study considers how advocates and other social actors have framed the case for and against single-sex education, and the analysis highlights the contrasting ways gender differences have been defined and positioned within these competing frames.

The discussion begins with an historical overview of different justifications that have been presented for separating students by sex in K–12 school settings. As I explain in chapter 2, arguments in support of single-sex education have variously invoked biological and sociological rationales ranging from the reportedly harmful effects of mental strain on the female reproductive system to the need to counteract the feminization of boys supposedly caused by excessive exposure to female teachers. Over the course of the nineteenth century, the impracticality of single-sex education in a country dominated by one-room schoolhouses rendered separation of the sexes a practical impossibility, whatever its perceived merits may have been. A select few public single-sex high schools were created in more densely populated areas, but the cost of supporting such programs remained prohibitive in most school districts. However, the campaign to promote single-sex education in public school settings was given new life following the 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*. Ironically, this landmark racial desegregation case spurred a move to create single-sex public schools across the southern states, as stalwart segregationists seized on single-sex education as a way to subvert the seemingly imminent prospect of Black boys and white girls being educated

side by side. Recognizing the racist underpinning of these programs, civil rights activists and members of local communities opposed single-sex public schooling initiatives in the decades following the *Brown* decision. These efforts were bolstered by broader developments in sex discrimination law and jurisprudence at the same time, and, by the late 1970s, only a handful of historically single-sex public schools survived.

The subsequent chapters offer a closer analysis of the controversies that have erupted in recent decades as various constituencies have organized to promote single-sex initiatives. Tracing the campaign to make single-sex options available to public school students from the late 1980s to the present, *The Separation Solution?* highlights the centrality of claims about racial injustice in making the case for single-sex education. As I explain, economically disadvantaged students of color have been disproportionately represented among students involved in experimental single-sex public schooling initiatives during the period under consideration in this book. Chapter 3 explains how single-sex education emerged in the late 1980s as the focus of local efforts to address the public education crisis in inner-city schools. In this period, education reformers proposed single-sex education as a solution to the widely reported “Black male crisis,” understood to be particularly acute in the nation’s economically struggling urban centers. At the time, several inner-city school districts moved forward with plans for all-male public school “academies.” Hastily implemented on the basis of unproven educational theories, these experimental programs attracted strong local support while, at the same time, eliciting swift opposition from feminist and civil rights organizations. Facing litigation, some districts opted to admit girls to programs originally conceived only for boys, and others abandoned their plans for all-boys

schools altogether. Through an analysis of the controversy surrounding these initiatives, this chapter highlights the central role that claims about racial injustice played in justifying positions both in support of and opposed to sex-segregation in public schools.

Chapter 4 demonstrates how a focus on educational equity for disadvantaged girls helped redeem and revive the cause of single-sex education. In the wake of the controversy over proposals to create all-male public school academies for inner-city boys, advocacy for single-sex education shifted course in the mid-1990s. Propelled by evidence revealing the persistence of gender bias in coeducational classrooms, single-sex education was promoted as an effective means to build girls' self-esteem and encourage greater female participation in the traditionally male-dominated fields of science, technology, engineering, and math. In the mid-1990s, the single-sex education movement gained an important ally in philanthropist Ann Rubenstein Tisch, who in 1996 launched the Young Women's Leadership School of East Harlem. The success of the school created critical momentum in support of single-sex public education. The idea of all-girls classrooms attracted powerful supporters from across the political spectrum, but dissenting perspectives of feminist researchers and legal advocates were marginalized in public debate over the promise and perils of single-sex approaches.

As chapter 5 explains, once federal funding for single-sex initiatives was made available, new voices rose to prominence in the campaign to bring single-sex education to public schools. Among the most conspicuous were those promoting new scientific evidence purported to prove that boys' and girls' brains are "hard-wired" to learn differently. Even as the case for single-sex education increasingly was made to rest on claims about biological sex

differences, advocates continued to invoke the public education crisis in disadvantaged communities to lend a sense of urgency to their cause. As a result of these efforts, inner-city boys of color became the public face of an education reform movement rooted in an essentialist gender ideology. This chapter offers an intersectional analysis of the way the images and voices of boys of color have been appropriated to lend much-needed credibility to “gender-friendly” education reforms rooted in scientifically dubious theories of sex difference.

The concluding chapter asks what the single-sex education debates reveal about the changing nature of gender discourse in the twenty-first century. The renewed push to make single-sex educational opportunities available to public school students attests to the resilience of gender-essentialist beliefs in the twenty-first century, even in the shadow of formal legal equality. More specifically, these debates draw attention to the emergence of “different but equal” as a prominent gender discourse. “Different but equal” is marked by an insistence on the biological truth of essential gender differences, accompanied by an equally adamant disavowal of the idea that males are inherently superior to females. As the single-sex public education debates reveal, those who promote “different but equal” distance themselves not only from the unapologetic sexism of the past but also from the discredited doctrine of “separate but equal” once applied to race-based classifications. Indeed, in the period under consideration in this book, advocates for single-sex public schooling initiatives have vigorously contested the suggestion of any parallel between racial segregation in schools in the past and efforts to make single-sex options available to public school students in the present. In these debates, the renunciation of racial discrimination has gone hand in hand with affirmation of

gender difference as an irreducible biological fact. In this way, disavowals of racism have been yoked to gender essentialism in education reform debates. Moving forward, I argue, greater attention must be paid to the gender ideologies motivating efforts to address the effects of racial and economic injustices in education.