

# The Separation Solution?

*Single-Sex Education and the New  
Politics of Gender Equality*

Juliet A. Williams



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS

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*For my brothers, Matthew and Daniel—  
thank you for standing by me  
with courage, kindness, and abundant good humor  
at Central High, and always*

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As I recount in the opening pages of this book, my interest in single-sex education goes back to my days as a high school student in the city of Philadelphia. For helping me navigate troubled waters during an unsettled time, I am especially grateful to Dr. Sheldon Pavel for his kindness and extraordinary leadership, and to Kostis Kourelis, without whose friendship I never would have stayed afloat. I also thank Rita Bernstein and her colleagues at the Women's Law Project for their dedication to making the opportunity to attend Central open to all, and especially Carol Tracy, for her ongoing work to promote gender equality.

It's embarrassing to admit, but the truth is that when I graduated from high school, the last thing in the world I would have wanted to be when I grew up was a women's studies professor. To be sure, this is hardly the only, or even the most significant, of my youthful misjudgments, but it is one I am particularly fortunate to have outgrown. As it happens, it was only after I became an assistant professor in the Department of Women's Studies (now Feminist Studies) at the University of California,

Santa Barbara, that I first dared even to contemplate writing this book, and I owe a great deal to my feminist colleagues there for so warmly welcoming me into their midst. Also while at UCSB, I made the acquaintance of Darlene Craviotto, an undergraduate student who at the time had returned to campus to complete a degree she had begun some years before. One day after class, Darlene approached me with an idea—why not make a documentary about the integration of female students at Central High School? Drawing on her experience as a successful Hollywood screenwriter, Darlene set out to do just that, and the result is the captivating and informative film *No Girls Allowed* (2011). Working with Darlene as she pulled the film together helped me begin to make sense of my own past and finally emboldened me to revisit a topic I still cared deeply about but had assiduously avoided for fear of finding myself once again uncomfortably embroiled in controversy. It is because of Darlene as well that I was able to connect with the pioneering members of the Central High 6. Special thanks to Michele Hangle and Rachel Gafni for making the trek to Los Angeles to visit my class, and to former UCSB student and film assistant Mallory Lass for helping document that wonderful day.

Like the proverbial duck floating seemingly effortlessly on the water's surface while frantically paddling just below, writing has always struck me as a lot harder than it looks. Don't get me wrong—having the freedom (if not always quite enough time) to write is surely one of the greatest privileges of academic life; it's an aspect of this profession I wouldn't trade for the world. I hope I don't sound unappreciative, then, if I nonetheless acknowledge that there were days (and to be perfectly honest, more than a few) when I have greeted the prospect of spending a couple of hours in front of my computer screen with a feeling not of possibility but

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Duranti provided critical support as I worked to complete this project, and he taught me by example that creativity lies at the very heart of the academic enterprise. Jenny Sharpe has been an invaluable friend and extraordinary mentor throughout my time at UCLA; Jenny also happens to be one of the most elegant academic writers I have had the pleasure to read, and her example inspires me every time I sit down at the keyboard. Finally, I am singularly indebted to Sandra Harding, who took time from her absurdly busy schedule to read and review in detail with me the earlier drafts of these chapters; her comments had a tremendous impact on this book, and her mentorship has had a profound impact on me.

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While no book can be written without committing words to the page, much of the thinking that makes writing possible, at least for me, occurs in the enlivening space of conversation with my remarkable community of family and friends. For this, and for so much else, I offer very special thanks to Annie Barnes, Clemence

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While I was growing up, my parents made sure the dinner table was a place where I could count on a world of wonder opening up on a nightly basis. Now that I have a family of my own, I find myself surrounded by three of the most magnificent conversationalists in the world, and I am grateful beyond all measure to them for their part in keeping this tradition alive. Over the course of (too) many dinnertime conversations about this book and related matters, I have learned more than words can tell from my children, David and Roxana—keen thinkers, gentle critics, and exceedingly compassionate observers of the human condition. I

thank them for their glorious openness to traveling each evening wherever the conversational spirit may lead us.

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## 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.”<sup>3</sup> 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.”<sup>4</sup>

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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup>

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.<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup>

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.<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup> 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."<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup>

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*.<sup>24</sup> 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.”<sup>25</sup> Anxiety about the specter of sexuality likely is heightened in the case of education reform debates, where children are the central subjects.<sup>26</sup>

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.<sup>27</sup> In scores of U.S. public schools serving

students in grades K–12, “brain-based research” is cited to justify sex-differentiated pedagogies.<sup>28</sup> 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.”<sup>29</sup>

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.”<sup>30</sup> 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.”<sup>31</sup> 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.<sup>32</sup> 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.<sup>33</sup>

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.<sup>34</sup> 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.”<sup>35</sup> 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.<sup>36</sup> 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.<sup>37</sup>

### 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.<sup>38</sup> 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.<sup>39</sup> Yet other observers contest the pointedly antifeminist agenda undergirding much “boy crisis” rhetoric.<sup>40</sup> 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."<sup>41</sup> 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.<sup>42</sup> 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.<sup>43</sup> 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.”<sup>44</sup> 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.<sup>45</sup> 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.<sup>46</sup> 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.<sup>47</sup> 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.<sup>48</sup>

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.<sup>49</sup> 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.<sup>50</sup>

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.<sup>51</sup> Intersectional research considers “the relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formation.”<sup>52</sup> 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.<sup>53</sup> 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.”<sup>54</sup> 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.<sup>55</sup> Crenshaw argues that “the single-axis framework erases Black women in the conceptualization, identification, and remediation of race and sex discrimination.”<sup>56</sup> Crenshaw uses terms like *erase*, *silence*, and *obscure* throughout the article to describe the way single-axis frameworks position those “who are multiply-burdened.”<sup>57</sup> 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.”<sup>58</sup> 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.<sup>59</sup>

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.<sup>60</sup> 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:<sup>61</sup>

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].<sup>62</sup>

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?*<sup>2</sup> builds on the important work of those scholars who have focused most explicitly on the political dimensions of intersectionality.<sup>63</sup> 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).<sup>64</sup> 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.”<sup>65</sup> 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.”<sup>66</sup> 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.<sup>67</sup>

#### 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.<sup>68</sup> 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.

## Single-Sex Education in Historical Perspective

Advocates of single-sex education commonly use the allure of tradition to make the case for single-sex education in the twenty-first century. The perception of single-sex education as a time-tested model of educational excellence has been stoked in recent years by media reports that commonly describe the surge of interest in single-sex approaches in terms of a “return” or “comeback.” In typical fashion, one news story confidently declares that “separate schools for boys and girls used to be the norm across the nation.”<sup>1</sup> Another report explains that “at one time, single-gender education was the norm; girls and boys had their own schools, each with separate goals and standards for education.”<sup>2</sup> But it is not just journalists who traffic in this kind of folk historicization. At the outset of her influential book on single-sex education, legal scholar Rosemary Salomone suggests that it was a “sweeping tide of coeducation” in the latter part of the twentieth century that pushed single-sex education aside in U.S. public schools.<sup>3</sup>

Popular and scholarly commentaries such as these create a highly distorted picture of the past, obscuring the remarkably

uncontroversial status of coeducation in the United States throughout this nation's history. Coeducation has been commonplace in the United States for almost two centuries, and mixed classrooms have been nearly universal in public schools for well over one hundred years.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, coeducation was embraced earlier in the United States, and generally with less discord, than in Europe and elsewhere. As education scholars David Tyack and Elisabeth Hansot explain in their landmark study *Learning Together: A History of Coeducation in American Public Schools* (1990), coeducation in the United States is a story of “the dog that did not bark”—that is, a tale whose most striking feature is the remarkable absence of controversy.<sup>5</sup> To be sure, the relative lack of strife surrounding the question of coeducation should not be taken to deny or in any way minimize the fact that girls and women in the United States long were denied access to educational opportunities afforded to their male peers. As historian Thomas Woody explains in his classic history of women's education in the United States: “Any wide acceptance of coeducation in practice had obviously to wait upon more general approval of the idea that girls should have more than rudimentary education.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, what distinguishes the United States is that when girls and women were granted access to education, this most often (although not always) led to the integration of female students into already existing schools, rather than the creation of separate institutions devoted exclusively to students of one or the other sex.

Despite coeducation being a commonplace in the United States since the nineteenth century, the idea of single-sex education today enjoys the luster of tradition, producing a rosy image that harks back to simpler times when, it is imagined, the innocence of childhood was more fiercely protected, and the rigors of education

more vigorously pursued. The prestige associated with some of the nation's oldest and most selective private colleges and boarding schools surely plays a role in maintaining the popular association between single-sex education and academic excellence. Behind this nostalgic view, however, lies a much more complicated story. Throughout U.S. history, there often has been an intimate connection between advocacy of single-sex education and promotion of highly inegalitarian gender ideologies, often articulated in conjunction with deeply racist and classist social views. This is not to deny the important fact that some single-sex institutions were founded with the express purpose of challenging gender inequalities, particularly the exclusion of girls and women from the ranks of elite educational institutions. Nonetheless, it is critical to recognize that single-sex education also has been vehemently promoted by those embracing highly traditional gender ideals.

While emphasizing that historical campaigns to promote single-sex education have been grounded in patently inegalitarian social beliefs, I do not mean to suggest that the surprisingly long-standing and widespread adoption of coeducation in the United States attests to some deeply rooted cultural commitment to gender egalitarianism. Quite the contrary. Indeed, when viewed from a contemporary perspective, what is perhaps most striking about the relatively uncontroversial history of coeducation in the United States is the fact that so many proponents of educating boys and girls together apparently saw no contradiction in doing so while nonetheless clinging to the idea that nature had forever ordained woman the subordinate of man. As the following discussion makes evident, a strikingly broad array of justificatory logics has been invoked in different time periods in the United States to reconcile the reality of coeducation with an ideology of essential gender difference.

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF COEDUCATION

Among the Puritans, literacy was understood to be a prerequisite of piety, and therefore it was an attainment expected of members of both sexes.<sup>7</sup> While the education of all children was mandated by law, in practice formal schooling was available only to boys. For girls, the earliest educational opportunities outside of the home were to be found in “dame schools,” where lessons were given during the summer months in the empty classrooms otherwise occupied by boys during the regular school term. Mothers eagerly enrolled young children of both sexes in these temporary classes, seeking relief from the encumbrance of tending to young ones while performing domestic labor.<sup>8</sup> Hoping to expand pupil loads, and hence pay, teachers generally welcomed students of both sexes into their charge. Nonetheless, the gap between male and female literacy rates remained vast throughout the colonial period, reflecting both the limited opportunities for education outside the home as well as the much greater priority given to the education of sons over daughters.<sup>9</sup>

In the Revolutionary period and its aftermath, the issue of girls’ education rose to the forefront as women symbolically were elevated to the status of guardians of national virtue, particularly when acting in their capacity as mothers.<sup>10</sup> While endorsing a highly restricted and unequal role for women as citizens, education reformers in this period nonetheless helped pave the way for girls to gain broader educational access. In an influential 1787 address delivered at the Philadelphia Academy for Young Ladies, respected statesman Benjamin Rush argued for expanding the educational offerings available to girls to include instruction in the English language, bookkeeping, and

geography.<sup>11</sup> In advocating that girls' formal schooling be extended beyond the primary school level, Rush emphasized the critical social role women would be expected to play as wives, not only in managing the financial and other domestic affairs of their husbands, but also in nurturing the intellects of the next generation of citizens. A well-educated woman is the ideal guardian of the nation's virtue, Rush exhorted: "Let the ladies of a country be educated properly, and they will not only make and administer its laws, but form its manners and character."<sup>12</sup> Reflecting on Rush's speech, historian Nancy Cott observes that "Rush argued neither for justice with regard to women's opportunities for learning nor for women's participation in the advancement of knowledge. His reasoning was utilitarian; his plan for female education was functional."<sup>13</sup> While the ideology of "republican motherhood" supplied a compelling public justification for educating girls, this vision was set forth with an understanding that men and women, by nature, nonetheless were destined to occupy "separate spheres."<sup>14</sup> In this way, the campaign to educate girls was presented in terms that emphasized compatibility with the prevailing gender order, rather than appearing to challenge it.

The decades following the Revolution saw the slow expansion of opportunities for girls to attend primary school, particularly in New England. In 1790, officials in Boston moved to admit girls to its town schools, and many other localities would soon follow suit.<sup>15</sup> Tyack and Hansot describe the gradual entry of girls into elementary schools over the first decades of the nineteenth century as "arguably the most important event in the gender history of American public education."<sup>16</sup> Observing life in the United States in 1831, Alexis de Tocqueville was taken aback by the nation's manifest commitment to educating girls. It

was Tocqueville's impression that there existed in the United States a broad social consensus that "woman's mind is just as capable as man's of discovering the naked truth, and her heart as firm to face it." Tocqueville surmised that this show of "esteem" for women's intellectual capacity was an ingenious strategy for maintaining the devotion of women to family and country.<sup>17</sup> Tocqueville concluded that, rather than destabilizing the social order, the education of girls had the salutary effect of promoting domestic tranquility.

The term *coeducation* itself did not emerge to replace the more common designation *mixed school* until the early 1850s; but as historian Thomas Woody notes, the "practice was much older than the name, certainly."<sup>18</sup> As common schools (the forerunners of today's public schools) proliferated to serve a growing population of elementary-school-age children, boys and girls came to be educated side by side. Particularly in the sprawling rural areas where a significant proportion of the population had settled, one-room schoolhouses serving elementary school students were typical. As Tyack and Hansot explain, "Both sparse settlement and a desire to economize on the costs of schooling pressured rural patrons toward coeducation once parents had concluded that they wanted to educate their daughters as well as their sons."<sup>19</sup>

During this period some private academies, mirroring changes in the common schools, began to admit girls into their ranks—although female students generally were taught in separate rooms or during different hours of the day than were male students.<sup>20</sup> This period also saw the creation of private academies dedicated exclusively to the education of girls. In contrast to the utilitarian ethic characteristic of "coeducational" schools, elite institutions arose to provide the daughters of the well-to-

do with “ornamental” training in leisure-class pursuits such as drawing, embroidery, and French.<sup>21</sup> The emergence of these all-female academies was a testament to the enduring belief, particularly among the upper classes, not only in the “canon of domesticity” but also in the existence of a natural “contrast between the occupations of the two sexes.”<sup>22</sup> Over time, however, some advocates of single-sex education distanced themselves from the “aristocratic vanity” associated with “ornamental” education, arguing that while educational arrangements must reflect the “separate destiny” of girls and boys, rigorous academic training should be the priority for both sexes.<sup>23</sup> As one educator explained at the time: “The employments of man and woman are so dissimilar . . . that no one will pretend to say that an education for these employments must be conducted on the same plan; but the discipline of the mind, the formation of those intellectual habits which are necessary to one sex are equally so to the other.”<sup>24</sup>

Tyack and Hansot observe that coeducation has been “the standard grammar of” public schools in the United States since the first half of the nineteenth century.<sup>25</sup> It is likely that the simple impracticality of separate schools for boys and girls living in rural areas was sufficient to render the issue of an alternative moot. To be sure, there were notable regional differences, with southerners proving not only more reluctant to educate boys and girls side by side but also less willing to provide for public education of any kind.<sup>26</sup> Still, it was not until the middle of the nineteenth century that the practice of coeducation generated any significant controversy. While mixed classrooms may have seemed perfectly natural in close-knit, rural communities, the prospect of boys and girls learning side by side in classrooms proved alarming to at least some residents of the nation’s more



densely populated urban areas. To meet the demands of a burgeoning youth population, many cities at this time moved to create public secondary schools. In these institutions, students would be drawn from widely varying class backgrounds and presumably would mix freely—a notion that prompted dire warnings about the inevitable loss of “sexual morality” to ensue if young women were to mingle with young men from lower classes and different ethnic groups in school.<sup>27</sup> In 1848, the school committee in Charlestown, Massachusetts, spurred a heated local debate when it proposed to reorganize the city’s schools on the coeducational model. The objections registered by dissenting school board members reflected the outrage of those parents in the community who insisted that schools protect their daughters from the “‘contamination’ and sexual innuendo coming from vulgar and obscene boys.”<sup>28</sup> Supporters of common schools dismissed such demands as nothing more than “veiled prejudice against poor and immigrant families” and, as such, tantamount to an attack not only on coeducation but also on the underlying principle of universal education.<sup>29</sup> In this regard it bears remarking that even the more inclusive educational vision adopted by advocates of common schools did not lead reformers to seriously question the many gender-differentiated practices prevalent within mixed school settings, such as offering training in commerce, agriculture, and mechanical arts to boys while focusing instruction for girls on the cultivation of practical skills thought to be most useful in the domestic sphere.

Opposition to coeducation would begin to take on a more distinctively scientific gloss in the following decades. By the latter part of the eighteenth century, the traditional notion that girls were naturally the intellectual inferiors of boys seemed perilously at odds with reality, as girls rapidly established themselves

as every bit the equals of boys in classrooms in which they were allowed to be educated side by side.<sup>30</sup> This fact alone, however, hardly prevented the emergence of new *au courant* justifications for limiting girls' educational opportunities. Rather than questioning the intellectual ability of girls, prominent advocates of segregation at the time invoked the latest scientific discoveries in proclaiming the strain of intellectual labor to be gravely taxing on the female reproductive system.<sup>31</sup> In 1873, controversy was sparked by the publication of Dr. Edward H. Clarke's influential book *Sex in Education: Or a Fair Chance for Girls*. While the practice of educating girls by then enjoyed substantial popular support, Clarke raised a dissenting voice, declaring "the co-education of the sexes [to be] intellectually a success, physically a failure."<sup>32</sup> In the face of growing local demands to admit girls to public high schools being established in urban areas, Dr. Clarke explained that the capacity for reproduction rendered the female body especially vulnerable to pathology and even collapse, most especially during adolescence, when the reproductive system completes the critical stages of its development.<sup>33</sup> During this period of fragility, Dr. Clarke instructed, a young woman's "vital energy" must be conserved to support the healthy development of the reproductive organs.<sup>34</sup> As a result, he counseled that "from fourteen to eighteen, a girl should not study as many hours a day as a boy."<sup>35</sup> Clarke also recommended that girls be released from the obligations of both study and exercise every fourth week so as not to compound the infirmities imposed by menstruation. Should a female follow the typical course of schooling suitable for a male student, Clarke ominously suggested, she could expect a lifetime of education-induced afflictions, including "neuralgia, uterine disease, hysteria, and other derangements of the nervous system."<sup>36</sup> Failure to heed this advice, Dr. Clarke averred, would

result in an epidemic of female sterility that ultimately could threaten the survival of the “Anglo-Saxon race.”<sup>37</sup>

Some years after Clarke’s book first appeared, Scottish naturalists Patrick Geddes and J. Arthur Thompson would popularize in their authoritative treatise *The Evolution of Sex* (1889) a theory of sex-differentiated cell metabolism, an account based on the notion that the “katabolic” cells of males are organized for activity and innovation, while female “anabolic” cells are inherently passive.<sup>38</sup> Invoking the latest scientific thinking, they proclaimed gender difference to be determined at the cellular level, and based on microscopic analysis they concluded that “males were, by nature, individual and unique in their interests, talents, and abilities, but females were, by nature, generic and mediocre.” Others in the scientific community would proclaim greater genetic variability to be the cause of males’ presumptively superior intelligence—a superiority supposedly evidenced by the greater average size and weight of the male brain.<sup>39</sup>

While circulating widely, these new scientific theories certainly did not enjoy universal acceptance. The prominent social activist and abolitionist Julia Ward Howe published a scathing collection of essays denouncing Clarke’s book shortly after *Sex in Education* first appeared in print. Howe’s own contribution to the volume challenges Clarke’s account of biological sex differences and emphasizes the central role that socialization plays in producing gender difference.<sup>40</sup> In Howe’s view,

the intellectual education given to girls and boys in America may have less to do with the ill-health of the former than the dissimilarity of their physical training. Boys are much in the open air. Girls are much in the house. Boys wear a dress which follows and allows their natural movements. Girls wear clothes which impede and almost paralyze their limbs. Boys have, moreover, the healthful

hope held out to them of being able to pursue their own objects, and to choose and follow the business or profession of their choice. Girls have the dispiriting prospect of a secondary and derivative existence, with only so much room allowed them as may not cramp the full sweep of the other sex.<sup>41</sup>

Even if Howe's radical critique did not prevail, social support for coeducation, at least through secondary school, remained secure. In a survey undertaken by the commissioner of education in 1882–83, local officials reported a wide range of rationales, from the principled to the utilitarian, for favoring coeducation over single-sex approaches. Among the most widely cited reasons for investing in mixed schools was the belief that coeducation is “beneficial,” “economical,” “natural,” “customary,” and “convenient.”<sup>42</sup> In contrast, many reportedly regarded sex segregation as an “unnatural” arrangement that might prevent healthy social development.<sup>43</sup> In 1890, a national organization of education experts endorsed coeducation on the grounds that it “led to better discipline, more balanced instruction, and a healthier psychological and sexual development of both boys and girls.”<sup>44</sup> As Saint Louis school superintendent William T. Harris explained in the early 1870s: “The rudeness and *abandon* which prevails among boys when separate, at once gives place to self-restraint in the presence of girls. The prurient sentimentality, engendered by educating girls apart from boys—it is manifested by a frivolous and silly bearing when such girls are brought into the company of the opposite sex—this disappears almost entirely in mixed schools. In its place a quiet self-possession reigns.”<sup>45</sup> Once again, one finds a defense of coeducation that proceeds not from an egalitarian premise but rather from a logic firmly rooted in an ideology of gender difference, in this case leading to the argument that mixed schools are superior to

single-sex ones precisely because of the tempering effect each sex exerts upon the other.

By the start of the twentieth century, the focus of education reform debates shifted from concern that high school was a far too masculine environment for girls to endure, to panic that boys were being “feminized” at school.<sup>46</sup> In the face of mounting evidence suggesting that boys were more likely than their female peers to be held back, drop out, and present discipline problems in school, education reformers became “obsessed with the specter of female dominance.”<sup>47</sup> In an echo of racially charged discourses of the day, “the woman peril” was blamed for the epidemic of failure among school-age boys, with fault for the “boy problem” laid at the feet of members of the predominantly female teaching profession, who were dismissed as naturally ill-suited to guide the intellectual and psychological development of boys. Others suggested that the very structure of the typical school day favored the less dynamic cell metabolism of girls, who, by virtue of their relative genetic “mediocrity,” were better able to endure the dullness of daily lessons.<sup>48</sup> From this perspective, boys, being naturally predisposed to activity and creativity, were at an unfair disadvantage.<sup>49</sup>

Even in the face of expert warnings about the incompatibility of “ovaries and algebra,” the practice of coeducation appears never to have been seriously at risk.<sup>50</sup> Instead of retreating from coeducation, educators devised reforms to tilt the balance in favor of male success within coeducational settings. In subsequent decades, even greater resources would be directed to boys to address perceived disadvantages and challenges in school. In particular, significant investment would be made in vocational training and extracurricular athletics—programs conceived primarily for the benefit of boys.

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, single-sex public schooling was in slow but steady decline as the goal of accommodating the special needs of boys in coeducational settings was consolidated as a priority. But the idea of single-sex education was given an unexpected boost at midcentury, following the announcement of the decision in the landmark 1954 racial desegregation case *Brown v. Board of Education*. *Brown* turned on a constitutional challenge to state laws permitting segregation in public schools on the basis of race. In the 1898 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision, the court had concluded that state-sponsored segregation posed no conflict with the Fourteenth Amendment, provided that “separate but equal” facilities be made available to individuals of all races. In challenging racial segregation in public schools, the *Brown* plaintiffs sought judicial reconsideration of the established doctrine of “separate but equal.”

When the Supreme Court handed down its historic decision, a firestorm of white supremacist outrage ensued. Significantly, the torrent of racial hatred unleashed in reaction to *Brown* was articulated in highly sexualized terms. Desegregated schools in which Black boys and their white female peers might freely mingle became a primary site for the projection of racial hysteria.<sup>51</sup> As legal historian Serena Mayeri explains, “*Brown* revitalized a long-standing discourse that linked racial integration to sexual disorder and the decline of civilized humanity.”<sup>52</sup> For those who had lost the campaign to maintain racial segregation in public schools, single-sex education quickly was embraced as a serviceable proxy. Soon after the *Brown* decision was announced, state legislatures in Alabama, Texas, South Carolina, Tennessee, Florida, and Louisiana passed legislation to ease the way for the creation of

single-sex public schools.<sup>53</sup> The racism driving the retreat from coeducation during this period was flagrant and unapologetic.<sup>54</sup>

In these unsettled times, sex segregation was introduced as a palliative, a compromise position that drew support not only from unabashed racists but also from committed advocates of desegregation who nonetheless hoped to defuse the violent and stubbornly unyielding forces of opposition. The result was the advent of “Jane Crow” segregation in the South: the creation of single-sex public schools across the region whose primary *raison d’être* was to appease those bent on maintaining racial segregation at all costs.<sup>55</sup> But as Jane Crow segregation spread throughout the public school system in the southern states, legal challenges began to wend their way through the courts. At first, those defending these racially motivated single-sex initiatives benefited from the more relaxed standards of legal review accorded to sex-based classifications in comparison to race-based distinctions. By the late 1960s, however, the racial motivation underlying the sudden turn to single-sex education attracted more exacting judicial scrutiny. As the legal battles intensified, judges on the Fifth Circuit intervened with the goal of providing a uniform standard for lower court review. Their standard required showing that the impetus for separating the sexes lay in legitimate “educational purposes” and did not rest upon racially discriminatory ones.<sup>56</sup> Predictably, in the following years proponents of single-sex education would foreground gender-based rationales to defend programs suspected of emanating from racially driven motives.<sup>57</sup> Harkening back to the turn of the twentieth century, the discourse of a pervasive “boy problem” was revived as the case was made for protecting boys from the debilitating effects of “feminization” at school.<sup>58</sup> Also recycled from the past was the promise that single-sex education would improve student discipline while limiting

“distractions.” Of course, these claims, too, had arisen earlier, at a time of racialized panic over the influx of new immigrants to urban centers.<sup>59</sup> Trading the more explicit rhetoric of “race amalgamation” for what proved to be a far less inflammatory focus on the supposedly hormonally dictated challenges of adolescence, advocates of single-sex education foregrounded familiar claims about the easy distractibility and sexual preoccupation of teens.<sup>60</sup>

Even as judges steadfastly maintained that sex-based classifications must be accorded greater deference than racially based ones, the legislative environment was undergoing significant change. In 1972, Congress passed Title IX of the Civil Rights Act, prohibiting sex discrimination in public and private institutions receiving federal financial assistance.<sup>61</sup> In 1974, the Equal Educational Opportunity Act became law; and while commonly known as a measure intended to address “busing” controversies, the act contained an important provision prohibiting the assignment of students to schools on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin—or sex.<sup>62</sup> Also in 1974, Congress passed the Women’s Educational Equity Act, providing modest funds to support programs to combat gender bias in public schools.

In the years that followed, the lingering traces of Jane Crow school segregation would all but disappear as single-sex public schools across the South returned to coeducation in the face of persistent legal challenges and local opposition. Across the country, the number of single-sex schools serving students in grades K–12 dwindled to a handful. Those that remained were increasingly thought to rest on shaky legal ground, particularly given evident shifts in prevailing judicial dispositions toward sex-based classifications. In 1976, the Supreme Court seemed poised to decisively resolve the question of the legality of single-sex public schooling when it agreed to review a case



arising from a challenge brought on behalf of a student who had been denied admission to the Central High School for Boys in Philadelphia.<sup>63</sup> By the time the young woman's case reached the Supreme Court, a district court finding in her favor had been reversed on appeal. But the court's much-anticipated holding in *Vorchheimer v. School District of Philadelphia* fell short of the definitive statement on the matter observers on either side of the issue might have wished for; anticlimactically, the Third Circuit holding was affirmed per curiam by a split vote of four to four (with one justice recusing). Even in the absence of an explicit constitutional ban, however, single-sex public education seemed unlikely to survive much longer given the clear trend toward intensified judicial scrutiny of sex-based classifications of any kind.

By the mid-1980s, gender equity in education—an issue that had captivated lawmakers and jurists in the preceding decade—no longer enjoyed a position at the top of the federal education reform agenda. In 1983, the highly publicized *Nation at Risk* report warned of a “rising tide of mediocrity” in the nation's public schools, riveting attention on the question of whether the United States could maintain its putative position of dominance in the world without fixing its broken system of public education. Warning of a precipitous decline in student achievement across the nation, the report proclaimed, “What was unimaginable a generation ago has begun to occur—others are matching and surpassing our educational attainments.”<sup>64</sup> In the following years, education officials in the Reagan administration pushed questions of educational inequities within the United States aside in favor of a focus on across-the-board reforms, such as raising high school graduation requirements and mandating more classroom time focused on instruction in “the New Basics”: these

were policies intended to be implemented at every school, regardless of the particular demographics or economic situation of its students.<sup>65</sup>

As single-sex public education teetered on the brink of extinction in the late 1980s, it suddenly was revived. And while separate classes for boys and girls have remained a marginal practice in public schools in the decades since, the issue of single-sex education has received regular attention in the media and generated debates that have reached far beyond the boundaries of those communities in which single-sex initiatives have been launched.

## CHAPTER THREE

# “We’ve Got to Try Something”

### *The Male Academy Initiatives*

Just a few years after the last remaining historically all-male public school in the United States was compelled to admit female students, single-sex education staged a dramatic comeback. Efforts to revive single-sex education initially were propelled by national alarm over the situation facing young Black men living in the nation’s economically ravaged urban centers. Searching for solutions, reformers in Detroit, Milwaukee, Baltimore, and other inner-city school districts moved forward with plans to create learning environments specifically designed to meet the academic and social needs of at-risk Black male students. At the time, all-male classes were promoted as a promising reform with the potential to alter the life trajectories of a generation with little hope of success. Leading proponents of all-male public schooling initiatives argued that Black boys were suffering from a masculinity crisis rooted in the lack of appropriate male roles presented to them both at home and at school.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, many of these early initiatives brought an “Afrocentric twist” to single-sex education. Galvanized to act

by mounting evidence of the crisis conditions facing their students, inner-city school districts across the United States hastily launched experimental single-sex initiatives. Although these initiatives relied on largely untested educational theories, they quickly won ardent community support amid deepening concerns about the future of Black youth in the United States. Nonetheless, national feminist and other civil rights organizations stepped in, warning of the dangers of a return to state-sponsored segregation, and questioning the basis for the exclusion of girls from promising new educational programs. The courts intervened, and local officials were given an ultimatum: admit girls or shut the programs down.

The highly regarded book *Same, Different, Equal* (2003) by legal scholar Rosemary Salomone provides the most sustained analysis to date of this turbulent period in the struggle to create single-sex learning environments in U.S. public schools. In this work, Salomone masterfully weaves together discussions of feminist theory, law, and education policy to present an engrossing account of the heated debate over single-sex public education in the United States in the period from the late 1980s to the early years of the new millennium. *Same, Different, Equal* has been praised for eschewing partisan advocacy in favor of presenting a "reasoned," "balanced," "fair," and "evenhanded" approach to a deeply divisive issue.<sup>2</sup> Yet there are reasons to challenge such assessments. Salomone's account only superficially engages, and all too readily dismisses, the diverse perspectives of those who voiced opposition to single-sex initiatives. In Salomone's telling, "well-intentioned" plans for experimental single-sex programs became a casualty of overheated opposition inflamed by the lingering specter of racial segregation in U.S. public schools.<sup>3</sup> Salomone suggests that critics of promising programs fomented misplaced alarm by turning a

debate over public schooling initiatives for inner-city boys into a referendum on the future of *Brown v. Board of Education*. She vehemently objects to the suggestion, made by critics at the time, of a continuity between racial segregation in the past and the kind of sex segregation being proposed by education reformers in this period. Arguing that opponents overplayed a merely formal analogy between racially discriminatory segregation and single-sex schooling, Salomone blames feminists and other critics for "touch[ing] off a national debate in which gender and race became conflated."<sup>4</sup> The end result, she concludes, is that promising efforts to help disadvantaged boys were halted on the specious grounds that such programs undermined the value of "an integrated society" and created "a real danger of racial re-segregation."<sup>5</sup> In the end, Salomone finds a disturbing irony in the way opponents stoked fears about a return to a pre-*Brown* racial regime as a strategy to derail initiatives that were in fact intended to empower racially marginalized groups in the present.

I offer a counternarrative to Salomone's widely referenced account of the period. Salomone's discussion creates the impression that opposition to early single-sex initiatives was led by egalitarian "absolutists" who clung dogmatically to the court's conclusion, in *Brown v. Board*, that "separate educational facilities are inherently unequal."<sup>6</sup> But news accounts, legal decisions, and scholarly debates of the period tell a very different story—one in which supporters of all-male public school academies leveraged well-founded concerns about the devastating effects of racial injustice to dismiss legitimate concerns raised about the troubling nature of the distinctive gender ideologies promoted by these initiatives. In fact, several aspects of these experimental initiatives warranted closer scrutiny—starting with the questionable ethics of making an already egregiously underserved

population of schoolchildren the subjects of avowedly "experimental" interventions. At the same time, the social theory underlying the initiatives described below relied uncritically on an approach, popularized by the Moynihan Report, that attributed the underperformance of Black boys in school to the pernicious effects of a "matriarchal culture" in Black communities.<sup>7</sup> Finally, there is the question of the rationale for excluding girls from initiatives that drew on an Afrocentric educational model—an approach that gained popularity primarily for use in coeducational learning environments. While Salomone's account sidelines these and other important issues, my reconstruction of the controversy suggests that these matters properly belong at the center of any serious consideration of this issue.

While the following discussion challenges key aspects of Salomone's account of this period, one point on which all observers should agree concerns the severity of the educational crisis in inner-city communities that spurred educators and local activists into action in the first place. The dire scarcity of educational resources in urban areas and elsewhere at that time marked then, as it continues to do today, a catastrophic societal failure to provide for the basic needs of an entire generation of young people. Judged by any measure, from the likelihood of dropping out of school to ending up in jail, to facing unemployment, to becoming a victim of gun violence, young Black men in the early 1990s were looking down a road of terrifyingly grim prospects. Against this background, it bears emphasizing that my intent in raising questions about the soundness of education reform plans being considered at that time is not to deny or diminish, in any way, the reality of this crisis. This point is fundamental, yet is one that was too often lost in the acrimonious debate surrounding the all-male Afrocentric initiatives. While a

wide array of approaches to alleviating the educational crisis in inner-city schools might have been explored at the time, few strategies of redress garnered the consideration given to the idea of creating all-male academies for inner-city boys.

### THE "BLACK MALE CRISIS"

In the late 1980s, national media attention was drawn to the crisis conditions facing young Black men, particularly those living in the nation's faltering urban centers. While news reports during this period sometimes acknowledged in passing that Black females were "faring little better" than their male peers, Black males most often were presented as suffering a singularly extreme fate.<sup>8</sup>

In the face of mounting evidence of alarmingly high rates of poverty, violence, and incarceration, Black men were characterized in the media as an "endangered species" facing possible "extinction."<sup>9</sup> Looking back, the emergence of "Black male crisis" discourse in the late 1980s is unsettling—and not only because of the social reality it described. At the rhetorical level, likening Black boys to an "endangered species" implicitly reinforced racist conjurings of "wild" youth living in an "urban jungle" beyond the reach of the civilizing effects of society.<sup>10</sup>

The "Black male crisis" discourse that emerged in this period resuscitated the themes and conclusions of the controversial Moynihan Report, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*. Appearing in 1965, the Moynihan Report had been commissioned to investigate the persistence of racial inequality following a wave of civil rights law reforms. The Moynihan Report concluded that legal reform alone would not be sufficient to overcome racial inequality, for, in the words of the report, "three centuries of injustice have brought about deep-seated structural distortions in

the life of the Negro American."<sup>11</sup> According to the report, the greatest single barrier to equality for Black Americans was "the deterioration of the Negro family."<sup>12</sup> This "deterioration" was said to be manifest in the "matriarchal" structure of the typical Black household, a structure that the report insists "seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male and, in consequence, on a great many Negro women as well."<sup>13</sup> The report is chock full of data offered to substantiate these claims, such as evidence of lower rates of marriage but higher rates of reproduction and poverty among "Negroes" in comparison to whites. But the explanation of the relationship between these outcomes and the so-called "matriarchal family structure" remains in the report more associative than evidence-based. In one telling passage, the authors take pains to distance themselves from the more overtly misogynistic implications of their analysis, acknowledging that "there is, presumably, no special reason why a society in which males are dominant in family relationships is to be preferred to a matriarchal arrangement."<sup>14</sup> Claiming to eschew an ideological defense, the authors nonetheless proclaim as a simple sociological truth the fact that "it is clearly a disadvantage for a minority group to be operating on one principle, while the great majority of the population, and the one with the most advantages to begin with, is operating on another. This is the present situation of the Negro. Ours is a society which presumes male leadership in private and public affairs. The arrangements of society facilitate such leadership and reward it. A subculture, such as that of the Negro American, in which this is not the pattern, is placed at a distinct disadvantage."<sup>15</sup> Even while laying blame for racial inequality at the feet of the "matriarchal" Black family rather than emphasizing the continued culpability of white-dominated society, the Moynihan Report appealed to a



certain liberal sensibility rooted in a proud rejection of the variety of biological racism associated with more overtly white supremacist ideologies. In pointing to cultural factors such as family structure rather than proclaiming innate racial differences to be the root cause of social inequalities, the Moynihan Report self-consciously dissociates itself from the racist formations of the past. But as legal historian Peggy Pascoe reminds us, during this same period the law rapidly was moving to embrace the doctrine of color blindness, and the United States saw the proliferation of a "modernist racial ideology" that narrowly defined racism as a phenomenon explicitly premised on biologically essentialist claims-making.<sup>16</sup> As Pascoe observes, the result was "an Alice-in-Wonderland interpretation of racism in which even those who argue for racially oppressive policies can adamantly deny being racists."<sup>17</sup>

If the authors of the Moynihan Report were eager to distance themselves from outdated racial attitudes, they evidently harbored no similar qualms with respect to traditional gender ideologies. In a chapter titled "The Roots of the Problem," the report attributes the "tangle of pathology" in "the Negro community" to a debilitating sense of social subordination Black men had experienced since the days of slavery. The report explains, "The very essence of the male animal, from the bantam rooster to the four-star general, is to strut. Indeed, in 19th century America, a particular type of exaggerated male boastfulness became almost a national style. Not for the Negro male. The 'sassy nigger' was lynched. . . . In this situation, the Negro family made but little progress toward the middle-class pattern of the present time."<sup>18</sup> Here the Moynihan Report offers up a patriarchal sociology in place of a resort to biological racism, trading a suspect mode of racial essentialism for a sociologically inflected justification for bolstering male privilege within Black communities.

The release of the Moynihan Report sparked outrage in at least some segments of the public.<sup>19</sup> But as Kimberlé Crenshaw has observed about the controversy surrounding the release of the report: "Few commentators challenged the patriarchy embedded in the analysis."<sup>20</sup> In laying blame for the "tangle of pathology" in the Black community on the purported dominance of women in the community, the report presents a rightful restoration of the patriarchal social order as the road to equality. At the same time, in vilifying Black women generally, and Black mothers in particular, the report colluded with a broader antifeminist agenda in a period when questions about the appropriate place and role of women in society were very much at the fore. The report's call to restore men to their presumptively natural position of power in the nuclear family immediately was identified by leading feminist organizations such as the National Organization for Women as an effort to rally opposition to women gaining a foothold in the world of paid employment. As feminist scholar Bettina Aptheker explains,

Implicit in the Moynihan doctrine is also an indictment against all women. It is a warning to white women that if they persist in entering the work force as their Black sisters have done, and join with them in demanding equal pay for comparable work and related benefits in order to secure financial independence for all women, they too will endanger the basic structural unit of society—the nuclear family under male provision. In this way, white women invite social chaos and economic ruin, and they too will pay the penalty for such a transgression.<sup>21</sup>

Against the background of intensifying demands for greater employment opportunities for women, the Moynihan Report sent a warning to white women that solidarity with their working Black sisters would spell doom for the white family. At the

same time, by attributing the disempowerment of Black Americans as a class to the relative empowerment of Black women within the Black family structure, the report placed Black women in a bind where aligning themselves with activists in the white women's movement would readily be perceived as a betrayal of the cause of racial justice. As sociologist Deborah King explains, "During the civil rights and Black nationalist movements of the 1960s and 1970s, men quite effectively used the matriarchy issue to manipulate and coerce Black women into maintaining exclusive commitments to racial interests and redefining and narrowing Black women's roles and images in ways to fit a more traditional Western view of women."<sup>22</sup>

The "Black male crisis" discourse that emerged in the late 1980s recycled many of the central tenets of the Moynihan Report but did not evoke nearly the same counterreaction. Educational sociologist Pedro Noguera notes that, at one time, pointing the finger at the "matriarchal Black family" might have been challenged as "the by-product of racist and racially biased theories of Black behavior."<sup>23</sup> But by the late 1980s, "these ideas [were] being produced by a wide assortment of journalists, scholars, and political actors, many of whom perceive[d] themselves as sympathetic to the plight of Black males, and some of whom also happen[ed] to share their race and gender."<sup>24</sup> The following offers a closer look at some of the single-sex public schooling initiatives developed by education reformers who adopted the "Black male crisis" frame.

#### A SIMPLE IDEA

Almost immediately, education emerged as a focal point of "Black male crisis" discourse. Given national visibility by William Raspberry, an op-ed columnist for the *Washington Post*, a

little-known educational psychologist burst on the scene as a leading voice in the campaign to address the educational plight of the nation's urban Black boys. In March 1987, Raspberry published an editorial about a "simple idea" with the potential "to make a significant, perhaps even profound, difference in the lives of some youngsters now growing up in the nation's ghettos."<sup>25</sup> While offering a cursory acknowledgment that students of both sexes at inner-city schools "tend not to do very well in school," Raspberry underscored the fact that "inner-city boys tend to fare worst of all." Why? Because, according to Raspberry, young Black girls have the advantage of female role models at school who can teach them that there is "an alternative to the life Mama lives." In contrast, Black boys who are raised by single mothers and educated by a predominantly female teaching force lack the role models they need to develop into successful men. Enter Dr. Spencer Holland, an educational psychologist from the Washington, D.C., school system, with a plan to create "all-male classes headed by male teachers."<sup>26</sup> In his op-ed, Raspberry quoted Holland at length: "We all know that most of these boys come from single-parent, female-headed households. From birth to preschool, these boys' only significant role models are most often female relatives. Then, from preschool to late elementary or junior high, most are confronted with female teachers. So, for the first 10 to 12 years of their lives, many if not most inner-city Black boys' significant role models are female."<sup>27</sup> Underscoring Holland's point, Raspberry declares that "even the most loving and conscientious of female relatives have a tough time teaching boys how to be male."<sup>28</sup>

As a chief architect of "Black male crisis" discourse, Holland did more than simply proclaim a crisis; he supplied a theory of its cause. Holland's account centered on the failure to properly

socialize Black boys into manhood. Echoing the Moynihan report, Holland linked the educational crisis among young Black males to the dominance of mothers within Black households and to the predominantly female teaching profession. At the very core of Holland's educational theory lay the claim that boys need male role models to succeed—a truth he presented as self-evident.<sup>29</sup> Explaining the importance of providing male students with male teachers, Holland stated simply, "When a man walks into a room and says, 'Johnny, sit down,' Johnny sits down."<sup>30</sup> Or as one school principal puts it in an article about a school served by volunteers from Holland's organization, Project 2000: "Some kids don't know who their fathers are. They grow up with women, and they go to school with women. We have wonderful teachers here, but they're all women, and some boys can't always relate to women as well as men. That's just the way it is."<sup>31</sup>

The ideas that Holland presents as axiomatic demand closer scrutiny. Consider, for example, a claim of his that many might willingly affirm—the idea that "schools need to teach a young, fatherless Black boy that men read and write and sing songs and play games, that there are nurturing men, particularly Black men. We want him to understand that this whole education thing is not just for girls."<sup>32</sup> But Holland argues for much more than encouraging boys to develop a positive self-image based upon a strong sense of academic capability. In attributing Black males' school struggles to the deficiencies of single-mother households, Holland's brand of "Black male crisis" discourse positioned Black women as the very source of their problems. To be sure, not all commentators on the "Black male crisis" at the time endorsed the view that "matriarchal" families, coupled with a feminized teaching force, were primarily to blame for the challenges facing Black boys at school. Nor was there uniform agreement that the creation of all-male

learning environments was the best solution to the problems facing these young men.<sup>33</sup> But while Holland's approach did not reflect an expert consensus at the time, he became the go-to expert in media coverage of the "Black male crisis."<sup>34</sup> Credited as the one "who first broached the idea of special academies for boys," Holland emerged as a leading voice in the national debate over single-sex public schooling initiatives.<sup>35</sup> This status provided him with abundant opportunities to influence the direction of national deliberations over how best to address the plight of young Black men. Holland used these opportunities to sound the themes that became dominant in "Black male crisis" discourse: that the plight of inner-city Black males is not only serious but also unparalleled in its scope and severity; that the lack of Black male teachers is a primary cause of Black male students' failure to thrive in school; and that all-male classes, taught by Black men, are an effective strategy for addressing poor educational outcomes for Black boys.

#### THE EARLY EXPERIMENTS

When William Raspberry published his original piece trumpeting the promise of Spencer Holland's "simple" plan for education reform, he surely was hoping to reach readers like Willie J. Wright. At the time the editorial appeared, Wright was the principal of Pine Villa Elementary School in Dade County, Florida. As Wright would later recall, he read Raspberry's column and a thought suddenly occurred to him: "*Why not*"? Moving quickly—and apparently without pausing to undertake any further research on the subject—Wright established two all-boys classes at Pine Villa Elementary, one for students in kindergarten, and one for first-graders. Seeing an opportunity to conduct some research of his own, however, Wright assigned a Black male teacher to one of the classes, and

a white male to lead the other group. Wright required that, to be eligible to participate in these classes, a boy had to live "in a female-headed household with no available male figure in their immediate family."<sup>36</sup> Wright later explained that his intent was to "test our theory that Black male children would do better if they were exposed to positive role models, especially Black males."<sup>37</sup>

The Dade County School Board granted permission to launch the experiment, but the Pine Villa program was called to an abrupt halt after the regional office of the Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights stepped in with a warning that the exclusion of girls appeared to be a violation of Title IX. Reluctantly canceling the program, Wright nonetheless issued a glowing assessment of his experiment. In his own estimation—likely not an entirely objective one—the all-boys classes had proven "successful beyond our expectations."<sup>38</sup> Among the accomplishments Wright touted was the extraordinary "esprit de corps" they had created by encouraging boys to act as "buddies" both inside the classroom and outside of school. Wright also remarked favorably upon their cultivation of "gentlemen's social graces" in the all-boys classes, noting that students were encouraged "to compliment each other's work, clothing, and successful efforts to use appropriate language."<sup>39</sup>

As an experience, Wright's initiative may have been a positive one for its participants. But as an experiment, it was deeply flawed. Given that students in the all-male classes were exposed to innovative teaching methods and offered a variety of extra support systems, there is no way to determine the specific role, if any, played by the exclusion of girls in producing the positive results Wright observed. For example, the special all-boys classes were staffed with "volunteer teacher aides" who were successful Black men from the community with experience as

business professionals. Had Principal Wright provided similar enrichment programs for students in coeducational classrooms, the study design would have been greatly strengthened. Instead, a hollow rhetoric of "experimentation" and hypothesis testing served merely to confer an aura of legitimacy on a program whose very design made its efficacy impossible to assess.

The fact that Wright himself would issue such a flattering assessment of the program he spearheaded is hardly surprising; more remarkable is that any objective observer would take Wright's self-assessment at face value. But this is precisely what Rosemary Salomone does in presenting Pine Villa as "a good case in point" of a program "shut down under legal threat despite positive effects on discipline, attendance, and achievement."<sup>40</sup> Repeating Wright's claims of higher-than-average attendance and better-than-average test scores in the all-male classes, Salomone offers up Dade County as a prime example of what happens when civil rights crusaders shut down "promising" programs for underserved kids.<sup>41</sup> Presented in these terms, Salomone's narrative casts the Office for Civil Rights as a callous federal agency whose aggressive enforcement of one-size-fits-all regulations led a worthy local initiative to be tragically abandoned.

One critical point that gets lost in Salomone's discussion of the Pine Villa initiative is the fact that the Office for Civil Rights did *not* in fact order the program to be shut down. What the office did do is insist that the same enhanced educational opportunities being made available to boys also be provided to girls. No bar was placed on continued provision of mentoring, community-building, and the other innovative practices Wright touts as so critical for the boys in his experimental classes—as long as similar opportunities were made available to all students regardless of sex. This requirement need not be interpreted as



an attempt to discourage innovation, as Salomone seems to suggest: rather, it should be seen as a means to facilitate the kind of rigorous assessment we surely should demand when it comes to educational experiments undertaken in classrooms serving already disadvantaged kids.

After the Office for Civil Rights stepped in, William Raspberry published a second op-ed, this time chronicling Wright's tribulations as a champion of boys of color.<sup>42</sup> Once again, Spencer Holland was featured as an expert on the educational challenges facing inner-city youth. With evident frustration at the continued failure of the public education system to adequately address the Black male crisis in schools, Raspberry reiterated Holland's central thesis that girls generally do better than boys at school because of the abundance of "positive role models" for female students. Reflecting on Wright's experiment with all-male classes, Raspberry expresses exasperation with challengers who charge that such programs discriminate: "Does anyone really believe that such an arrangement is a denial of rights to girls?"<sup>43</sup>

Four days after Raspberry's column appeared, Spencer Holland published an op-ed of his own.<sup>44</sup> In it, he calls for "immediate and radical actions" to be taken to address "an epidemic of academic failure" among "Black, inner-city male students." Citing as evidence the documented high rates of illiteracy and low rates of high school graduation among Black male students, Holland warns that the public education crisis virtually condemns students living in inner-city areas to lives of poverty. To reverse this course, Holland prescribes "experimental classes made up only of boys, taught by male teachers, from kindergarten through third grade." Sounding his familiar chords, Holland explains that "the most common reasons cited for the academic and social failings of Black males are that such boys come from

poor, single-parent, female-headed households" where they have "no positive role models" and "view school as feminine."

As the conditions in urban areas continued to deteriorate, urban school districts across the United States began exploring the possibility of single-sex classes for at-risk boys. While some at the time voiced concerns that plans to open all-male academies might be "rushed," the imperative to do something—*anything*—ultimately prevailed.<sup>45</sup> Conceived in an atmosphere of desperation, new initiatives were presented as "experiments" that just might hold the key to success. This vaguely scientific rhetoric put a decidedly positive spin on the lack of research evidence to support single-sex education as a pedagogical intervention. At the same time, however, the term *experiment* created an uncomfortable parallel with the long history in the United States of subjecting vulnerable populations to untested practices by way of developing socially useful knowledge.<sup>46</sup> Without the benefit of empirical evidence to establish the effectiveness of all-male classes as an educational intervention, the case *for* these new initiatives came to rest largely on the case *against* an undeniably failing status quo approach. Urging communities to adopt all-male classes for Black boys taught by Black male teachers, the pitch for these new initiatives was blunt and to the point. Spencer Holland put it this way: "Let's try it. We've got to try something."<sup>47</sup>

The local architects of all-male public school programs looked for inspiration to pioneering Afrocentric schooling initiatives that had been tried in cities like Atlanta and Seattle only a few years earlier. Positioning all-male initiatives as an offshoot of the Afrocentric education movement surely played a role in garnering local support in urban school districts like Detroit and Milwaukee. But this suggestion of continuity glossed over the fact that prominent Afrocentrists generally had not advocated sex-separate

classes in the preceding years.<sup>48</sup> In the early 1980s, pioneering Afrocentric scholar Molefi Kete Asante elaborated a searing critique of Eurocentrism in the U.S. education system. Asante's goal was not simply to correct the historical record; it was also to counteract the pervasive sense of disempowerment and disaffection common among students of color who had been erased within the dominant curriculum. Proponents of Afrocentric school reforms believed that changing what students learn had the potential to both raise the level of academic achievement and address a crisis of self-esteem among Black students. Critics objected vigorously, charging that history was being rewritten for no better reason than to provide a psychological palliative to underachieving kids.<sup>49</sup> As Arthur Schlesinger Jr., an outspoken opponent of the Afrocentric curriculum movement, opined, "I don't think that history is a form of therapy that should be used to improve self-esteem."<sup>50</sup> Over the objections of those who dismissed Afrocentrism as a pseudoeducational movement emanating in a "'feel-good' rationale," proponents of Afrocentric curriculum reform won some important victories.<sup>51</sup> In 1987, the Portland, Oregon, school district, headed by Superintendent Matthew Prophet, released the African-American Baseline Essays.<sup>52</sup> Under the direction of Dr. Asa G. Hillard III, six leading Afrocentric thinkers were recruited to write essays highlighting the distinctive contributions and experiences of Africans and African Americans in foundational subject areas, including language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, art, and music. In the years following the release of the Baseline Essays, Afrocentric reforms filtered into school districts across the United States, leading to the adoption of Afrocentric curriculum "infusion" plans in cities such as Portland and Indianapolis, as well as plans to open coeducational Afrocentric public schools in cities across the country.<sup>53</sup>

By aligning their fledgling programs with the controversial doctrine of Afrocentrism, advocates of all-male initiatives in the early 1990s surely knew they risked attracting unwelcome critical scrutiny. And this certainly proved to be the case. But the gesture of alliance with the Afrocentric school reform movement simultaneously consolidated local community support. In January 1990, the Milwaukee Public School's board of directors convened a special task force "to study district programs that addressed the needs of African American male students."<sup>54</sup> Nine months later, the task force unveiled a plan for two new schools that would "[focus] specifically on the needs of young African American males."<sup>55</sup> As members of the task force explained, they hoped that these initiatives soon would become "islands of hope in a sea of indifference."<sup>56</sup> With a plan for a curriculum organized around the idea of a "a total learning environment designed to fit the needs and draw upon the strengths of African American students," the task force envisioned an empowering school context that would "vitate the feelings of inadequacy and impotence that result from the academic and personal alienation too many of Milwaukee's African American schoolchildren presently face in its public schools."<sup>57</sup>

The task force's report provides little in the way of specifics regarding how these objectives were to be met. What would this "total environment" look like in practice? In response to a question about the justification for the immersion school concept, C. Skully Stikes, a cocreator of the Milwaukee plan, opined that "Blacks, by way of their culture, are more emotional and 'people-centered' than other ethnic groups, while traditional learning plans tend to be 'content-centered' and dismiss feelings."<sup>58</sup> In a published article defending the plan, two members of the Milwaukee task force, professors of education at the University of

Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Donald Leake and Brenda Leake, presented the desperate situation facing African American male students as a de facto justification for the initiative. Citing alarming statistics, the Leakes note that African American males have experienced "the largest decline for any racial or ethnic group" in college enrollment, noting that "forty percent of African American males are functionally illiterate," and that "more than eighty percent of the African American male high school students are performing below average."<sup>59</sup> In a telling omission, no data pertaining to the relative situation of African American female students is provided. While the authors do acknowledge "the existence of parallel problems for African American females," they nonetheless presume, rather than explain, that African American males should be treated as a class of their own, and that their interests should be given top priority.<sup>60</sup> Indeed, the closest the Leakes come to providing a justification for the plan to separate students by sex is to suggest that single-sex environments are particularly conducive to instruction that focuses on "gender socialization," and that single-sex classes "would ... help students examine and establish personally and culturally appropriate notions of femininity and masculinity."<sup>61</sup> No details are provided to clarify how "appropriate" gender norms will be defined, nor is an explanation given for why issues pertaining to gender identity could not be effectively engaged in coeducational settings.

The Milwaukee plan was challenged almost immediately, and members of the school board moved quickly to revise it. Admission to the immersion schools would be open to all students regardless of sex; however, the curriculum would remain "geared toward Black males," as originally planned.<sup>62</sup> In accepting female students, members of the Milwaukee school board seem to have

resolved to do whatever it might take to avoid a court battle. Education reformers in Detroit, however, did not back down so readily. In February 1991, the Detroit Board of Education approved a proposal to launch the Malcolm X Academy, an all-male school created to address the "special needs" of African American boys.<sup>63</sup> By summer of 1991, plans were in the works to open two additional schools based on a similar model—the Paul Robeson Academy and the Marcus Garvey Academy. The decision to launch these new programs came on the heels of an alarming report prepared by the Male Academy Task Force, a group that had been convened by the school board a year earlier to study the issue. The report confirmed the catastrophic condition of Black boys in Detroit. As school board vice president Frank Hayden warned, "Unless innovative measures are taken within the educational community, the survival of young African-American males in Detroit will be threatened."<sup>64</sup> In accounting for the desperate situation of young Black men, the Male Academy Task Force reiterated many points common in "Black male crisis" discourse at the time: "There are thousands of young males that can be characterized as 'at risk' because of difficulties associated with urban poverty and violence, family unemployment, single-mother households, lack of positive male role models, and lack of healthy, nurturing home environments."<sup>65</sup>

The proposed Detroit academies were to offer a variety of special programs and alternative approaches to instruction. Students would be required to wear uniforms, and the curriculum would emphasize "male responsibility."<sup>66</sup> Saturday classes would be offered, as well as extended instruction beyond the typical school day during the week, mentoring, and "individualized counseling."<sup>67</sup> School board member Clifford Watson claimed credit for the "educational concept" behind the proposal. It was an approach he

said he developed during the 1980s while serving as an elementary school administrator.<sup>68</sup> Watson's concept drew explicitly on existing Afrocentric models. In his approach, central emphasis was placed on creating an African-centered curriculum, one that might, for example, include a history lesson on Lewis Howard Latimer, the African American inventor who developed the patent drawing for the lightbulb filament, or a geography lesson highlighting the Egyptians' early contributions to mapmaking. In a book Watson coauthored several years later in which he explains in more detail the thinking behind the Detroit academies, the theory and practice of Afrocentrism is discussed in detail, but nowhere does Watson address the fact that Afrocentric approaches developed in the 1980s were designed with coeducational settings in mind.

The plan for the Detroit academies won approval from the local school board, although not without dissent. Explaining her opposition to the plan, school board member Gloria Cobbin declared, "If we want to offer single-sex schools for those students who function better in that type of environment, then we should offer it to each sex and to all the races—not just single out Black males as 'problem children.'"<sup>69</sup> Despite objections such as this, the controversy surrounding the Detroit academies was represented in media reports as a conflict between local community members on the one hand, and national legal organizations on the other.<sup>70</sup> While news stories commonly identified groups such as the American Civil Liberties Union and NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund as leading the opposition, almost no media attention was given to the fact of dissent *within* the Detroit community itself. To be sure, local challengers had good reasons for avoiding the media glare—as Detroit resident Shawn Garrett quickly learned. Garrett, described in press reports as an

insurance clerk, was at the time the mother of a four-year old daughter whom she intended to enroll in a local public school. On August 5, 1991, just three weeks before the Detroit academies were set to open, the ACLU and NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund filed a lawsuit in federal district court challenging the exclusion of girls from the proposed academies. Howard Simon of the ACLU of Michigan described the motivation behind the suit this way: "There is clearly a crisis, but the crisis is all urban school children. These schools may open up a whole new world for these boys. That world should be open to girls, too."<sup>71</sup> Explaining her decision to join the lawsuit, Garrett stated simply, "I want my daughter to have the best, too."<sup>72</sup> This stand would prove personally costly, however. As the date of oral argument drew near, Garrett was subjected to harassing phone calls and hostile treatment from community members in support of the academies. Succumbing to these pressures, just thirty minutes before oral argument in the case was set to begin, Garrett withdrew from the action.<sup>73</sup>

Moving forward without their named plaintiff present, Garrett's lawyers argued before Judge George E. Woods that the exclusion of girls from the Detroit academies violated both constitutional and statutory prohibitions against sex discrimination.<sup>74</sup> The plaintiffs' case rested on the claim that African American girls in the Detroit school system were desperately in need of expanded educational opportunities. Marshaling evidence to demonstrate that "urban girls" were grossly underserved by existing schools, lawyers argued that "ignoring the plight of urban females institutionalizes inequality and perpetuates the myth that females are doing well in the current system."<sup>75</sup> This contention stood as a pointed challenge to "Black male crisis" discourse by contesting the assumption that the calamitous situation



facing inner-city boys was of a significantly different order of magnitude than that of their female counterparts.

Judge Woods issued his ruling less than two weeks before the Detroit academies were set to open. Finding the constitutional challenge persuasive, he granted the motion for a preliminary injunction and ordered members of the school board to work out a schedule for admitting girls. Still, the ruling left open the possibility that a single-sex program could pass constitutional muster, provided a sex-based exclusion was shown to be "substantially related" to the achievement of an important governmental objective.<sup>76</sup> In the case of the Detroit initiative, the objective of the program—to better serve Black male students—was deemed an important one. But the court remained unconvinced that excluding girls was necessary to achieve this end. "Although co-educational programs have failed, there is no showing that it is the co-educational factor that results in failure."<sup>77</sup> And since no evidence was provided establishing that the presence of girls in the classroom was a primary cause of the Black male crisis, there was no reason to believe that girls' presence in the new academies would subvert educational interventions intended to ameliorate the crisis. On the flip side, Judge Woods noted the risk that "should the male academies proceed and succeed, success would be equated with the absence of girls rather than any of the educational factors that more probably caused the outcome."<sup>78</sup> This concern would prove all too prescient.

#### THE AFTERMATH OF GARRETT

For those who objected to the proposed male-only admissions policy at the Detroit academies, the decision in *Garrett v. Board of Education* came as a welcome vindication of the cherished

antisegregationist principle so memorably articulated by the court in the *Brown* decision. In the controversy sparked by the Detroit academies, critics had warned that public school segregation of any kind risked rolling back the clock to the pre-*Brown* era of state-sponsored prejudice. Indeed, the specter of "re-segregation" surfaced in both the Milwaukee and Detroit controversies.<sup>79</sup> Horace Sheffield Jr. of the Detroit Association of Black Organizations warned that "what we have now are people who are beginning to question the 1954 desegregation decision."<sup>80</sup> Declaring the move to single-sex public schools a "retrogression," Sheffield implored "Black folks" to resist the temptation to "mortgage our future on something that may turn out to be nothing more than a quick-fix that didn't work."<sup>81</sup>

To those disappointed by the *Garrett* ruling, however, the outcome seemed less an affirmation of *Brown* than an outrageous misappropriation of it. As one op-ed writer reflected with palpable outrage: "Who would have thought that anti-discrimination law would stand in the way of efforts to help those most in need? Who'd have thought that attempts to focus efforts on Black boys—an endangered species—would be constructed as discrimination against girls?"<sup>82</sup>

But if, as disappointed supporters of the Detroit academies charged, the *Brown* doctrine had been hijacked, who exactly were the hijackers? In the aftermath of the *Garrett* decision, fingers quickly pointed at the feminist legal establishment. An episode of the popular news show *Nightline*, airing just after the *Garrett* decision was announced, offers a closer look at the rhetorical strategies mobilized at the time to promote the impression of the controversy as a battle between community advocates for disadvantaged students of color on the one hand, and, on the other, elite feminist lawyers driven by an ideological

opposition to acknowledging gender differences of any kind.<sup>83</sup> The episode opens with a segment narrated by guest host Chris Wallace: "In Detroit, a proposed solution for a troubled population. The school board establishes special academies for young Black male students under siege in the inner city. 'Discrimination,' cries the National Organization for Women."<sup>84</sup> Note that this setup implies that NOW itself is the plaintiff, and it is not until much later in the segment that viewers learn the suit in fact was brought by Detroit resident Shawn Garrett. Garrett herself does make a brief appearance in the report, quickly followed by Waltene Grady Truly, director of the Project on Equal Education Rights (PEER) of the NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund. Truly explains, "When you have a school system like Detroit's that has a 54 percent dropout rate for young men and a 45 percent dropout rate for young women, you're not talking about a school system that's working for one sex and is not working for the other. You're talking about a school system that is failing children." But the last word before the commercial break comes from another mother in the community, who asks incredulously, "I really can't understand the—you know, why would someone fight something like this?"

While the opening segment reveals significant discord *among* local Detroit residents over the creation of the proposed academies, the notion of a divided community is quickly forgotten in the second segment. After the break, the show resumes in its signature debate format. Arguing in favor of the academies is Clifford Watson, the school principal who authored the plan for the Detroit academies. He is joined by Kwame Kenyatta, a local organizer from the Malcolm X Community Center in Detroit. On the other side is Helen Neuborne, head of the NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund. In the absence of anyone from

Detroit to speak on behalf of girls in the community, Neuborne is left to fill the gap. At her first chance to speak, Neuborne stresses that NOW's primary interest in bringing the suit lay in addressing the exclusion of Black girls from a promising new educational initiative. With an education crisis in urban Detroit of this magnitude, Neuborne insists, "what you can't do is throw the girls educationally out of the lifeboat."<sup>85</sup> At this point Kenyatta interrupts, declaring NOW's professed interest in stopping sex discrimination to be a mere "smoke screen" for white people's discomfort with Afrocentric educational initiatives. Neuborne responds that the problem has nothing to do with opposition to Afrocentrism, and that her opposition in fact resides in a challenge to the exclusion of one segment of the Black population—girls—from the program. In response, Kenyatta reiterates his position that opposition to the Detroit academies is "not about sex, it is about Black men and Black people and their right to self-determination . . . and they don't want that to take place." Pushing back, Neuborne demands, "But what about the Black girls[?] They're the girls that are being left out." At this point, Watson interjects to explain that girls in the community, including his own daughters, will also be beneficiaries of the all-male academies, if only indirectly. After all, he observes, young women in the community will gain "some positive African-American males to choose from when they get ready to get married."<sup>86</sup>

The suggestion that the appropriate response to a community-wide public education crisis is to provide boys with enhanced educational opportunities and girls with better husbands surely warrants a response. But as we see in the preceding discussion, Neuborne's efforts to rebut the sexism in Watson's remark were dismissed as a flimsy cover for racist anxiety about Black empowerment. In this exchange, characterizing feminism

as a white, middle-class movement—whose interests are presumed to be the primary concern of the National Organization of Women—enables the spurious dismissal of important questions concerning the basis for excluding girls from a promising education reform initiative. In this way, media reports that presented the controversy over the Detroit academies as a struggle between local advocates for disadvantaged kids on the one hand, and legal outsiders on the other, primed the public to accept the delegitimizing idea that feminists “just don’t get it” when it comes to racial injustice.

#### INTERSECTIONALITY

The *Garrett* holding was announced in 1991, the same year Kimberlé Crenshaw published her celebrated law review article “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color.”<sup>87</sup> As noted earlier, Crenshaw is widely credited with coining the term *intersectionality*. Keeping in mind a provocative observation by feminist studies scholar Robyn Wiegman—that this familiar citational gesture rings hollow if the rhetorical act of recognizing a Black woman’s place in the feminist canon is not backed by a careful engagement with the work—it is significant that the historical context in which Crenshaw’s galvanizing writings first appeared is rarely remarked in scholarship that appropriates intersectionality as a key analytic. Historicizing the concept is crucial, I suggest, not by way of parochializing or otherwise seeking to limit its critical reach, but rather to better appreciate the distinctive political meaning, and force, of the concept.

A companion to her earlier law review article, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex” (1989), “Mapping the

Margins" moves beyond the sphere of antidiscrimination law to address the persistent marginalization of Black women's voices and interests in arenas ranging from progressive activism to popular culture. Boldly, Crenshaw asserts that "the failure of feminism to interrogate race means that the resistance strategies of feminism will often replicate and reinforce the subordination of people of color, and the failure of antiracism to interrogate patriarchy means that antiracism will frequently reproduce the subordination of women."<sup>88</sup> Crenshaw characterizes these exclusions as "mutual elisions" that work in tandem to force an impossible choice upon those women of color who, in addressing one "dimension" of subordination, find that they must deny another.<sup>89</sup>

The idea of intersectionality is particularly helpful in unpacking the effects of the distinctive way the controversy over the Black male academy initiatives was framed, both by those directly involved in the debates and in media coverage of it. As a theory centrally concerned with the politics of complex identity, intersectionality attunes us to the way the needs and interests of Black girls came to be marginalized in public education reform debates perceived to turn on a clash between local advocates for Black youth and white feminist lawyers working for national legal organizations. As legal scholar Devon Carbado has observed, discussion of the Black male academy initiatives too often "ignore[d] the degree to which Black girls are burdened by racism," while stoking "the false impression that the educational status of Black female adolescents is such that they are not in need of these academies or that, if they are in need of such academies, in a zero-sum political world their need has to be subordinated to the perceived needs of Black male adolescents."<sup>90</sup> And as political scientist Cathy Cohen notes, "Any insistence by group members that the lived experience of young

black women also be recognized as part of the larger community narrative of racial discrimination and struggle is portrayed as denying the more dire position of young black men."<sup>91</sup>

At the same time that intersectional analysis highlights the marginalization of girls and women in discourses of crisis within Black communities, intersectionality also reveals the limitations of "single-axis" approaches to advocacy for women that privilege demands for equal treatment on the basis of sex over recognition of the urgent need to address the severe shortage of educational opportunities in schools districts serving predominantly Black students. Reflecting on the organized opposition to single-sex education in the early 1990s, civil rights lawyer Galen Sherwin observes that prominent women's rights groups "focused so strictly on theory that they . . . missed the reality of oppression on the ground below."<sup>92</sup>

If the all-male-academy debates reveal what might at first appear to be a classic case of intersectional dynamics, the debates also present an occasion to explore some less-commonly noted dimensions of intersectional politics at play. Intersectional analysis typically focuses on instances of intragroup marginalization, with the emblematic cases being white women's-movement activists claiming, presumptuously, to speak "for and as *women*."<sup>93</sup> But is a reading of this nature adequate to capture the intersectional dynamics observed, for example, in the *Nightline* episode discussed earlier? In that case, an attunement to intersectional political dynamics forces a confrontation with the fact that even the most well-founded critiques of feminist exclusionary practices may be rallied for diverse political ends, including unapologetically antifeminist ones.<sup>94</sup> By insisting that Neuborne's opposition to the all-male academies emanated in race-based animus, her interlocutors resorted to a delegitimation strategy by way of

invalidating an alternative perspective. Here, intersectionality names not only the process by which the interests of multiply marginalized subjects—in this case, Black girls living in the inner cities—were shunted aside but also the conditions that enable the strategic leveraging of difference to fracture potential coalitions. That is, intersectionality should be understood as a way of characterizing not just complex *identities* but also strategic *politics*.

#### LESSONS LEARNED

Among the most lasting legacies of the *Garrett* controversy is the way the debate over single-sex education came to be framed as a battle between advocates for racially and economically disadvantaged kids on the one hand and feminists on the other. As I have argued in the preceding, framing the conflict as a struggle between Black communities and feminist legal elites erased the needs and interests of Black girls in debates over public education reform. In this environment, support for single-sex initiatives became the way to signal a committed antiracist stance. It was a rhetorical opportunity eagerly seized upon by then-president George H. W. Bush. Two weeks after the *Garrett* decision was announced, the president addressed a gathering of education writers. He praised single-sex initiatives in public schools as an "imaginative solution" and the kind of "innovation" he would like to see more of in classrooms across the United States.<sup>95</sup> Referencing the *Garrett* ruling, President Bush remarked, "We've got to abide by the law of the land and if our experience shows us that we need to get modifications to accommodate academies of that nature, we ought to do it because I do believe that something of that nature has some merit."<sup>96</sup> In this way, a conservative president



seized upon the controversy provoked by the Detroit academies to position himself as an ally in the struggle to overcome racial injustice. The irony here is arresting, given that the *Garrett* decision affirms the government's adamant *disavowal* of responsibility for racial inequalities by reiterating the prevailing view that racial segregation that does not directly originate in an explicit state policy is beyond the scope of judicial address. And so, even while affirming the position that de facto racial segregation should be regarded as a nongovernmental matter, *Garrett* comes to present an occasion for the president to proclaim a renewed commitment to racial justice.

To be sure, not everyone was persuaded. President Bush's widely circulated remarks in support of all-male public schooling initiatives reportedly caused prominent members of the ACLU, NOW, and some urban schooling watchdog groups to "bristle."<sup>97</sup> Nonetheless, the president's comments won accolades from segments of the public ranging from "the conservative Heritage Foundation" to "Black parents and educators."<sup>98</sup> Media characterizations such as this implicitly reinforced the impression that the ACLU and NOW constituencies were entirely distinct from "Black parents and educators"—an impression that once again rendered parents like Shawn Garrett and other local critics of the initiatives invisible.

As I noted at the outset, Salomone tells the story of this period as a tragedy, one in which "well-intentioned" single-sex initiatives were derailed, depriving students living in desperately needy communities of promising educational opportunities.<sup>99</sup> In Salomone's view, it was the "conflation" of gender with race reflected in absolutist opposition to state-supported segregation of any kind that led to the downfall of these worthwhile programs. As I have shown, however, the "conflation" of gender and race played a

central role in the discursive strategies adopted by those *promoting* all-male academies for inner-city boys. Proponents of these initiatives popularized a syllogistic logic according to which opposition to all-male academies was tantamount to an endorsement of racial injustice. Thus, rather than being greeted as a victory for inner-city girls, the *Garrett* decision is portrayed as a loss for the Black community. Reading Salomone's account, it is easy to overlook the fact that the goal of feminist and other critics was not to shut the Detroit initiative down but only to ensure that girls be included in promising new programs. Salomone notes with dismay that the *Garrett* ruling "soon became another weapon in the oppositionist arsenal against single-sex education of any nature."<sup>100</sup> But again, I suggest that the conflict ultimately may have done more to build the arsenal of rhetorical weaponry amassed by *supporters* of single-sex public education than by its critics. An *Associated Press* headline, issued just after the *Garrett* ruling, announced, "Judge Disallows All-Male Schools; Detroit Plan Was Aimed at Blacks."<sup>101</sup> Of course, the Detroit plan wasn't "aimed at Blacks"—it was aimed at Black *males*. Nonetheless, headlines such as this reinforced the efforts of advocates to frame the controversy as a struggle between those fighting to overcome racial injustice, and those trying to stop them.

Salomone bemoans the "conflation" of gender and race in the single-sex public education debates, but in the end her analysis fails to adequately address either the origins of this "conflation" or its effects. In this regard, it is telling that Salomone neglects to mention the next chapter of the controversy following the ruling in the *Garrett* case. In late fall 1991, the three Detroit male academies opened after all. One year later, officials decided to relocate one of the three schools, the Malcolm X Academy, to a more suitable space in an unoccupied school building owned by

the district. The new site happened to be in a predominately white, working-class neighborhood. When the relocation plan was announced, area residents vigorously protested. The *New York Times* reported on a "chaotic" neighborhood meeting at which angry protesters screamed, "I don't want niggers in my neighborhood!" and "Go home!"<sup>102</sup> The opening days of the school year were compared to those of Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957.<sup>103</sup> Significantly, this episode rarely is mentioned in more recent reflections on the ongoing controversy over single-sex public education in the United States, perhaps because it doesn't fit neatly, or comfortably, into the common framing of this issue as a conflict between local education reformers and outside feminist activists. It is sobering enough to realize how easy it has been to position feminists as uncompromising ideological extremists in the debates over single-sex public schooling initiatives. It is perhaps more sobering still to see how this focus keeps the real opponents of social justice out of the line of fire.

## What about the Girls?

Plans to create public all-male academies for inner-city boys generated intense controversy in the early 1990s. In the wake of the *Garrett* decision, advocacy of single-sex public education shifted course. Propelled by research demonstrating significant gender bias in coeducational classrooms, single-sex education was promoted in the ensuing years as a promising strategy for cultivating girls' interest in traditionally male-dominated science, technology, engineering and math fields, as well as a way to counteract a generally unrecovered loss of self-esteem many girls reportedly suffered at the onset of adolescence. Advocates of single-sex education pointed to evidence suggesting that racially and economically disadvantaged girls stood to benefit most from single-sex learning environments. In the mid-1990s, philanthropist Ann Rubenstein Tisch made headlines with a high-profile effort to extend the opportunity for single-sex education beyond the precincts of the elite. Tisch went on to found the Young Women's Leadership School (the organization's customary acronym is TYWLS) of East Harlem, which opened to

great fanfare in 1996. Shortly thereafter, California's governor launched an ambitious experiment with single-sex education, providing funds to support the creation of six "dual academies" across the state.

The shift in emphasis away from the challenges facing inner-city boys and toward the problem of the unmet educational needs of girls would prove pivotal in reviving the cause of single-sex public education. During this period, single-sex schooling initiatives began to attract powerful supporters from across the political spectrum, from proud feminists to unapologetic political conservatives. Rosemary Salomone explains, "With the forces of gender equality and choice oddly coalescing, by the late 1990s single-sex schooling experienced an unforeseeable renaissance that defied and transcended political labels."<sup>1</sup> This chapter takes a closer look at the arguments and strategic alliances that produced this "odd coalescence." During this period, those who raised doubts about the wisdom of single-sex initiatives were commonly dismissed as feminist extremists in the grip of overblown anxieties about a return to the long obsolete "separate but equal" mentality. The shared sensibility that brought otherwise disparate interests and activists together in a campaign to make single-sex learning environments available to public students in grades K–12 was far from a phenomenon that "transcended political labels," however. I suggest that the term *backlash*—popularized by best-selling author Susan Faludi in her 1991 book of the same title—aptly describes it. As Faludi explains, at the crux of any backlash narrative lies the claim that feminism itself is to blame for the problems facing women in modern times: "The women's movement, as we are told time and again, has proved women's own worst enemy."<sup>2</sup> By this logic, it is the pursuit of the impossible dream of "having it

all”—rather than, say, sexist attitudes or structural barriers to success in the workplace and to satisfaction on the home front—that poses the greatest threat to women’s well-being. Against this background, single-sex initiatives targeted at girls were pitched not in terms of a return to traditional values but rather as a corrective to the insistence of an earlier generation of feminists on denying, rather than constructively engaging, gender differences.

This is not to suggest that all of those who supported single-sex public schooling initiatives during this period self-consciously aligned themselves with backlash thinking.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, some of the most ardent supporters of single-sex public schooling initiatives during this period forthrightly identified as feminists and clearly were deeply committed to overcoming gender inequalities in educational settings and elsewhere. But while not all proponents of single-sex public schooling initiatives adopted an antifeminist stance, it is nonetheless the case, as this chapter explains, that single-sex advocates from across the political spectrum benefited from, and sometimes even deliberately stoked, the perception that the only serious opposition to single-sex initiatives emanated from a vocal minority of dogmatic feminists. To put the matter slightly otherwise: during this period, advocates for girls who supported single-sex initiatives aligned themselves with those whose investment in single-sex approaches had little to do with feminist critiques of gender inequity in education or feminist visions of empowerment. This seemingly strategic realignment generated a deep fracture within feminist communities and contributed to the silencing of dissenting feminist perspectives in the subsequent debate. And, as I discuss in this chapter and the next, the costs of this “strange bedfellows” arrangement would prove very high indeed.

SINGLE-SEX EDUCATION  
ADVOCACY SHIFTS COURSE

Following the *Garrett* decision, the climate surrounding single-sex education in public schools was decidedly chilled. Hoping to keep the possibility of future single-sex public schooling initiatives alive, in 1993 Senator John Danforth (R-MO) sponsored an amendment that would allow for Title IX enforcement to be waived in a limited number of cases, by way of creating room for further local experimentation with single-sex approaches in public school settings.<sup>4</sup> Senator Danforth presented his proposal as an effort to encourage the creation of educational initiatives for the schoolchildren most sorely in need—that is, “low-income, educationally disadvantaged students.”<sup>5</sup> The amendment won Senate approval by a solid margin of sixty-six to thirty-three. Among the more adamant dissenters was Senator Edward Kennedy (D-MA), who opposed the idea of waiving hard-won civil rights protections simply for the sake of allowing further experimentation with still unproven educational approaches.<sup>6</sup> Senator Carol Mosley-Braun (D-IL) also spoke out against the measure, condemning the Danforth proposal as “a major step backward in terms of gender equity.”<sup>7</sup> Succumbing under the weight of objections such as these, the amendment eventually was scrapped by a congressional conference committee.

In light of the judicial setback in *Garrett* and the legislative defeat of Danforth’s proposed amendment, it is hardly surprising to find that advocacy of single-sex education would soon take a different turn. As described in the previous chapter, single-sex education had been heavily promoted in the late 1980s and early 1990s as an intervention for at-risk boys. But what about the girls? Amid proclamations of the “Black male crisis” in the early 1990s,

a growing cadre of commentators worried that the unfinished business of gender equity for girls was at risk of being subverted, if not abandoned altogether.<sup>8</sup> Reclaiming a share of the public's interest for girls—at least temporarily—the American Association of University Women (AAUW) released a report in 1992 titled *How Schools Shortchange Girls*. Based on a nationwide survey of students aged nine to fifteen, the AAUW study found that girls suffer a severe loss of self-esteem and academic confidence during their school years, most precipitously when they enter adolescence and move into high school.<sup>9</sup> Acknowledging the seriousness of “the particular education problems of poor black and Hispanic boys,” *How Schools Shortchange Girls* nonetheless is sharply critical of the glaring “absence of attention to girls in the current education debate.”<sup>10</sup> Noting that girls have “fallen behind their male classmates in key areas such as higher-level mathematics and measures of self-esteem,” the report indicts “the absence of attention to girls in the current education debate.”<sup>11</sup> In a direct challenge to the contention that, after decades of feminist advocacy for girls, it was now boys who were most likely to be suffering neglect in school, the AAUW report proclaimed in no uncertain terms that “the educational system is not meeting girls' needs.”<sup>12</sup>

In declaring the work of gender equity to be far from complete, the AAUW sought to underscore the myriad educational and social-emotional challenges facing girls in school—challenges ranging from pervasive gender bias in testing to the debilitating effects of low self-esteem. These same themes were elaborated by education researchers Myra and David Sadker, who published their book *Failing at Fairness* two years after the *How Schools Shortchange Girls* first appeared. Written for popular audiences, *Failing at Fairness* draws attention to the “hidden bias” produced in seemingly insignificant, everyday classroom



interactions. Drawing on extensive classroom-observation research, the Sadkers diagnosed an epidemic of “subtle sexism” in U.S. schools.<sup>13</sup> “Today’s schoolgirls face subtle and insidious gender lessons, micro-inequities that appear seemingly insignificant when looked at individually but that have a powerful cumulative impact.”<sup>14</sup> Based on observations of teacher-students interactions that had taken place in hundreds of classrooms across the country, the Sadkers found that, compared to their female peers, boys are called on more frequently in class, given more time to respond to questions, and offered more constructive praise about their work.

The wide coverage given to the Sadkers’ claim that U.S. schools were “failing at fairness” suggests that the charge resonated, at least with some segments of the public. As one news report intoned, “From kindergarten to college, girls sitting in the same rooms as boys, reading the same books and listening to the same teachers are getting a very different education. Although it is less visible, the crippling effect is as systematic and devastating to female members of society as Chinese foot-binding or Victorian corsets were.”<sup>15</sup> Rhetoric such as this conveyed not just the pervasiveness of the problem but also the urgent need to address it. The question was how.

While these well-popularized studies drew attention to the ongoing problem of gender inequities for girls in education, it is significant that neither of them highlighted single-sex education as a remedy. The AAUW’s *How Schools Shortchange Girls* report included forty detailed recommendations for education reform; single-sex education was not among them.<sup>16</sup> Given that the vast preponderance of public schools at the time were coeducational, the fact that reformers focused their attention on the question of how to address gender bias in mixed settings is hardly surprising.

Still, both the AAUW report and the Sadkers' book seemed quite deliberately to leave the door open to further consideration of single-sex approaches in those cases in which separating the sexes might be feasible. In a brief chapter near the end of *Failing at Fairness*, the Sadkers deem the evidence in support of single-sex education for girls to be "persuasive" (while noting that evidence of the benefits of all-boys classes was far less compelling).<sup>17</sup> Persuaded of the merits of studies suggesting that all-girls classes could boost self-esteem and encourage interest in math and science study, the Sadkers nonetheless note research confirming that "disturbing forms of sexism" may flourish in single-sex schools, especially those for boys.<sup>18</sup> For their part, the leadership of the AAUW in the years immediately following the release of the association's two reports cautiously endorsed the push to "experiment" further with "the all-girl or all-boy school model" as one among a number of potential reform strategies.<sup>19</sup>

Despite the fact that single-sex approaches did not figure prominently in proposals to address gender inequities in education set forth at the time, it nonetheless appears to be the case that the heightened awareness of classroom bias and sexism generated by these discussions spurred a resurgence of interest in all-girls schools and women's colleges. To many observers, all-girls schools seemed like an obvious remedy to the challenges girls faced in coeducational classrooms. So obvious, in fact, that single-sex education enthusiasts saw no reason to delay new public school initiatives until evidence could be gathered to substantiate the merits of this commonsense solution. For at least some of its most ardent supporters, firsthand experience—the kind of evidence no formal study could dispute or dismiss—clearly was sufficient to confirm the advantages of single-sex education.

The scant research on single-sex education available at the time was based primarily on studies undertaken in Catholic schools.<sup>20</sup> Studies of inner-city Catholic school students by Providence College professor Cornelius Riordan were among the most well-known at the time. Riordan's research suggested that single-sex education might have some benefits, particularly for economically disadvantaged students.<sup>21</sup> As he explained, "The effects of single-sex schools are greatest among black or Hispanic females from low socioeconomic homes. These students possess three low-status characteristics: female, racial minority, low SES [socioeconomic status]. Likewise, the strength of the effects diminish slightly for blacks and Hispanic males from low-socioeconomic homes who have two low-status characteristics. Similarly, the effects are smaller still for white middle-class females who have a single low-status characteristic. The effects are virtually nonexistent among affluent students regardless of race or gender."<sup>22</sup> Riordan speculated that black and Hispanic boys in particular might thrive in single-sex environments because they are not exposed to the bias and effects of lowered expectations experienced in classrooms in which they are directly compared either to white students or girls of color.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, Riordan was careful to note that even "these significant effects for at-risk students are small in comparison with the much larger effects of home background and type of curriculum in a given school."<sup>24</sup>

References to Riordan's research began to appear more frequently in the press as the campaign for public single-sex initiatives gained momentum.<sup>25</sup> News reports on the subject typically cited Riordan's finding that single-sex education could be particularly beneficial for at-risk girls. Less often was explicit notice given to Riordan's finding of only limited benefit for at-risk boys and no benefit for affluent students. Overlooked as well was the fact that

even for at-risk girls, the impact of alternative reforms introduced into coeducational settings was much more significant.

#### SINGLE-SEX EDUCATION COMES TO HARLEM

In the mid-1990s, the campaign to provide single-sex alternatives to public school students gained an important ally in philanthropist Ann Rubenstein Tisch. A broadcast journalist with a long-standing interest in education, Tisch was married to the heir to the Loews Corporation fortune and had chosen to dedicate herself full time to making a difference in the lives of those less well-off. A 1998 *New York Times* profile of Tisch explains that she found her cause after being “touched by the yearnings of poor minority girls to aspire to more than having babies.”<sup>26</sup> Explaining her decision to found an all-girls school in New York City’s storied Harlem neighborhood, Tisch remarked that she wanted “to provide economically disadvantaged girls with a high-quality college preparatory education modeled upon the finest private schools.”<sup>27</sup> She reasoned, “If single-sex schools are so good for affluent students, wouldn’t it follow that they would be good for poor children?”<sup>28</sup>

The task of creating an all-new high school in a low-income, inner-city district surely would be daunting under any circumstances. But in the case of the Young Women’s Leadership School of East Harlem, the contested legality of separating students by sex in public schools posed a particular challenge. For the would-be founders of TYWLS, the threat of legal challenge was acute, and uncertainties about the viability of the plan were only exacerbated following an important Supreme Court ruling on single-sex education just months before the school was set to open. On June 26, 1996, the court announced its decision in *United States v.*

*Virginia*, a case that had originated in a challenge to the all-male admissions policy at a state-run military institute in Virginia. Having opened its doors in the mid-nineteenth century, the Virginia Military Institute (VMI) was the only exclusively male, public university in the state. A lower court denied a challenge to the school's admissions policy brought under the equal protection clause. On appeal, the Fourth Circuit court reversed the decision, and the admissions policy was declared unconstitutional. By way of remedy, Virginia proposed to create a separate, all-female institution, to be called the Virginia Women's Institute for Leadership. Acknowledging that this school initially would lack the resources and prestige of VMI, Virginia's plan nonetheless received court approval. Following a series of appeals, the case was accepted for review by the Supreme Court.

In their seven-to-one decision,<sup>29</sup> the justices ruled that the all-male admissions policy was unconstitutional and rejected the plan to create a parallel institution as inadequate, finding that the women's institute would not be in a position to provide its students with the same opportunities and resources available to those attending the men's institute. VMI rested its defense of the male-only policy on the contention that the school's hallmark "adversative method" of training was unsuitable for women.<sup>30</sup> Writing for the majority, Justice Ginsburg emphasized that a justification for a sex-based classification "must not rely on overbroad generalizations about the different talents, capacities, or preferences of males and females."<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, "generalizations about 'the way women are,' estimates of what is appropriate for most women, no longer justify denying opportunity to women whose talent and capacity place them outside the average description."<sup>32</sup> In the opinion, Justice Ginsburg was careful to affirm her belief that "inherent differences" between men and

women exist, and that these differences “remain cause for celebration.”<sup>33</sup> Nonetheless, Ginsburg is clear that sex classifications which rely on assertions of “supposed ‘inherent differences’” between the sexes will not pass constitutional muster.<sup>34</sup>

In August 1996—just a few weeks after *United States v. Virginia* was decided—the New York City Board of Education unanimously approved the plan to open the Young Women’s Leadership School of East Harlem the following month. The school welcomed its inaugural class of fifty seventh-grade girls in September 1996. While winning board approval was celebrated in the community and in press reports, the shadow of *United States v. Virginia* clearly hung over the endeavor. To be sure, that decision did not impose a categorical ban on single-sex education in public school settings—but the decision nonetheless put advocates on notice that courts would carefully scrutinize the justification for single-sex admissions policies, and that no purported rationale, no matter how popular the program, would be given a free pass.

Moving forward, supporters of TYWLS knew the survival of their initiative would depend on drawing as sharp a distinction as possible between the approach they were taking to single-sex education on the one hand, and the mentality of those defending the VMI policy on the other. Distancing TYWLS from VMI hardly seemed a serious challenge, at least in the court of public opinion. After all, VMI sought to defend a policy of *excluding* a historically disadvantaged class—women—from its elite ranks. In contrast, the goal of TYWLS was to empower girls by *expanding* educational opportunities, particularly by extending them to those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. Of course, when the matter is presented in this way, it is easy to overlook the fact that a constitutional equal protection challenge turns not on a simple judgment about whether the motive behind an

exclusionary practice is benign, but rather on whether the practice rests on stereotypes about the inherent capabilities of members of one sex in comparison to the other.

The first groups to register opposition to TYWLS's plan were the New York Civil Rights Coalition and the New York Civil Liberties Union. The summer before TYWLS was set to open, these organizations sent letters to the school's chancellor, Rudy Crew, urging him to scrap the plan.<sup>35</sup> When the school board voted to approve it, Michael Meyers of the New York Civil Rights Coalition declared the board's chancellor "the handmaiden of benevolent sexism."<sup>36</sup> The group filed a complaint with the U.S. Department of Education, alleging that "the school is premised upon stereotypical views of the personality and behavior of girls and upon stereotypical views of the personality and behavior of boys," and demanding that the school make plans immediately to admit boys.<sup>37</sup> One year after the initial complaint was filed, federal education officials contacted lawyers for the New York City Board of Education and informed them of their preliminary finding that TYWLS was in violation of civil rights laws. Nonetheless, federal officials decided not to file a formal finding, instead urging local administrators to consider establishing a comparable boys program nearby.<sup>38</sup> By February 1998, the Department of Education moved to rescind its earlier finding of a violation, suggesting that TYWLS might qualify for an exception to Title IX by showing it serves as an affirmative-action "remedy."<sup>39</sup>

#### THE CALIFORNIA EXPERIMENT

In his January 1996 State of the State address, Governor Pete Wilson of California announced an ambitious plan to address the evident failures of the K–12 public school system in the state to

meet even the most basic educational needs of its students. Included among the governor's proposed initiatives was a \$5-million pilot program that would support the creation of twenty new single-sex academies.<sup>40</sup> Funds would be provided on a competitive basis to local districts; each winner was to use the funds to create a set of parallel public magnet programs, one open to boys and one open to girls. From the outset, the contrast between Governor Wilson's vision and that of the idealistic founders' of TYWLS was starkly apparent. Governor Wilson presented his single-sex initiative first and foremost as a way to promote student "discipline," turning to the subject of public education reform directly following an extended discussion of problems of violence and criminality across the state. Reaffirming his office's commitment to taking a "tough on crime" approach, the governor pledged to crack down on a range of problems associated with wayward youth, ranging from graffiti to gangs.<sup>41</sup> Railing against "the hijacking of our neighborhoods by urban terrorists," the governor vowed to put an end to the reign of "juvenile thugs," declaring that "all too many of California's most vicious criminals embarked upon their early careers as teenagers, yet our juvenile justice system remains dangerously lenient." Calling for a "total overhaul" of the juvenile justice system, the governor quickly segued from the issue of punishment to prevention, opining that "the best way to keep boys out of jail is to keep fathers in the home." Emphasizing the imperative to teach fatherless kids that "there are other choices in life," he observed that "some cities around the nation have found success with all-male classrooms for at-risk boys. There, strong male teachers serve as an alternative to gang leaders. So I propose establishing all-male empowerment academies as magnet schools. There boys can find the discipline and role models they'll need to escape a life on the



streets. In the same way young girls and their parents should have the option of all-female schools. I'd especially like to see such a school offer girls the opportunity to concentrate on math and science."<sup>42</sup> Presented in this way, single-sex public schools for boys appear as part of a complex of strategies, including stepped-up incarceration and more strictly enforced teen curfews, for keeping the state's at-risk youth in check. In subsequent speeches and comments about the program, however, Wilson would present the program as an initiative designed to expand public school "choice," deflecting attention from the state's embrace of single-sex education as a disciplinary tactic aimed at predominantly Black and Latino youth residing in the state's most troubled inner-city school districts.

Wilson's plan rankled at least some observers. Following the speech, Democratic assemblywoman Marguerite Archie-Hudson of the South-Central Los Angeles district proclaimed the issue of coeducation versus single-sex education to be a "distraction" from the more fundamental problem of sorely under-resourced schools.<sup>43</sup> By and large, however, press coverage of dissenting voices proved the exception, not the rule. Even in the absence of compelling research evidence demonstrating the benefits of single-sex classrooms when compared to coeducational ones, Wilson's plan generally was greeted as a welcome step in the right direction. As one local school official put it, "Anything that allows us to break through in raising academic performance, especially with at-risk kids, I'm receptive to."<sup>44</sup>

California's Single-Gender Academy Pilot Program easily won legislative authorization, and local districts were invited to submit applications for individual grants in the amount of five hundred thousand dollars, with the important stipulation that recipients would be compelled to split the funds equally in estab-

lishing paired single-sex academies (one for boys and one for girls)—a requirement clearly intended to fend off the threat of an equal-protection challenge.<sup>45</sup> The authorizing legislation explicitly mandated that “if a particular program or curriculum is available to one gender, it shall also be available to those pupils in the other gender who would benefit from the particular program or curriculum.”<sup>46</sup> As one state education official explained, districts were encouraged to create schools that were “mirror images, and the only difference was the gender of the students. Same teaching materials, access to the same caliber of teachers.”<sup>47</sup>

As the largest statewide initiative of its kind, the California experiment was closely watched across the country. But it proved short-lived. Almost immediately, it was apparent that the programs the state had selected to fund had been poorly planned and hastily launched. Once up and running, the pilot schools were beset with challenges that proved overwhelming, among them high staff turnover and uncertain financial footing. After just two years, lawmakers declined to extend funding, and four of the original six districts participating in the initiative terminated their single-sex programs. Just three years out, only one pair of academies remained. In a report based on a longitudinal case study of the California pilot program, education researchers Amanda Datnow, Lea Hubbard, and Elizabeth Woody identified significant problems with both the design and the implementation of the initiative. In diagnosing the problems that led to the collapse of the California experiment, Datnow, Hubbard, and Woody identified the lack of a coherent theory of gender difference and its educational significance as a central cause.<sup>48</sup> They found that “instead of seeing the single gender academies as primarily an opportunity to address gender inequities, most educators saw the grant as a way to help address the more typical educational and

social problems of low-achieving students.<sup>749</sup> A similar inattention to gender was reflected among parents, who “rarely mentioned that they chose to attend the single-gender academies because of their interest in empowerment or gender equity for their young boys or girls, except for some parents of white girls in a suburban district.”<sup>750</sup> The consequences of this lack of engagement with issues of gender difference and inequities had a profound effect on the design and implementation of the California experiment, according to the researchers. They found that “most educators did not adequately reflect upon the hidden or overt gender biases (to the disadvantage of both boys and girls) that often existed in their organizational, pedagogical, and curricular practices.”<sup>751</sup>

In place of a well-thought-out plan to engage the educational and social significance of gender, the researchers found evidence of rampant sex-role stereotyping. “Traditional gender stereotypes were often reinforced in the single gender academies. Boys tended to be taught in a more regimented, traditional, and individualistic fashion, and girls in more nurturing, cooperative and open environments.”<sup>752</sup> The authors found that “traditional gender role stereotypes were reinforced, and gender was portrayed in an essentialist manner.”<sup>753</sup> For example, in all-girls classes, students were given more opportunities to collaborate and work in groups, whereas the boys’ classrooms tended to be organized in a manner that was much more “traditional,” which is to say rigid, both in terms of physical layout and pedagogy.<sup>754</sup> These practices reinforced the view that girls are “good” students and boys are “bad.” In the estimation of the researchers, “most educators operated on the assumption that boys needed discipline and girls needed nurturing.”<sup>755</sup>

A similar lack of critical attention to gender ideology was apparent in media reports on the pilot programs. An early article

on the Bay Area academies describes contrasting scenes of two seventh-grade classrooms, one filled with attentive and quiet students, the other verging on chaos. After revealing that one is a class of girls and the other of boys, the article continues: "It's all a question of hormones, and hormones have a lot to do with why the Bay Area's first all-girls and all-boys public schools opened."<sup>56</sup> What comes into view here is the way a mere reference to sex difference so readily cues beliefs rooted in a kind of gender folk wisdom. In light of this, Datnow, Hubbard, and Woody conclude with a warning: "If schools—much less single gender schools—pursue a gender-blind approach under the guise of equal opportunity, and if policies refocus attention on the plight of boys without a careful critique of equity, the gendered culture of schooling and society is likely to continue."<sup>57</sup>

#### FRAMING FEMINISM

The narrative of this period presented by Rosemary Salomone portrays a feminist movement deeply divided against itself. In her telling, hard-line feminist activists opposed segregation of any kind, alienating those who recognized a continuing role to be played by single-sex education in supporting the advancement of girls and women. In an article examining divergent feminist perspectives on single-sex education during this period, Salomone remarks that "few issues have caused such sharp divisions in the dwindling ranks of scholars, advocates, or public intellectuals who still proudly carry the 'feminist' banner or who, at the least, believe that women have yet to win the battle for equal citizenship."<sup>58</sup> Level-headed consideration of single-sex education has been rendered impossible, Salomone suggests, by uncompromising legal activists who have seized upon

the issue to wage intramural warfare over the future of feminism itself. “Within feminist ranks, ideological disagreements over sameness and difference and what it means for women to achieve political and social equality inevitably arise, directly or indirectly, in the discussion of single-sex education.”<sup>59</sup> The result, in Salomone’s estimation, has been the alienation of potential allies who may be less ideologically rigid, but who certainly are no less intensely committed to promoting gender equality. “While organized women’s groups, who most visibly speak on behalf of women, have voiced strong legal and political opposition to the concept, numerous individuals—including dissenters within these same organizations—have supported it, most of them outside the public eye.”<sup>60</sup> Salomone’s antagonistic rhetoric of “opposition” and silenced “dissenters” gives the impression of a feminist movement overrun by doctrinaire bullies. In a plea to move beyond the discord and identify “common ground,” Salomone demands as a first step that critics of single-sex education show a willingness to “move beyond ideology.”<sup>61</sup>

Is the bitter discord that erupted among advocates for girls and women in this period fairly characterized as a clash between ideological extremists and their more measured counterparts? Was opposition to single-sex public schooling initiatives limited, as Salomone suggests, to those feminists who objected as a matter of principle to the idea of different treatment for boys and girls? There are grounds for skepticism with respect to both claims. As I have described in the preceding, while some feminists at the time openly questioned whether separate could ever be truly equal, many others approached the debate not from an ideological perspective but rather from one based on a thoughtful analysis of actual programs. Too often, however, these voices are marginalized in Salomone’s narrative, brushed aside in an

account that selectively highlights the most divisive moments in an extended and richly nuanced debate. This broader deliberative context is elided when Salomone observes, with palpable exasperation, that “for more than a decade, the National Organization for Women and the American Civil Liberties Union have swiftly moved to stop school districts dead in their tracks at the mere suggestion of separating females and males.”<sup>62</sup> But as I have demonstrated in this chapter and the preceding one, this representation of the actions of NOW and the ACLU is highly misleading. Fairness surely demands an acknowledgment that these organizations were mobilized not by the “mere suggestion” of separating boys and girls in school but rather by the commitment of significant resources, both private and public, to single-sex initiatives deemed problematic based on a careful review of the evidence in each of these cases. It also bears remarking that the aim of bringing legal challenges was not to “stop school districts dead in their tracks,” as Salomone suggests, but rather to encourage local officials to move forward with promising educational alternatives, but to do so in a more inclusive manner.

More broadly, Salomone’s account creates a distorted impression of the issues at stake in debates over single-sex education in this period by failing to engage the perspectives of the many thoughtful commentators who were reluctant to rally around single-sex education as an antidote to problems such as classroom gender bias. For example, in a 1996 interview, David Sadker acknowledged the evidence supporting the benefits of single-sex education for girls. But he nonetheless warned, “It’s a dangerous path to start walking down. History teaches us that the less valued group, in this case females, will end up with fewer resources in their school. Given the tenor of the times,

I think that is a particular concern.<sup>63</sup> In 1997, the AAUW convened a roundtable with leading experts on single-sex education to explore the issue; the papers were later published in a special report, *Separated by Sex: A Critical Look at Single-Sex Education for Girls*.<sup>64</sup> Inexplicably, Salomone neglects even to mention this important report in her overview of conflicting feminist perspectives on the issue articulated at the time. Primed by Salomone to expect stridency and conflict among feminists weighing in on the matter, what one encounters in the AAUW roundtable report is sure to surprise. In the opening essay, AAUW research associate Pamela Haag observes that one reason consensus on the issue of single-sex education has proven so hard to achieve is that the motivations behind support for all-girls learning environments vary so widely. As Haag notes, some parents favor single-sex education because they see it as a way to empower their daughters and to better enable them to fight back against gender inequality throughout their lives. In contrast, other parents choose single-sex schools for their daughters “precisely for their ‘traditional’ missions.”<sup>65</sup> For Haag, the important point is that “the structure of single-sex education . . . does not in and of itself ensure any particular outcomes, positive or negative, because it has multiple inspirations and forms.”<sup>66</sup> Given this fact, Haag urges researchers to focus further study on identifying the “specific practices and characteristics of single-sex environments” that will contribute to student success, while recognizing that not all single-sex environments are equal.<sup>67</sup> In a kindred plea to move beyond the common but reductive “pro or con” framing of the issue, education consultants Patricia B. Campbell and Ellen Wahl open their essay with this observation: “While the question ‘Are single-sex classes better than coed classes?’ sounds logical, it makes little sense when it doesn’t

include what goes on in the classes, the pedagogy and practices of the teachers, or anything about the students other than their sex.”<sup>68</sup>

Portraying feminist critics as stubborn ideologues clearly made their objectives all the more easy to dismiss—even by commentators who themselves might be vulnerable to a charge of narrow-mindedness. Consider that the founders of TYWLS partnered with the conservative Manhattan Institute on the initiative, an organization widely known for its promotion of an aggressively right-wing agenda. And yet, when feminists at the time questioned whether single-sex education was the best approach to take in addressing the severe shortage of educational opportunities in urban settings like Harlem, supporters of TYWLS’s initiative were quick to delegitimize the opposition by appropriating progressive critiques of liberal white feminists as insufficiently attentive to problems of racial and economic inequality. Playing on this vulnerability, TYWLS founder Ann Tisch commented, “Those who are trying to stop us are looking at theories, and we’re looking at the faces of the dozens of school children who very much want this opportunity.”<sup>69</sup>

Quite apart from such rhetorical maneuvering, prominent feminist critics of single-sex initiatives themselves contributed to their credibility deficit by hewing to a narrow focus on gender issues without acknowledging the intersection of racial injustice and other forms of social inequality. In the estimation of civil rights lawyer Galen Sherwin: “Critics’ approach to the issue of single-sex schools, the broader history of racism within the feminist movement, and the need for increased educational opportunity in low-income communities go a long way toward explaining supporters’ reluctance to endorse the critics’ views.”<sup>70</sup> Regrettably, even when some opponents of single-sex education



did make a point of addressing the politics of race and class, these efforts only reinforced the impression that feminist perspectives were seriously deficient. In a 1998 article in the *Atlantic Monthly*, author Wendy Kaminer likened those supporters of TYWLS who had denounced “elite feminists” for “meddling” in East Harlem to southern segregationists who opposed the intervention of federal civil rights authorities who threatened their way of life. Seizing the mantle of civil rights champion, Kaminer righteously proclaimed that just as there were “northerners who fought for an end to Jim Crow laws in the South,” so too did “a commitment to civil rights [assume] a responsibility to meddle.”<sup>71</sup> In this context, Kaminer’s glib suggestion that current-day supporters of TWYLS are the moral equals of racist segregationists in the “separate but equal” South serves only to confirm the suspicion that self-proclaimed feminists lack basic understanding of the history and current condition of racial injustice in the United States.

Just as Kaminer was wrong to liken supporters of the Harlem girls school to southern racists, surely it was a misstep for the Sadkers to couch the significance of their study of gender bias in the classroom as a demonstration that, while racism is now subject to social censure, sexism remains widely tolerated. In the opening pages of *Failing at Fairness*, the Sadkers opine, “While the record of racial injustice is at the forefront of our national conscience, history books still do not tell the story of profound sexism at school.”<sup>72</sup> In an interview held after the book was published, Myra Sadker elaborated on that observation: “The thing that outrages me most is the way gender bias is tolerated in schools in a way that racism and anti-Semitism aren’t.” She continued: “It boggles my mind that we can have girls walking down the street and someone calls her ‘wench,’ or ‘hey bitch.’ You

wouldn't do that on a racial or religious matter, but it's still permissible on gender. And it's allowed to go on."<sup>73</sup> At the time she made these comments, Myra Sadker probably wasn't thinking about the hate-fueled resistance that erupted in that white working-class Detroit neighborhood when residents learned about the plan to relocate the Malcolm X Academy to their area. If feminist researchers and activists in this period had made these connections, they might have been led to work in coalition with potential allies, rather than deepening divides that would be exploited by those who stood to gain from pitting feminism against the cause of social justice more broadly.<sup>74</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

The success of the Harlem girls school played a pivotal role in revitalizing interest in single-sex public schooling initiatives. In Salomone's estimation, "the opening of [TYWLS] and the model it created pulled single-sex schooling out of the dustbin of history."<sup>75</sup> The prestige conferred by the imprimatur of prominent advocates for girls should not be underestimated in enabling the cause of single-sex education to overcome the challenges that arose when programs for African American boys first were proposed. In this period, supporters of single-sex public education steered away from the more explicitly politicized rhetoric associated with the Afrocentric movement's critique of the prevailing racial and economic order of the United States. Once the door to single-sex public education was pried open again, experimental initiatives of a sort very different from those seen previously would emerge. As I explain in the next chapter, in the first years of the new millennium, advocacy of single-sex education would once again be reoriented, this time

to center on claims that boys and girls “learn differently” owing to biological sex differences. Reflecting on this turn of events in 2008, Salomone observed ruefully, “We could not foresee how a convergence of factors, including ambivalence among federal officials, misguided judgment among local school administrators, and persistence among brain research ‘purveyors,’ would derail the course.”<sup>76</sup> With evident dismay, Salomone admits, “For many of us who supported New York City’s all-girls school and the subsequent regulatory amendments, this turn of events was indeed disconcerting.”<sup>77</sup> But this turn of events might have been foreseen if the warnings of thoughtful commentators had been heeded rather than hastily dismissed as yet more evidence that feminists “just don’t get it” when it comes to the issues that really matter.

## Single-Sex Education and the Popular Neuroscience of Sex Difference

In 2001, a bipartisan coalition of U.S. senators persuaded their congressional colleagues to provide federal funding for experimental single-sex initiatives in K–12 public schools. Once federal funding became available, new voices emerged in the campaign to promote single-sex initiatives. As this chapter describes, advocates heralding recent scientific evidence purporting to prove that boys’ brains and girls’ brains are “hardwired” to learn differently became highly influential in designing new single-sex public schooling initiatives. While proclaiming essential sex differences to be the primary justification for sex-separate educational approaches, these advocates also pointed to the education crisis facing boys of color as an important reason to support single-sex initiatives in low-income communities. This chapter offers an intersectional analysis of the positioning of boys of color within the campaign to promote an educational approach based on controversial claims about the significance of biological sex differences in education. In this period, images of boys of color have been foregrounded in the campaign to promote

single-sex initiatives in public schools, lending this movement crucial legitimacy. As I explain, the result is that poor boys of color have become the public face of an education reform movement that displaces issues of racial and economic disadvantage to advance a highly stereotypical gender ideology.

#### “A GOAL WE ALL SHARE”

In 2001, Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison (R-TX) led an effort to add a provision to the No Child Left Behind Act to promote “innovative” programs in K–12 public schools.<sup>1</sup> The provision was to make special funds available for a wide range of initiatives, including programs that would encourage technological innovation in the classroom, support community service, teach “financial literacy,” hire more school nurses, improve mental health services, create smaller class sizes, and enhance parental involvement. Buried in the laundry list of eligible initiatives was a reference to “programs to provide same-gender schools and classrooms (consistent with applicable law).”<sup>2</sup>

Senator Hutchison certainly was not the first elected official to throw her support behind single-sex public education. As noted in chapter 3, in 1994 Senator John C. Danforth of Missouri had proposed an amendment that would have enabled local school officials to launch single-sex programs on an experimental basis. Senator Danforth’s proposal met with strong skepticism from his congressional colleagues, and it suffered a swift defeat. Dismissing existing antidiscrimination protections as “barriers,” “hurdles,” and “roadblocks” to be “gotten over,” Senator Hutchison was intent on pressing forward. With the election to the Senate of Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-NY)—a proud Wellesley graduate and a strong believer in single-sex education as a tool of

empowerment for girls and young women—Senator Hutchinson found a powerful ally in the cause. Joined by cosponsors Senator Susan Collins (R-ME) and Senator Barbara Mikulski (D-MD), Senators Hutchison and Clinton quickly built support for what now was a proudly bipartisan proposal.

From the perspective of supporters, promising single-sex programs had been “unfortunately” curtailed by “needless obstacles,” chief among them the threat of costly lawsuits.<sup>3</sup> Casting the federal government not as the watchdog of equal educational opportunity but rather as an impediment to educational innovation, the proposal’s sponsors led a charge to loosen existing regulations.<sup>4</sup> And if “rigid” antidiscrimination laws were the problem, “flexibility” was the solution.<sup>5</sup> Speaking on the Senate floor in support of the provision, several of the measure’s principle sponsors cited examples of successful single-sex programs. Notably, all of the programs they identified were for girls. Nonetheless, those promoting the provision rhetorically aligned themselves not with ongoing feminist campaigns for gender equity but rather with the rapidly growing public school “choice” movement.<sup>6</sup> “I believe that public school choice should be expanded and as broadly as possible,” Senator Clinton proclaimed.<sup>7</sup> As a bipartisan value, “school choice” appealed not just to those ideologically opposed to federal education mandates but also to would-be public school reformers frustrated by the maze of restrictions and regulations standing in the way of change. Urging consensus, Senator Collins pronounced “the ability to offer single-gender classes when the school determines that these classrooms will provide students with a better opportunity to achieve higher standards” to be “a goal we all share.”<sup>8</sup>

In her closing statements, Sen. Hutchison reassured supporters that she had discussed the single-sex education provision with

Secretary of Education Rod Paige, and that he had pledged to “open the spigot, open the floodgates, to allow this to be one of the options that will be available to the parents of public schoolchildren in this country.”<sup>9</sup> As this chapter details, Senator Hutchison’s metaphors would prove all too apt. The coming years would see a surge of single-sex experiments undertaken in K–12 public classrooms across the country. Senator Clinton emphasized in her testimony that “Title IX and the equal protection clause provide strong protections so schools cannot fall back on harmful stereotypes.”<sup>10</sup> But like storm waters beating against a levee, a breach would prove only a matter of time.

The No Child Left Behind Act was signed into law by President George W. Bush in January 2002. During a visit that spring to the Young Women’s Leadership School in Harlem, Secretary of Education Paige praised the school as an example of the kind of “new, vibrant options” being provided to public school students by an administration committed to educational innovation.<sup>11</sup> Even with the strong support of federal education officials behind single-sex education, however, its legal status remained uncertain. While explicitly, albeit parenthetically, stating that all qualifying “same-gender” programs would be “consistent with applicable law,” the new provisions amounted to more of a dodge than a clarification of the legal standard. What exactly did the “applicable law” require? The answer was the subject of considerable disagreement, with women’s rights organizations and civil rights groups insisting that Title IX sharply limited the scope of even well-intentioned sex-segregation in public school settings, while others lobbied for a more permissive interpretation of existing laws and regulations. The Department of Education was given 120 days to issue guidelines for schools contem-

plating single-sex programs. The guidelines published that spring reiterated the department's "longstanding interpretation, policy, and practice" requiring any district that made a single-sex school available to students of one sex to provide a "comparable" single-sex school for the other. While officially affirming past policy, however, it was apparent that these guidelines would not be the Department of Education's last word on the subject. On the same day the guidelines were released, officials gave notice of intent to amend the Title IX regulations "to provide more flexibility to educators to establish single-sex schools and classes at the elementary and secondary levels and to provide additional public educational choices to parents."<sup>12</sup>

The announcement was an early indication that proponents of single-sex public education now had a strong ally in the Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights. That ally was Gerald A. Reynolds, who in March 2002 had been appointed by President Bush as assistant secretary of education for the Office for Civil Rights. At the time of his appointment, Reynolds had achieved notoriety as a prominent Black critic of affirmative action. Conservative commentator George Will lauded Reynolds's appointment as the department's chief, describing Reynolds as a man "used to liberals' vehement opposition to African-Americans who escape from liberalism's intellectual plantation and become conservative."<sup>13</sup> Reynolds appeared to relish his gadfly status, and he lost no time stirring up controversy over single-sex public education. Addressing the issue shortly after his appointment, Reynolds observed tauntingly that it "drips with irony" for liberals to rally in opposition to single-sex schools when "Black and Hispanic parents ... are lining up around the block to get their children into" these programs.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps it is ironic, too, that Reynolds defended a program of affirmative



segregation even as he so vehemently denounced affirmative action. Nonetheless, Reynolds pressed the point that “liberal” opposition to single-sex education revealed a hypocritical disregard for the very students that a supposedly progressive agenda aimed to serve.

Opponents remained steadfast in the conviction that separate would never be equal.<sup>15</sup> On the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the historic *Brown* decision, in 2004, education scholar David Sadker suggested that slackening federal regulations on single-sex education amounted to “codifying segregation.”<sup>16</sup> NOW vice president Terry O’Neill affirmed her organization’s position on single-sex public education, warning that “segregation has historically always resulted in second-class citizens.”<sup>17</sup> In the face of ever-worsening conditions for the nation’s most disadvantaged students, however, such proclamations rang hollow.<sup>18</sup> Those with the temerity to publicly question whether it really made sense to invest in unproven interventions when considering the fate of the nation’s neediest kids struggled for a voice in the debate. As one frustrated commentator put it: “This is not innovation. It is desperation.”<sup>19</sup> And in desperate times, a crisis mentality itself can prove sufficient to justify doing something, anything.

#### THE EMERGING SCIENCE OF SEX DIFFERENCES

In 2002, there were approximately thirteen single-sex public schools in the United States.<sup>20</sup> Two of these—the Philadelphia High School for Girls and Western High School in Baltimore—had maintained all-girls admissions policies that dated back to the mid-nineteenth century, when they were founded. In addition to TYWLS in Harlem, a second Young Women’s Leadership School

had opened in Chicago in 2000, enrolling three hundred girls in grades seven through twelve. Of the original twelve dual academies seeded by California governor Pete Wilson in his statewide pilot program, only two—in San Francisco and Long Beach—still remained open and in operation as single-sex schools. Other single-sex programs were scattered across the country, from Seattle, Washington, to Paducah, Kentucky, to Baltimore, Maryland. Nearly all of these initiatives were in schools serving primarily students of color from low-income families.

Likely emboldened by the perceived thaw in the regulatory climate, little-known advocates with new agendas joined the already diverse interest groups promoting single-sex options for public school students. In 2002, an organization appeared on the scene calling itself the National Association for the Advancement of Single Sex Public Education.<sup>21</sup> The name provocatively mirrored that of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the prominent civil rights organization famous for having initiated the case that culminated in the landmark school desegregation decision, *Brown v. Board of Education*. In aligning itself, at least nominally, with one of the nation's leading civil rights groups, it was clear from the outset that NAASSPE's backers had no intention of shrinking from the looming history of racial segregation in mounting their case for reintroducing segregation into public school settings, this time on the basis of sex.<sup>22</sup>

Credit for the organization's founding is given on the group's official website to Leonard Sax and two other cofounders; but from the very beginning, NASSPE has been associated almost exclusively with its executive director, Sax. Sax earned a combined medical degree and PhD in psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, and at the time he launched NASSPE he was a

practicing pediatrician in the Maryland area. Virtually overnight, Sax became the nation's most visible media spokesman for single-sex public education. Since 2002, Sax has been featured as an expert in hundreds of newspaper reports on single-sex schooling initiatives, as well as on numerous television and radio shows. Sax's earliest media mention came in a 2002 *Washington Post Magazine* article about the rise of single-sex public schools nationally.<sup>23</sup> The report mentions President Bush's pledge to "encourage" more single-sex public schools, and it notes that "several popular books and reports" had proclaimed both girls and boys to be the victims of gender-based disadvantage at school. The article goes on to cite "new brain research [that] has pinpointed dramatic differences in boys' and girls' brains and in the way boys and girls learn, raising questions about whether they would be better served in separate classrooms."<sup>24</sup> In the coming years, similar references to "brain-based" research would become a staple of news reporting on single-sex education, a fact that stands as one among many indicators of Sax's unparalleled influence in directing the campaign for single-sex public education in subsequent years.

Since 2002, journalistic coverage of the controversy over single-sex education has frequently provided Sax with a platform from which to expound his distinctive version of "the emerging science of sex differences." In news reports, Sax generally is positioned not merely as an advocate of single-sex education but as an expert on brain science, sex differences, and education.<sup>25</sup> In media coverage of single-sex education, Sax's message has been clear and unwavering: "Girls and boys learn in fundamentally different ways, and single-sex schools understand this."<sup>26</sup> Typical is a 2003 report on an Atlanta middle school that had recently implemented separate classrooms for sixth-grade students. Defending the move, Sax explained, "If you visit an all-boys

school and an all-girls school, everything is louder in the boys' school. . . . The classroom is conducted at a much higher decibel level. The teacher is raising his voice. That is appropriate, given what we know about how girls and boys learn."<sup>27</sup> To reporters covering the single-sex education debates, Sax explains again and again "the reality that girls and boys are wired differently. . . . They hear differently, and they learn differently."<sup>28</sup>

With the appearance in 2005 of his book *Why Gender Matters: What Parents and Teachers Need to Know about the Emerging Science of Sex Differences*, Sax's reputation as a leading authority on sex differences in education was further cemented—despite the fact that his book, clearly aimed at general audiences, had not undergone the kind of rigorous review required of scholarly research publications. In *Why Gender Matters*, Sax paints a portrait of stark differences between girls and boys, offering purported biological truths such as the fact that "female brain tissue is 'intrinsically different' from male brain tissue."<sup>29</sup> Throughout the book, Sax assumes the voice of a trustworthy expert compelled to act on behalf of all children, but especially boys, to liberate them from the harmful feminist myth of gender "sameness." Indeed, Sax characterizes the period from the mid-1960s to the mid-1990s as the "Dark Ages," an era when "it was politically incorrect to suggest that there were innate differences" between girls and boys.<sup>30</sup> In his view, far too many parents and teachers today remain "stuck in a mentality that refuses to recognize innate, biologically programmed differences between girls and boys." This has created a situation, he explains, in which "social engineering" is prioritized above the goal of providing an education.<sup>31</sup> With *Why Gender Matters*, Sax offers parents and teachers alike the tools to cast off the "dogma of social constructionism" and move toward the creation of educational environments that

acknowledge and engage the “naturally different” learning styles distinguishing males and females.<sup>32</sup>

Despite such overtly polemical prose, Sax claims the authority of a disinterested scientist throughout the book. In the opening pages, he pledges, “Every time I make any statement about how girls and boys are different, I will also state the evidence on which my statement is based. Every statement I make about sex differences will be supported by good science published in peer-reviewed journals.”<sup>33</sup> All too often, however, this commitment is honored only in the breach. Instead, the central argument of *Why Gender Matters*—that “girls and boys behave differently because their brains are wired differently”—rests on a combination of personal anecdote and wild extrapolation about the true essence of human nature, occasionally intermixed with highly selective references to the research literature.<sup>34</sup> The book itself is narratively driven by a series of vignettes drawn from Sax’s own experiences as a pediatrician and psychotherapist working with young people. After each story, Sax identifies a gender difference at play and then asserts a biological basis for it, often declaring a neurological cause.

For Sax, the bottom line is that it is futile to resist the facts of nature. Educators must teach *to* the biology, not in denial of it. But what does this look like from a practical standpoint? *Why Gender Matters* teems with suggestions for putting the science of sex differences into play in the classroom. For example, based on studies that Sax presents as evidence of “innate differences in how females and males respond to stress,”<sup>35</sup> he recommends that teachers use “a supportive, nonconfrontational approach” when engaging with girls in the classroom, while employing a “confrontational, in-your-face” style with boys. Elsewhere, Sax counsels that “moderate stress improves boys’ performance on

tests—the boys do better than you might expect—whereas the same stress degrades young girls’ performance on tests.”<sup>36</sup> Claiming that an “avalanche of studies” confirms the existence of “fundamental sex differences in the organization of the autonomic nervous system,” Sax warns teachers that boys’ “senses sharpen” when “exposed to threat and confrontation,” whereas girls typically “feel dizzy” under such conditions.<sup>37</sup> For Sax, the implications are clear: teachers should create a stressful, do-or-die environment for boys, while relieving girls of the anxieties of competition.

At the same time, Sax declares that “gender difference in brain organization” puts boys at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to emotional processing. On these grounds, he advises parents and teachers to abandon efforts to engage boys at an emotional level, insisting that any such efforts will be doomed to failure given boys’ biological makeup. As Sax explains, “Questions of the form, ‘How would you *feel* if ...’ don’t work well for most boys. That question requires boys to link emotional information in the amygdala with language information in the cerebral cortex. It’s like trying to recite poetry and juggle bowling pins at the same time.”<sup>38</sup> Sax goes on to attribute girls’ seeming preference for fiction and boys’ greater attraction to nonfiction to fundamental differences in brain structure, dismissing with disdain the suggestion that such choices about reading material might attest more to the influence of gender socialization than to essential differences in the brain.<sup>39</sup>

Although Sax has been the most prominent purveyor of the popular neuroscience of sex difference in the single-sex education debates, he has not been alone in promoting the idea that sex differences in the brain have important implications for classroom practice. Family therapist and best-selling author

Michael Gurian is the founder of the Gurian Institute, a professional development organization that has trained thousands of K–12 educators in “brain-based teaching with a gender focus.”<sup>40</sup> In these trainings, Gurian and his team instruct that “the increased number and speed of the neural connections [in the cerebral cortex] may help girls process and respond to classroom information faster, help them make transitions faster, help them multitask, and help them access needed verbal resources (reading, writing, complex speech) as they engage in learning.”<sup>41</sup> Gurian elaborates that because this “area matures more slowly in the male brain,” we find “boys more apt to engage in high-risk behavior, respond impulsively and, in general, to ‘think less before they act.’”<sup>42</sup> As a result, Gurian instructs, we should expect boys to be slower to acquire verbal skills, to be less able to control themselves physically, to be more fidgety, and to “[need] more time to process before they can respond to content information.”<sup>43</sup>

While Sax insists that “gender difference in brain organization has clear implications for education,” many informed observers remain skeptical of the neuroscientific evidence as reported by Sax and other vocal supporters of single-sex education.<sup>44</sup> Neuroscience researcher Lise Eliot sharply disputes Sax’s account of the scientific data. In her analysis of Sax and other popularizers of brain science, Eliot identifies several common pitfalls in the popular neuroscience literature. Among the most significant has been the failure to identify which differences actually make a difference—and which don’t. For example, one study found radically different rates of brain development in girls and boys. Journalists soon were reporting that typical girls are about six years ahead of boys in language and fine motor development, while boys are generally four years ahead of girls

in the development of capacities related to spatial memory. Or, as Sax puts it: “When it comes to learning geometry, the brain of a 12-year-old girl resembles the brain of an 8-year-old boy.”<sup>45</sup> As Eliot points out, however, Sax’s conclusion rests on a fundamental misunderstanding of how the brain develops. As it turns out, the process isn’t linear but instead occurs in cyclical phases. And while researchers did find a difference in the phase of the developmental spiral for the average boy and girl of a similar age, the significance (if any), of this difference is hardly clear given the cyclical nature of growth. That is, the mere fact of an average difference in the phase of brain development of boys and girls can in no way support the claims about “global maturity.”<sup>46</sup>

A second pitfall Eliot identifies in the popular neuroscience literature concerns the tendency to base assertions about sex differences in the brain on unsubstantiated extrapolations from existing evidence. For example, Sax recommends that when addressing boys, teachers should “speak loudly and in short, direct sentences with clear instructions: ‘Put down your papers. Open your books. Let’s get to work! Mr. Jefferson, that includes you.’” In contrast, when addressing girls, Sax suggests that teachers “speak much more softly, using more first names with more terms of endearment and fewer direct commands: ‘Lisa, sweetie, it’s time to open your book. Emily, darling, would you please sit down for me and join us for this exercise?’”<sup>47</sup> Sax bases these recommendations on a research study concerning the reactions of adults to cardiac stress. The study, originally undertaken to generate insights that might prove useful in the prevention of heart attacks, revealed some differences between the reactions of male and female subjects on a stress test. Transposing these results from the treadmill to the classroom, Sax blithely overlooks such basic incommensurabilities as the fact that the study



he cites (a) did not involve children and (b) tested only physical stressors, which may or may not be physiologically equivalent to the kind of emotional stress response elicited by, say, a pop quiz in a seventh-grade history class.

A third pitfall Eliot identifies is the tendency of some popular neuroscientists to cherry-pick evidence. In a study based on fMRI scans, it was reported that female subjects activated both the left and right inferior frontal lobes on one of three different language tasks, whereas male subjects showed significant activation in only the left lobe for the same task. This oft-cited study seems to be the source of what Eliot calls the “corpus callosum myth”—the idea that women are hardwired for multitasking, while men’s brains are wired in a way that allows them to concentrate on only one thing at a time. (At a professional development training seminar for teachers I attended in 2009 led by Michael Gurian, he suggested that this difference in the corpus callosum explains why men have such a notoriously hard time responding to wives’ pleas for attention when a football game is on.) As Eliot notes, however, over two dozen studies comparing brain activation have failed to replicate the results of the original study, and a recent meta-analysis found no significant sex differences in brain lateralization. Nonetheless, considerable time and research money continue to be poured into validating this result, and the allure of the myth that women are *by nature* better multitaskers than men lives on.

Reflecting on the popular neuroscience literature, Eliot finds that the brain generally is presented in highly deterministic terms, thereby denying what is arguably its most significant feature—plasticity. “There is a widespread misconception that, because gender differences in the brain are biological, they are necessarily fixed, or ‘hardwired.’”<sup>48</sup> As Eliot explains, “Neuroplasticity, defined as the structural and functional modification

of the brain, is the basis of all learning, academic or otherwise: everyday experience generates the neural activity that selects and strengthens certain synapses at the expense of others, adapting each child's brain to the academic, social and leisure tasks at hand.<sup>49</sup> Accounting for neuroplasticity requires more than a simple recognition that life experience shapes brain function—it demands consideration of the possibility that social practices associated with gendered identity get written into the brain. However ironically, then, neuroscience has come to provide some of the most compelling evidence there is for the social construction of gender.

To be sure, news reporting on single-sex schooling initiatives quite commonly acknowledges that neuroscientific claims about sex-based learning differences remain controversial. Nonetheless, the critics most likely to be consulted by journalists covering this issue are legal advocates who contend that sex-segregation violates antidiscrimination laws, not the scientific researchers best positioned to evaluate the validity of the claims undergirding many new initiatives.<sup>50</sup> The conspicuous lack of investigative rigor observed in response to expansive assertions of brain-based learning differences between boys and girls presents a vivid instance of a phenomenon researchers memorably have dubbed the “selective allure of neuroscience explanations.” In a series of ingenious experiments, a team of Yale psychologists found that even “extraneous neuroscientific information makes explanations look more satisfying than they actually are, or at least more satisfying than they otherwise would be judged to be.”<sup>51</sup> This “allure” suggests that the public can be all too easily drawn into accepting even the most poorly substantiated claims about sex differences, provided those claims come dressed up in the commanding rhetoric of “hard wiring.”

## THE BOY CRISIS REVISITED

In his own writings, Sax addresses the relationship between neurological development and schooling in children of both sexes; but as an education advocate, he places his primary focus on boys. As noted in the preceding, Sax argues that boys today are suffering acutely in school owing to society's failure to accept their biologically determined nature.<sup>52</sup> From the moment boys enter school, Sax contends, they are held to standards that are developmentally inappropriate and, in the case of many boys, functionally impossible to meet given the typical path of male neurological development. But boys who are unable to sit still and listen passively to a teacher for long periods each day quickly get the message that something is wrong with them—rather than with an educational system that puts developmentally inappropriate demands on them. As I demonstrated in chapter 1, today's champions of boys are only the latest in a long line of education reformers to sound the “boy crisis” alarm in the United States—*anxiety about boys falling behind girls in schools seems to have been around for as long as girls have been educated alongside them. Around the start of the twentieth century, there was much hand-wringing over the purported “feminization” of education, a discourse that blamed the predominantly female teaching profession for the failure of some boys to occupy what was widely presumed to be their rightful place of dominance in school and beyond. Nearly a century later, as the guarantees of white male privilege appeared in the late 1980s to falter—at least by some traditional measures—popular commentary teemed with charges that white men had become the latest casualties of a civil-rights-era culture of redress run amok.*<sup>53</sup> Coming on the heels of “angry white male” discourse, the proclamation of a

“Black male crisis” in the early 1990s capitalized on a growing sense that men, too, might in some respect constitute a disadvantaged class; at the same time, it stood as a pointed rebuke to those who suggested that white men should take center stage in discussions of social inequality. While the cultural fixation on the narrowly drawn figure of the “angry white male” proved short-lived, this is arguably so only because this positionality was so quickly normalized, as evidenced by the steady stream of radio talk show hosts and cable network figures who have since built successful careers dealing daily doses of vitriolic outrage to the “aggrieved” everyman.<sup>54</sup> At the same time, the legacy of “angry white male” discourse lives on in the “boy crisis” discourse that has captured headlines in the United States and elsewhere since the late 1990s.<sup>55</sup> Spurred by antifeminist polemics such as Christina Hoff Sommers’s *The War against Boys*, many commentators have pronounced boys to be a disadvantaged class—regardless of race or economic status.<sup>56</sup> Though “boy crisis” discourse is rarely pitched in terms as antagonistic as Sommers’s, an undercurrent of feminist-blaming courses through it, often manifest in the more subtle suggestion that boys have been left to languish in the rush to compensate for past injustices against girls. A *New York Times* headline from 1998 is illustrative—a story about growing attention to boys is titled “After Girls Get Attention, Focus Shifts to Boys’ Woes.”<sup>57</sup>

Since the time of the appearance of Sommers’s book in the late 1990s, there has been a steady stream of news reports warning that boys are “falling behind” girls, with a widely reported “gender gap” in the educational arena commonly identified as a prime example of the crisis. In typical fashion, a May 2004 report in the *Richmond (VA) Times Dispatch* declared, “The statis-

tics are out, and the news is not good—if you’re a young man or the parent of one.”<sup>58</sup>

A distinctive feature of “boy crisis” rhetoric since this time has been the insistence that this crisis is not “just” about racially and economically disadvantaged boys. As viewers were warned in 2002 at the outset of a *60 Minutes* episode on the “boy crisis”: “If you think it’s just boys from inner cities, think again. It’s happening in all segments of society, in all fifty states.”<sup>59</sup> Appropriating a favored trope from the “Black male crisis” rhetoric of the previous decade, a 2002 *USA Today* report titled “Now Boys Trail Girls” similarly observed that “today, boys appear to be the intellectually endangered species.”<sup>60</sup>

#### RULES CHANGE

In March 2004, a Department of Education press release announced a forty-five-day public comment period on “a proposed regulation that would make it easier for schools to offer—and for parents to choose—same-sex classes and schools for students.” The new guidelines would allow coeducational schools to create single-sex classes under certain circumstances. Reiterating the themes of “choice” and “opportunity,” Secretary of Education Rod Paige presented the proposed changes as “yet another example of our efforts to provide maximum flexibility to help states and schools provide the best education possible for their students. . . . This regulation is designed to provide educators and parents with a wider range of diverse education options.”<sup>61</sup> In his comments, Secretary Paige noted research suggesting that single-sex education might be particularly beneficial for “underprivileged” children.<sup>62</sup>

The Department of Education received over five thousand comments in response to its request, with many respondents arguing vigorously against the proposed changes. Capturing the mood of many critics, educational psychologist David Sadker declared the occasion of the announcement of the proposed regulations “a perverse anniversary of the *Brown* decision.”<sup>63</sup> Emily Martin of the ACLU observed, “I think that what our country has learned is, it’s very dangerous to experiment with segregation to make our society better. . . . I think we have too troubled a history to think that this is OK.”<sup>64</sup> Commentators were especially dubious of the proposal that enforcement of existing civil rights protections be loosened, particularly given the absence of solid evidence that the benefits of doing so would outweigh the evident risk of harm. As one observer put it: “Before we go about tinkering with our kids’ futures, let’s make sure the facts are in.”<sup>65</sup> Of course, “the facts” had long been a sore point for advocates of single-sex education, owing to the scant record of research evidence establishing its advantages in comparison to coeducational approaches. As the debate intensified, the U.S. Department of Education commissioned a “systematic review” of quantitative and qualitative research on single-sex education at the primary and secondary levels.<sup>66</sup> But if officials were hoping the study would provide definitive evidence that single-sex classrooms work, the report proved a disappointment. Based on an exhaustive review of the existing research, the report’s authors declared the evidence “equivocal” at best.<sup>67</sup> “Any positive effects of [single-sex] schooling on longer-term indicators of academic achievement are not readily apparent.”<sup>68</sup>

Despite the failure to produce an evidence-based justification for doing so, the Department of Education pressed forward. On

October 24, 2006, officials announced that the proposed rules would go into effect.<sup>69</sup> The new regulations immediately were heralded as “the biggest change to coed classrooms in more than three decades.”<sup>70</sup> And, despite the overwhelming opposition to the rules expressed in the comments submitted to the Department of Education, the changes were presented as a democratic triumph: “For the first time in a generation, public schools have won broad freedom to teach boys and girls separately.”<sup>71</sup> Winning not just a regulatory victory but a rhetorical one, the campaign to bring single-sex education to public schools was presented as a hard-won struggle for freedom of choice, leaving opponents cast as enemies of liberty rather than as the guardians of civil liberties they claimed to be.

Once the 2006 rules change was announced, local officials across the country rushed to establish single-sex programs in public schools, and it appears that very few of them paused to carefully assess the evidence purporting to justify these practices. Almost immediately, the far-reaching influence of Leonard Sax’s brand of popular neuroscience was apparent.<sup>72</sup> In 2007, South Carolina became the first state to create a statewide office to support single-sex public schooling initiatives, and former teacher and NASSPE board member David Chadwell was appointed the inaugural director. Chadwell used his position to promote the idea that boys and girls learn differently owing to underlying sex differences. In one of the first news reports covering the work of his office, Chadwell encouraged public schools to take steps to address purported sex differences in hearing ability, as well as boys’ greater need for freedom of movement in the classroom.<sup>73</sup> He advised teachers of boys that “you need to get them up and moving. That’s based on the nervous system, that’s based on eyes, that’s based upon volume and the use of

volume with the boys.”<sup>74</sup> In dealing with girls, Chadwell recommended paying attention to “the connections girls have (a) with the content, (b) with each other and (c) with the teacher. If you try to stop girls from talking to one another, that’s not successful. So you do a lot of meeting in circles, where every girl can share something from her own life that relates to the content in class.”<sup>75</sup>

News accounts reveal a host of “brain-based” teaching innovations adopted in single-sex learning environments created in the years since 2006. Several schools have acted on Sax’s advice that girls be placed in brightly lit rooms and seated in a face-to-face configuration to encourage group work, while boys are kept in dimly lit rooms with side-by-side desks to minimize the purported provocation of direct eye contact between students.<sup>76</sup> At the Young Oak Kim Academy in Los Angeles, girls-only classes were implemented on the theory that females prefer a “collaborative atmosphere,” while boys require more “management.”<sup>77</sup> Each classroom at the school is equipped with an individual thermostat control so that the boys-only classes can be kept at a lower temperature than the girls’ rooms, as per Sax’s instruction.<sup>78</sup> Classrooms also are outfitted with microphones, which teachers are instructed to crank up when addressing the boys’ classes. In Florida, a principal returned from a summer professional development course at the Gurian Institute and decided to decorate the all-girls classrooms at his school in pastels, so as to create “cozier” learning areas. Boys’ rooms were decorated in primary colors and equipped with rafts and tents.<sup>79</sup> On the grounds that “boys thrive on competition,” the same principal decided that boys should be compelled to take timed quizzes but that girls should not, given their higher sensitivity to stress.<sup>80</sup> Meanwhile, at a school in Virginia, girls in flower-adorned



single-sex classrooms are instructed to work in pairs or small groups, while boys are permitted to move around more freely during lessons.<sup>81</sup> According to materials prepared by Westside Elementary School in Florida, the curriculum at the school is based on the philosophy that “girls and boys see the world differently—not only figuratively but literally. Some examples are: Retinas—girls and boys see different images when looking at the same image; Hearing—girls have more sensitive hearing than boys.”<sup>82</sup> In a letter sent to parents of students at Middleton Heights Elementary School in Idaho, the principal explained, “When working in small groups one-on-one we try to sit beside boys, shoulder to shoulder rather than making direct eye contact as preferred by girls. Boys tend to need a greater amount of personal space, so in some classrooms the desks have been moved apart to allow that space.”<sup>83</sup> At Riverview Middle School in Wisconsin, teachers of all-girls classes are encouraged to speak more quietly and to devote more instructional time to “sharing feelings.” With boys, teachers are advised to speak more loudly, repeat directions more frequently, give specific written directions, and “avoid down time.”<sup>84</sup> A teacher at a single-sex public school in Saint Louis opines that “boys seem to learn better if they are presented a concept first, then allowed to experience it before coming back as a group to discuss it. Girls, they say, learn better if they talk about the concept first and then attack an activity on their own.”<sup>85</sup>

News reports offer disturbing indications that the 2006 rules change has opened the door to programs that are now promoting blatantly stereotypical ideas about boys and girls. Further evidence has been uncovered by the ACLU, which in May 2012 announced an initiative titled *Teach Kids, Not Stereotypes* to address gender stereotyping in single-sex public school

classrooms. To gather facts, the ACLU sent public-records requests to education officials in fifteen states with the goal of establishing the “scope and characteristics” of local single-sex initiatives. Relying on responses to their request provided by the schools themselves, the ACLU has documented a widespread failure to adhere to Title IX guidelines.<sup>86</sup> Despite existing regulations, the ACLU found that “virtually all” of the single-sex programs it surveyed “were premised on the theory that ‘hard-wired’ physiological and developmental differences between boys and girls necessitated the use of different teaching methods in sex-separated classrooms.”<sup>87</sup>

This reality is very different from what single-sex education advocates promised. Sax long has advertised single-sex education as an *antidote* to sex-role stereotyping, insisting that the risk of reinforcing traditional gender roles is much higher in coeducational environments.<sup>88</sup> “Single-sex schools expand educational opportunities. . . . The coed school will always inevitably replay the same sexist stereotypes that we have in the culture.”<sup>89</sup> Elsewhere Sax has observed, “It’s fine to play a flute at an all-boys school. I think if we have more single-sex schools, we will have more female fighter pilots.”<sup>90</sup> Other proponents of single-sex public education adopt a similar line.<sup>91</sup> At least in many single-sex public school settings, however, things haven’t turned out that way. Local news reports teem with generalizations about boys and girls offered up by teachers and administrators involved with single-sex programs: Boys are louder and noisier than girls and, hence, need more freedom to move about in the classroom.<sup>92</sup> Boys thrive on competition and challenge, whereas girls are naturally cooperative and suffer in stressful environments.<sup>93</sup> Boys respond better to harsh, loud instructions, whereas girls are primed by nature to respond to soft, gentle tones. Boys learn best

from hands-on lessons, whereas girls benefit from being allowed to talk among themselves.<sup>94</sup> Boys do better in classrooms where clutter is tolerated, whereas girls prefer a neat and clean desk.<sup>95</sup> Boys prefer to read fact-based materials, whereas girls are drawn to fictional narratives centered on human drama.<sup>96</sup> These reports raise the discomfiting possibility that newly popular gender-differentiated pedagogies will better equip boys for professional success in the adult world, for example, by emphasizing “fact-based” instruction and honing skills for completing tasks under pressure. And while boys receive this training in school, girls are assigned to classrooms organized around an affective rather than an instructional mission, one that places the highest priority on making sure girls feel comfortable and emotionally connected to those around them.

Research evidence confirms that educational environments that have been designed in accordance with generalizations about the different capacities of girls and boys to sit still, work collaboratively, or tolerate stress reinforce gender stereotypes, regardless of whether boys are consigned to play flutes or not. One team of researchers recently found that “placing students in [gender-segregated] classes strengthens rather than reduces gender-stereotypic beliefs.”<sup>97</sup> Noting the “long history of social and developmental research [that] has demonstrated the negative effects of separating people and the positive effects of bringing people together,” the researchers suggest that gender segregation “likely heightens the salience of gender in the classroom thereby reinforcing and increasing gender stereotypes.”<sup>98</sup> In another illuminating study, a team of researchers examined the reasoning behind support for single-sex education for girls. In a sample that included parents, teachers, and students, they found that interview subjects affiliated with single-sex as opposed to

coeducational schools were more likely to adopt gender essentialist views, and to “posit that girls’ and boys’ brains, interests, and peer relationships, respectively, differ in fundamental ways.”<sup>99</sup>

Just a few years before the 2006 rules change, Rosemary Salomone prodded feminist skeptics to “move beyond ideology” and “open their minds to new findings on sex-linked developmental and learning differences among children and adolescents.”<sup>100</sup> Attributing the closed-mindedness of feminists to “fear” of reinforcing traditional views about the inherent intellectual inferiority of females, Salomone dismissed, as a typical instance of feminist overreaction, critics’ warnings about the dangers of essentialist thinking flourishing in single-sex environments. Notably, the language of “fear” appears as well in a 2008 research policy brief that characterizes feminist opposition to single-sex education this way: “Some feminist critics fear that sex discrimination, stereotypes, and inequality are inescapable evils of institutions which allow for the separation of sexes.”<sup>101</sup> The insinuation that feminist commentators are operating from an emotional as opposed to a rational basis is all too familiar. But in the face of the growing number of public school initiatives now invoking the authority of science to legitimate single-sex programs organized around blatantly stereotypical gender norms, opposition that once might have been dismissed as paranoid now appears prescient. Even Salomone concedes that there may have been some basis for feminist wariness after all, confessing to a reporter in 2008 that “every time I hear of school officials selling single-sex programs to parents based on brain research, my heart sinks.”<sup>102</sup> She elaborates: “Brain research rationales have so tainted the practices of at least some of these programs that it is difficult, if not impossible, to gain a clear reading of

their true potential for improving academic and social outcomes. Those same widely reported practices have placed into serious question all single-sex initiatives, including the many thoughtfully planned separate classes and schools that now dot the educational landscape.”

Salomone and others nonetheless remain committed to the position that a few bad apples shouldn't spoil the possibilities for single-sex education generally. However, consideration of the situation on the ground since 2006 suggests that the opposite dynamic is at play insofar as the glowing reputation of a few star programs has created an aura of legitimacy for the many others that are engaging in harmful, and almost certainly unlawful, gender stereotyping. The question that needs to be addressed, then, is not whether there are *any* good single-sex public schools. (There are.) The question is: for every worthwhile program, how many others are getting a free pass? This is an issue that demands the attention of federal officials. The revised 2006 guidelines require that all single-sex programs be evaluated at least every two years “to ensure that single-sex classes ... are based on genuine justifications and do not rely on overly broad generalizations about the different talents, capacities, or preferences of either sex.”<sup>103</sup> To date, however, federal officials have failed to enforce the mandatory review requirement, abdicating their core responsibility to protect public school students from unlawful discrimination.

#### THE POLITICS OF (IN)VISIBILITY

The claim that single-sex education is especially beneficial for disadvantaged students has played a pivotal role in the promotion of single-sex initiatives in K–12 public schools. But the very visibility

of boys of color in the campaign to make single-sex educational options available to public school students has created a dilemma for advocates hoping to expand the reach of single-sex education beyond the nation's most obviously troubled schools. In the early 1990s, the case for single-sex education rested largely on the perception of a "Black male crisis," but more recently advocates of single-sex education have declared *all* boys to be in crisis.<sup>104</sup> Arguments based on purported sex-based learning differences have supplied much-needed, and oft-repeated, justifications for expanding single-sex education beyond schools primarily serving economically disadvantaged students of color.<sup>105</sup>

As the claim that "boys and girls learn differently" has become more prominent in the debate over single-sex education, more programs have sprung up in relatively affluent districts and those serving higher proportions of white students.<sup>106</sup> Given the growing emphasis on presumably universal human sex differences, one might assume that claims about the distinctive needs and interests of economically disadvantaged boys of color would recede in the campaign to promote single-sex initiatives in U.S. public schools. This has not been the case. Instead, the insistence that single-sex approaches are of particular value for students in underserved communities continues to play a prominent role in advocacy efforts. This no doubt reflects the fact that the urgency of the educational crisis in these communities has made single-sex reforms an easier sell. But there is more going on here. In this section, I take a closer look at the figuration of boys of color in the campaign for single-sex public education. Rather than finding boys of color marginalized one discovers that boys of color commonly are positioned in the foreground, their images conjured as the very emblem of the "boy crisis."<sup>107</sup> Intersectionality theory helps explain why this might be, while also, I suggest,

providing an occasion to extend intersectional analysis in ways that exceed its typical application.<sup>108</sup>

To begin, we might consider what intersectionality as a critical perspective brings to our understanding of the relative positioning of boys of color and white boys in “boy crisis” discourse. Much intersectional analysis focuses on the way the experiences and interests of multiply marginalized subjects are obscured when “single-axis” frameworks are deployed to address social subordination. Based on this critical emphasis within the intersectional literature, one might expect that the proliferation of a universalized “boy crisis” would produce *inattention* to the distinctive situation boys of color face in the educational system. This is a tendency Crenshaw aptly diagnoses, for example, in describing the way some domestic violence activists in the 1980s rebuffed efforts to publicize violence against women of color, insisting on the strategic value of presenting domestic violence to the public as “everyone’s problem” rather than “just” an inner-city problem. Twenty years after Crenshaw’s pathbreaking law review articles originally were published, the stress in intersectional analysis continues to be placed on silences and marginalization as the chief effects of intersectional dynamics. However, there has been much less critical scrutiny of *visibility* as a tactic associated with intersectional politics.<sup>109</sup> The assumption that intersectionality creates the conditions of possibility for silencing and erasures—that is, for *invisibility*—has led to a certain neglect of the way multiply marginalized groups are implicated in political dynamics produced not only by negation but also through strategic acts of representation. In this regard, I suggest that the single-sex public education debates present an illuminating instance of the intersectional politics of visibility.

How are boys of color positioned in the campaign to persuade the public of a universal boy crisis? An example from journalist Peg Tyre's 2008 *New York Times* bestseller *The Trouble with Boys: A Surprising Report Card on Our Sons, Their Problems at School, and What Parents and Educators Must Do* is instructive. Emphasizing that the "boy crisis" affects *all* boys, Tyre explains, "Almost every ill that befalls schoolchildren in America—from learning disabilities, to dropout rates, to rickets—disproportionately affects poor black and Hispanic children. And the boy problem is no exception. We should not downplay the heavy burden that poverty and racism place on poor kids and kids of color. That said, it's useful to hold this bit of data in your mind[:] . . . boys in every racial subgroup do worse than girls in *school even though they come from identical environments*" (emphasis in the original).<sup>110</sup> In drawing attention to the fact that boys in every racial subgroup do worse in school than girls in the same subgroup, Tyre obscures the also striking fact that *white boys on average do better than girls from every other racial subgroup but their own*. Viewed in this light, Tyre's gesture of recognition ("Almost every ill that befalls schoolchildren . . . disproportionately affects poor black and Hispanic children") justifies alarmist rhetoric about, ironically, a crisis centrally defined by anxiety over *white* boys' imperiled supremacy. In this way, it becomes clear how strategies of recognition, as much as those operating via erasure, are capable of producing and reinforcing marginalization.

Rather than simply trading arguments concerning racial and economic disadvantage for claims about biological sex differences, advocates of single-sex education have adopted a kitchen-sink approach, rallying diverse and not always obviously compatible justifications to support their claims. Typical is a 2006 *USA Today* editorial written in defense of single-sex education.



Addressing the charge that single-sex education is discriminatory, the piece insists, “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.”<sup>111</sup> A few lines later, however, the reader is informed that “minorities, for example, might benefit more [from single-sex approaches] than middle-class white children could, an Education Department review suggests.”<sup>112</sup> Asserting that boys and girls learn differently while “black and white children learn the same way,” the implication is that gender differences are rooted in biology, whereas race is a merely a social distinction. But this disavowal of biological racism denies as well the lived effects of racism by glossing over the possibility that learning is deeply affected by social conditions of disadvantage. Indeed, if “black and white children learn the same way,” then why exactly is it that “minorities” would “benefit more than middle-class white children could” from single-sex approaches? The concern is that formulations like this one opportunistically benefit from an association with antiracism even while advancing a logic that denies the enduring harms of racial prejudice. At the same time, the claim that “minorities” stand to gain more than middle-class white students from single-sex education begs elaboration, for, as legal scholar Verna Williams suggests, in the absence of an explanation racist stereotypes are likely to be given free play. Williams’s compelling analysis of single-sex initiatives undertaken in schools serving predominantly Black and Latino students demonstrates the way the justificatory rhetoric surrounding these programs reinforces racist myths of Black hypersexuality.<sup>113</sup> As Williams notes, media reports commonly emphasize the benefits of single-sex approaches in minimizing classroom distractions, particularly among adolescent students with raging hormones. This suggestion rests on the

absurd presumption that all adolescents experience desire exclusively for members of a different sex. Moreover, when such a claim appears alongside the suggestion that single-sex education works best with students of color, the implication would seem to be that kids of color are somehow more vulnerable to natural urges.<sup>114</sup> One might discern a similar blurring of the line between sociological and biological claims-making in Salomone's vague recycling of the evolutionary rhetoric of the "ladder of descent" to explain why single-sex approaches can be particularly effective for the least-advantaged students: "In privileged communities, and within certain ethnic and racial groups, the high value that families and peers place on academic achievement and college placement, especially for high-performing students, tempers to some degree the social distraction and pervasive anti-academic values of youth culture. Those mitigating factors gradually dissipate as we progressively descend the socioeconomic ladder toward the urban and rural poor."<sup>115</sup>

My concern here is with the emergence of a justificatory discourse for single-sex education that capitalizes on the will to address the educational crisis facing low-income students of color while, simultaneously, discounting the role of racial injustice and economic disadvantage in producing this crisis. Those advocating the creation of more single-sex options in public schools have framed the campaign as a social justice project. Reflecting on her own decision to promote single-sex initiatives in public schools, TYWLS benefactor Ann Rubenstein Tisch once explained, "Logic said to me, 'It's been a way of educating affluent girls for hundreds of years. If it works there, why wouldn't it work in the inner city?'"<sup>116</sup> Sounding a similar chord on the eve of the unveiling of the proposed regulations in 2004, Senator Kay Bailey Hutchinson declared, "It's time our nation's public school

children have the same options as their private school contemporaries.”<sup>117</sup> In 2006, State Representative LaMar Lemmons III (D-Detroit), lauded the regulatory rules change as a victory for the less well-off: “With this, public schools and public school academies can become more competitive with private schools where religious and more affluent parents already have this option.” In Philadelphia, the plan for a new all-boys public high school was touted as way to make single-sex education available to families “who lack the financial wherewithal” to pay private school tuitions.<sup>118</sup> Leonard Sax, too, has made “social justice” a key talking point, insisting that justice surely demands that an educational opportunity historically accessible only to wealthy students’ families—elite private schools—be made available to all.<sup>119</sup> In numerous public appearances and news reports, Sax has reiterated his message that the debate over single-sex public education “boils down to social justice to make it a choice.”<sup>120</sup>

In this way, advocates of single-sex public schooling initiatives are reworking the idea of “social justice” by figuring “choice” as the ultimate marker of social equality.<sup>121</sup> The result is a distinctively neoliberal brand of social justice discourse—one premised on a vision that stands in stark contrast to alternative visions rooted in a commitment not simply to expanding choices but to reducing inequality.<sup>122</sup> Understood in this way, the appropriation of social justice discourse by prominent single-sex advocates represents precisely the kind of hollowing out of difference discourse that Maxine Baca Zinn and Bonnie Thornton Dill memorably addressed in their canonical essay “Theorizing Difference from Multiracial Feminism.”<sup>123</sup> In this article, Zinn and Dill offer a bracing assessment of the turn to “difference” in feminist theory. While welcoming the belated acknowledgement of the “false universalism” riddling second-wave feminist theory and activism,

the authors warn that a true reckoning with difference entails more than paying mere lip service to diversity. Zinn and Dill explain, “Increasingly, we find that difference *is* recognized. But this in no way means that difference occupies a ‘privileged’ theoretical status. Instead of using difference to rethink the category of women, difference is often a euphemism for women who differ from the traditional norm. Even in purporting to accept difference, feminist pluralism often creates a social reality that reverts to universalizing women.”<sup>124</sup> The preceding discussion of advocates’ invocation of the educational crisis facing boys of color aims to build on Zinn and Dill’s pioneering analysis of the “pitfalls” of difference discourse by highlighting the limitations of the approach taken by some advocates of single-sex education to “the difference project.”<sup>125</sup> Rather than finding boys of color marginalized in “boy crisis” discourse, one discovers that boys of color often have been made poster children for the cause. As I have suggested in the preceding, the problem here is not so much diversity *denied* as it is the quintessentially neoliberal phenomenon of diversity *leveraged* to the benefit of those with very different kinds of investments.

#### CONCLUSION

Proponents of single-sex education have been quick to cite research studies presenting evidence of the benefits of this approach. While insisting they have the research on their side, advocates have, however, simultaneously emphasized the urgent need for further study. Indeed, advocates suggest that the dearth of research evidence in favor of single-sex approaches can itself be viewed as a compelling argument for continued experimentation, if only to provide future researchers with an abundant

supply of fresh data. Unquestionably, there is room for more—and better—empirical research on single-sex education. But this fact alone can hardly justify a decision to ignore the research evidence we already have—findings that are more than sufficient to establish that the case in favor of single-sex education has been seriously overblown. In 2014, a distinguished team of researchers published the results of a meta-analysis of studies comparing single-sex education and coeducation. This rigorous review established that “the controlled studies showed no substantial advantages of [single-sex] schooling for either girls or boys, across an array of academic outcomes.”<sup>126</sup> Echoing the findings of researchers who conducted the meta-analysis nearly a decade earlier for the Department of Education, Erin Pahlke, Janet Shibley Hyde, and Carlie A. Allison found that the vast majority of studies conducted on single-sex education, including some of the most highly publicized, are deeply flawed.<sup>127</sup> Existing studies are marred by fundamental methodological flaws. For example, in many studies of the efficacy of single-sex education, researchers have failed to account for “self-selection” bias—that is, the fact that the students who participate in single-sex public schooling initiatives most often have not been randomly selected but rather have opted in—itsself an indication that these students may be more highly motivated and have more involved parents.<sup>128</sup> Other studies similarly ignore the documented practice of “cherry-picking” the best students in a school to participate in a single-sex experiment.<sup>129</sup> Other confounding variables have been neglected by researchers as well, including the common practice of making additional resources available to students in single-sex classes, such as mentoring or after-school enrichment programs.<sup>130</sup> The frequent and largely uncritical citation of flawed research studies in public debates and media reporting has led to

a highly exaggerated perception of the efficacy of single-sex approaches.<sup>131</sup>

Supporters of single-sex education might counter that surely the bar is set too high in demanding conclusive evidence that single-sex education is superior to coeducation in order for it to be permitted. Is it really fair to foreclose the possibility of single-sex programs in public schools simply because of the inherent limitations of research based on human subjects, including vulnerable populations of school-age children? At any rate, given the myriad failures and ongoing problems riddling coeducational schools, isn't it enough to provide assurances that a single-sex program is unlikely to be any worse than the existing options—and then give parents and students a choice?

The answer is: it's not enough. Constitutional antidiscrimination jurisprudence requires that there be an "exceedingly persuasive justification" for treating students in public schools differently on the basis of sex—a requirement that demands a great deal more than establishing that segregation will do no obvious harm.<sup>132</sup> At the same time, Title IX requires that a school identify an important objective to be served by segregating students on the basis of sex, and that separation by sex be substantially related to achieving the stated objective. These stringent legal requirements reflect both hard-won recognition of the historical harms of state-supported sexism and a commitment to preventing unfair treatment on the basis of sex moving forward. Certainly, the discussion of single-sex public schooling initiatives presented in this chapter affirms the ongoing need for these critical protections. On the one hand, the evidence of educational and social benefits is not compelling. The studies are all over the map, but the most reliable research shows little if any benefit, including for disadvantaged kids. At the same time, there is

disturbing evidence suggesting that single-sex public schools create particularly hospitable environments for gender stereotyping. While there are plenty of anecdotal accounts of feeling liberated from gender stereotypes in single-sex environments, the facts on the ground tell a very different story. Many single-sex programs today are premised on the idea that boys and girls learn differently owing to purportedly fixed facts of nature, a claim that has led to “gender-sensitive” practices such as surrounding girls with pastel colors while exposing boys to bright ones, assigning romantic fiction to girls while giving nonfiction to boys, subjecting boys to frequent drills and timed tests, while emphasizing noncompetitive activities for girls—and on and on. This is not to say that every single-sex public school program promotes gender stereotypes. But it is to demand an acknowledgement that the reality of single-sex public education has fallen far short of what was promised.

## CHAPTER SIX

# Different but Equal?

### *Reflections on the Future of Gender Discourse*

This concluding chapter considers what the single-sex education debates reveal about prevailing understandings of gender in the early decades of the twenty-first century. The discussion focuses on three aspects of contemporary gender discourse prominent in debates over single-sex public education: (1) the conjunction of claims concerning racial inequality and gender difference; (2) the resilience of gender essentialism; and (3) the presumption of gender binarism. In what follows, I consider how these matters have played out in the single-sex education debates, and what this might indicate about broader shifts in the way gender difference is constructed in the contemporary moment.

#### *THE POLITICS OF INTERSECTIONALITY*

The preceding chapters highlight the complex interaction of discourses of class, race, and gender in recent debates over single-sex education. In so doing, this study builds on prior analyses that have adopted an intersectional approach in assessing the movement for



single-sex public education.<sup>1</sup> In an important 2004 article, legal scholar Verna Williams notes the persistence of stereotypical beliefs about racial groups manifest in advocacy of single-sex education. Whereas single-sex education commonly is pitched to parents of white girls as a way to help their daughters “become more confident and empowered,” all-girls classes for girls of color more often are touted as an effective way to discourage sexual activity and lower rates of teen pregnancy.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Williams’s analysis forces confrontation with the ways single-sex public schooling initiatives historically have provided cover for racist agendas rooted in deep-seated prejudice. On these grounds, Williams insists that proposals to separate students by sex at school be evaluated in light of the longtime function of single-sex public education as a racial management strategy.<sup>3</sup>

Williams’s study underscores the fact that historically, gender-based schooling initiatives have masked racially motivated objectives. In the period under consideration in this book, however, one finds a striking reversal, whereby *antiracist* sentiment is now commonly invoked to confer legitimacy on single-sex initiatives that promote highly traditional gender ideologies. In effectuating this rhetorical shift, feminist opponents of single-sex programs have been denounced as indifferent (if not antagonistic) to a broader social justice agenda committed to addressing the devastating effects of racial and economic inequalities. In particular, those critics aligned with civil rights groups that have led legal challenges against fledgling single-sex initiatives have been dismissed as out-of-touch elitists bent on pushing an ideological agenda—even if success comes at the cost of depriving the nation’s most underserved students of desperately needed educational opportunities. This image of the feminist opposition has been reinforced in numerous media reports that

present the debate over single-sex public schooling as a battle between local advocates for disadvantaged kids on the one hand and elite legal activists on the other.

The yoking of a rhetoric of social justice to antifeminist polemics highlights the critical importance of making explicit the guiding gender ideology at play in any given single-sex program. Unfortunately, as education researchers Edward Fergus and Pedro Noguera observe, research on single-sex programs for boys in particular has been characterized generally by “a lack of attention to how assumptions about gender (e.g., what boys need) and their development influence the decisions to separate boys and underlie the choices in teaching and learning practices and classroom management techniques.”<sup>4</sup> This inattention to implicit gender ideologies undoubtedly heightens the risk that a single-sex program will tolerate, if not actively encourage, the perpetuation of damaging gender stereotypes, including those that promote groundless beliefs concerning the inherent aptitudes and interests of boys and girls. At the same time, as education researchers Clarence Terry and colleagues observe, a failure to think critically about starting assumptions enables the continued influence of “problematic narratives and reinforce[s] pathological perspectives about Black males.”<sup>5</sup> In making this observation, these researchers draw much-needed attention to the constitutive role played by racial ideologies in the construction of gender.

In interrogating the specific gender ideologies motivating single-sex public schooling initiatives, the relationship between the goal of redressing the effects of social inequalities, and strategies for doing so that rely on separating the sexes in school, demands closer scrutiny as well. For example, in their call for programs to specifically address “the sober realities that shape [Black

males'] educational and social status in the United States," Terry and colleagues recall W.E.B. DuBois's support for "Black educational institutions as a reliable and effective means by which to properly educate Black children."<sup>6</sup> The invocation of DuBois in this context is suggestive but hardly self-explanatory, given that DuBois does not himself advocate gender-specific antidotes to counteract the pervasive effects of racism in education. In "Does the Negro Need Separate Schools?" published in 1935, DuBois concludes that "race prejudice in the United States today is such that most Negroes cannot receive proper education in white institutions."<sup>7</sup> He explains, "A separate Negro school, where children are treated like human beings, trained by teachers of their own race, who know what it means to be black in the year of salvation 1935, is infinitely better than making our boys and girls doormats to be spit and trampled upon and lied to by ignorant social climbers, whose sole claim to superiority is the ability to kick 'niggers' when they are down."<sup>8</sup> DuBois goes on to recommend separate schools for Black students, in acknowledgment of the fact that "American Negroes have, because of their history, group experiences and memories, a distinct entity, whose spirit and reactions demand a certain type of education for its development."<sup>9</sup> But surely it is one thing to suggest that Black students cannot thrive in an educational setting dominated by unapologetic white racists, as DuBois does in the quoted passage, and quite another to assert that it is similarly impossible to cultivate what DuBois calls "mutual understanding" in a classroom shared by Black boys and their female peers. In this regard, it is striking that Terry and colleagues nowhere acknowledge, let alone explain, the justification for the leap from DuBois's case for separate schools for Black *children* to their own argument in favor of single-sex programs for Black *male* students.<sup>10</sup> DuBois rests his case for creating separate

schools for Black children on the grounds that Black students are treated abhorrently by white teachers and white students in mixed school settings. Do Terry and colleagues really mean to suggest a similar hazard with respect to the presence of Black girls in educational settings shared with Black boys? If not, then the basis for the exclusion of Black girls—something that DuBois nowhere recommends—demands address. At this point, one also might wonder whether, and how, the approach of Terry and colleagues to educating Black boys might diverge from that of those who call for programs premised on the Moynihan-esque claim that the deficiencies of the “matriarchal” Black family ultimately are to blame for Black men’s struggles today. At the very least, Terry and colleagues miss an opportunity to move the debate forward by clarifying and elaborating their position. In the place of an explanation, the reader is left only with a vague exhortation to embark on “bold, explicit, and unapologetic efforts in the service of the education of African American males,” a mandate that is accompanied by a plea that such efforts not be dismissed out of hand as “de facto” discrimination.<sup>11</sup> But if the merits of single-sex initiatives are to be engaged on their own terms, surely it is incumbent on proponents to supply some kind of rationale for excluding similarly disadvantaged girls from such opportunities.

The demand to provide a compelling rationale for excluding girls from new educational opportunities has taken on special urgency in recent years, as evidence mounts that disadvantaged girls are being left behind in efforts to address the devastating effects of poverty and legacies of racism on children. Several widely publicized programs targeting disadvantaged boys of color, particularly Black and Latino boys, have substantial public and private financial support. In 2011, the City of New York

announced a partnership with billionaire George Soros on an ambitious initiative to support Black and Latino boys, and several other urban communities have followed suit with similar initiatives. In 2014, President Obama presented the My Brother's Keeper initiative as the signature social welfare initiative of his second term, with the goal of insuring "a coordinated Federal effort to improve significantly the expected life outcomes for boys and young men of color."<sup>12</sup> My Brother's Keeper places the issue of educational opportunity at its very center.<sup>13</sup> In conjunction with publicly financed efforts, numerous private organizations have pledged considerable financial support and have indicated a willingness to provide mentoring and other services for disadvantaged boys.<sup>14</sup>

My Brother's Keeper and related programs bring much-needed attention and resources to the plight of at-risk boys of color. But similar concern is not being given to their female counterparts. Legal scholar Paul Butler characterizes this limited interventionist purview as the hallmark of "Black male exceptionalism," a popular discourse that enjoys virtual "monopoly power" in public policy discussions today, despite the lack of evidence demonstrating that the crisis facing males color in the United States is of a qualitatively different magnitude than the situation of their female peers.<sup>15</sup> Quite the contrary: on virtually every measure commonly cited as evidence that boys and young men of color are in crisis, girls and young women of color are similarly situated, including on such key indices as the likelihood of being born into and raised in poverty, attending an underresourced, low-performing school, and being taught by inexperienced or unqualified teachers.<sup>16</sup> On all of these counts, girls of color are likely to fare just as badly as their male counterparts.<sup>17</sup>

In the end, one is left to wonder: whose interests will be served if the needs and demands of fully one-half of a subordinated class are shunted to the margins? Moving forward, one possible way to correct the distortions and imbalances perpetuated by “Black male exceptionalist” discourse is to insist that any resources offered to boys be made available in a parallel manner to girls. Toward this end, Butler proposes the adoption of a “parity objective” such that “any state or private actor that sponsors an intervention for African American men should also sponsor one for African American women.”<sup>18</sup> Whatever the appeal of such a proposal in theory, the account of education reform advocacy provided in the preceding chapters suggests grounds for serious skepticism about the goal of parity actually being achieved. Over the past several decades, the plight of girls has been frequently invoked to rally enthusiasm for single-sex initiatives, but to a significant degree boys have maintained a position at the very center of the campaign. Unless the extent of this problem is forthrightly acknowledged, the prospect of a serious change is unlikely.

#### ESSENTIALISMS OLD AND NEW

The prominence of gender essentialist claims in debates over single-sex education is a telling indication of biological determinism’s enduring grip on the popular imagination. Indeed, in the first decades of the twenty-first century, there are signs of a veritable essentialist renaissance in the cottage industry of parenting-, relationship-, and career-advice books proclaiming stark and immutable differences between “the male brain” and “the female brain.”<sup>19</sup> While social constructionist approaches to the study of gender have flourished in the academy in recent decades,

the single-sex education debates confirm the remarkable resilience of essentialist perspectives. At the same time, however, these debates reveal the extraordinary adaptability of essentialist discourse in the face of shifting social norms.<sup>20</sup> As sociologist Michael Messner observes in an astute appraisal of shifting ideologies of gender in the United States since the mid-twentieth century, contemporary gender discourse most decidedly is “not our grandparents’ essentialism.”<sup>21</sup> Instead, Messner explains, gender essentialism in our time is articulated through a bifurcated discourse which simultaneously insists that girls can be anything they want to be, but that “boys will be boys.”<sup>22</sup> Messner dubs this contradictory gender discourse “soft essentialism,” explaining that it “valorizes the liberal feminist ideal of individual choice for girls and women, while retaining a largely naturalized view of boys and men.”<sup>23</sup> Today, essentialist explanations for the persistence of gender inequality risk being met with swift and furious opposition—as former Harvard president Lawrence Summers discovered in 2005 when he speculated that the disproportionately low number of female math and engineering professors at his institution might reflect gender differences in natural ability, particularly at the highest end of the spectrum.<sup>24</sup> Yet no such outrage is elicited by generalizations about innate differences in cognitive and emotional development that have been rallied to explain data suggesting that boys are “falling behind” their female counterparts in school and beyond.

Messner identifies youth sports as one site where soft essentialism is “especially evident.”<sup>25</sup> The preceding chapters confirm that debates over single-sex education are another. Girls’ advocates in education generally have rejected essentialist arguments, in line with a broader feminist renunciation of biological determinism as an explanation for gender differences and inequalities. In sharp

contrast, boys' advocates have proven far more likely to suggest, for example, that learning environments should be redesigned to better suit the essential nature of boys. Legal scholar David Cohen provides an incisive analysis of the "myth of essentialist masculinity" propagated by many single-sex programs, particularly those that have been influenced by accounts of sex differences drawn from popular neuroscience. As the preceding account has shown, this emphasis on biological explanations for boys' behavioral and academic struggles sometimes has preempted consideration of the way masculine socialization itself sets boys up to fail. Rather than reassessing the dysfunctional consequences of training young boys to "man up" by, say, suppressing feelings of vulnerability and acting out aggression, prominent proponents of single-sex education have operated in a "recuperative" mode, seeking to build boys' confidence by recapturing the sense of entitlement conferred by male privilege.<sup>26</sup> As education researcher Marcus Weaver-Hightower observes, "Numerous suggestions have been made for correcting boys' real and perceived disadvantages, and, like the debates' general tenor, a majority have been largely conservative, aimed at re-entrenching traditional, hegemonic masculinities."<sup>27</sup> As an alternative, sociologist Michael Kimmel argues that "if we really want to rescue boys, protect boys, promote boyhood, then our task must be to find ways to reveal and challenge this ideology of masculinity, to disrupt the facile 'boys will be boys' model."<sup>28</sup> Single-sex programs premised on an essentialist account of masculinity clearly are failing to do so.

In the era of "soft essentialism," it is now less common than it once was for gender inequalities to be attributed to the inherent inferiority of females to males. While the apparent retreat from the limiting essentialist myths about girls is welcome, the single-sex education debates also reveal dangers lurking behind



the postessentialist “the sky’s the limit” discourse surrounding girls today. Chief among these is the risk that this still only aspirational rhetoric will be appropriated to bolster “postfeminist” denial of the ongoing reality of sexism and gender bias in education.<sup>29</sup> In her insightful study of contemporary gender politics in education, sociologist Jessica Ringrose contends that “postfeminist ‘presumptions’ of gender equality obscure ongoing issues of sexual difference and sexism that girls experience in the classroom, playground, and beyond.”<sup>30</sup>

In the more than twenty-five years of debate over single-sex public schooling initiatives reviewed here, boys have been insistently portrayed as a disadvantaged class, while the unmet educational needs of girls, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, have been sidelined. While appearing to acknowledge, and even celebrate, girls’ empowerment, “soft essentialist” thinking at once denies the need to address the harms of masculine socialization and enables the marginalization of girls in discussions of gender equity in education.

#### REINVENTING DIFFERENCE DISCOURSE

The single-sex public education debates point to the ascendance of “different but equal” as a defining gender discourse of our time. In the shadow of second-wave feminist and civil rights activism of the 1960s and 1970s, it is hardly surprising to find observations about gender differences regularly accompanied by the reminder that the mere acknowledgment of difference does not itself imply that one sex is somehow better than the other. As single-sex education advocate Leonard Sax puts the point: “Differences don’t imply an order of rank. You just need to know what the differences are. A knife is not better than a spoon. But

if you try to use a knife for a spoon or a spoon as if it is a knife, you are going to get frustrated.”<sup>31</sup> Despite such reassurances, however, the specter of judgment—that is, an “order of rank”—inevitably haunts discussions of difference in the U.S. context, given the way these claims historically have functioned to legitimate discriminatory laws and social practices.

Advocates of single-sex education have objected strenuously to intimations of any easy parallel between racially segregated schools of the past and single-sex public schooling initiatives in the present. “Different but equal,” we are assured, is not the return of “separate but equal.” In Rosemary Salomone’s assessment, the problem with the comparison is that it conflates a social category with a natural one. She instructs, “Race is a social construct; sex is irreducibly biological with an overlay of social considerations that define gender.”<sup>32</sup> In other words, while allowing that past practices of racial segregation in public schools have been rooted in ignorance and prejudice, today’s proponents of single-sex education pitch their case on what they present as an unbiased consideration of biological fact and social reality. Salomone’s assertion of a neat division between the socially constructed and the “irreducibly biological” is hardly plausible, however, in light of the wide embrace of a “pseudoscience” of sex difference among many single-sex-education proponents today; clearly, much that is passed off as “scientific fact” bears the mark of social preconceptions rather than verified truth.<sup>33</sup> In one telling instance, Leonard Sax declares, “You can’t tell by looking at a child’s brain whether that child is black or white, Asian or Hispanic. . . . But you can tell, by looking at a child’s brain, whether the child is a girl or a boy.”<sup>34</sup> The problem is that the mere fact of an observable difference hardly is sufficient to legitimate different treatment—just imagine the response if children were to be segregated in school on

the basis of equally observable biological differences such as eye color or height. In the end, what makes sex differences significant isn't whether or not they have a biological basis but, rather, what social meanings are ascribed to observable differences.

In asserting a fundamental distinction between race and sex, proponents of single-sex education mean to argue that the rules governing state-sponsored racial segregation shouldn't apply to public school students who are separated on the basis of sex. In an article confidently titled "The Bizarre, Misguided Campaign to Get Rid of Single-Sex Classrooms," Christina Hoff Sommers dismisses out of hand the idea that award-winning public schools like the Irma Rangel Young Women's Leadership School in Dallas or its more recently opened "brother" institution, the Barack Obama Male Leadership Academy, run afoul of civil rights laws: "What sensible person would call these programs and others like them morally and legally suspect?"<sup>35</sup> Characterizing the analogy drawn between racial segregation and single-sex education as "seriously flawed," Salomone also dismisses any suggestion that the antisegregationist principle can be readily transposed into the domain of single-sex schooling. Doing so, she argues, stretches the *Brown* ruling well beyond its intended scope. Salomone recalls that in the *Brown* case, the court addressed the constitutionality of state actions premised on the "invidious belief" that African Americans are "inferior" to whites. Given this was the case, the *Brown* court concluded that separating children on the basis of race "generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community."<sup>36</sup> This "sense of inferiority" has a serious impact, the court went on to say, in denying students the self-respect and confidence necessary to reach their full potential.<sup>37</sup> From Salomone's perspective, the fact that recent single-sex programs have been implemented with the goal of empowering all

students, rather than disparaging excluded groups, means the *Brown* precedent does not apply.<sup>38</sup> In a similar vein, Terry and colleagues emphasize that those single-sex public schooling initiatives serving at-risk boys of color “are built on a compensatory spirit that reasons against discrimination.”<sup>39</sup>

When it comes to the matter of stigma, perhaps the most notable feature of recent single-sex-education advocacy is just how negatively boys as a class have been cast. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, popularizers of “brain-based” approaches to learning have declared boys to be at a natural disadvantage in school when it comes to aptitudes ranging from verbal ability to impulse control. Indeed, if any group can be said to be stigmatized today, surely it would seem to be boys. Interestingly, however, in the case of “boy crisis” discourse, one commonly encounters stigmatizing claims, but in this case these claims circulate without producing the kinds of disadvantage typically associated with stigmatized classes. Instead, in this context male privilege arguably is advanced and enabled even as claims of inherent male superiority are disavowed. Of particular concern in this regard is the way the demand to create “boy-friendly” learning environments seems less to have encouraged a push beyond the double binds facing boys who feel obliged to perform in normatively masculine ways at school, and more to have acted as a strategy to shield boys from the consequences of the evidently dysfunctional complex of attitudes and behaviors associated with idealized manhood. In this way, “boy crisis” discourse turns the “badge of inferiority” logic on its head by leveraging boys’ purported inherent disadvantages to demand education reforms that protect and encourage traditional gender norms.

Reasoning along similar lines, the truly pressing problem posed by separating students by sex at school may have less to

do with stigmatizing members of the excluded class and more to do with promoting a superiority complex among members of the in-group. Social psychologists long ago established a human propensity for in-group bias.<sup>40</sup> One little-remarked danger of segregated environments is that positive self-esteem is built, however unintentionally, on a foundation of in-group bias—a risk that seems particularly acute given the high priority that proponents of single-sex approaches have placed on self-esteem building. Surprisingly little has been said, however, about how the self-esteem-building strategies recommended in settings for disadvantaged boys of color might differ from the approach used with boys from privileged backgrounds. Consider here the familiar assertion that all-boys schools create a safe haven for academically-inclined boys who experience intensified pressure in coeducational settings to distance themselves from the feminized trope of the compliant student. Here, one wonders whether the effect of creating all-boys classes is to liberate boys from the pressures of damaging gender stereotypes or, rather, to preserve a pretense of male intellectual supremacy by sparing boys the humiliating possibility of being outperformed in class by a girl. Put otherwise, the argument that single-sex education is good because it helps protect young people's fragile self-esteem begs the question of whether that self-esteem emanates from a superiority complex or, rather, from a foundation of mutual respect for others—the latter sensibility likely to be more difficult to cultivate in single-sex settings.

Quite aside from the question of stigma, the case for the compatibility of the reasoning behind “different but equal” with existing antidiscrimination laws remains shaky at best. That is because it takes more to clear the legal bar than a simple showing of goodwill or benign intent. While advocates have focused narrowly on

the question of stigma, the law requires a more searching inquiry into stereotyping.<sup>41</sup> Writing for the majority in *Mississippi v. Hogan*, Justice Sandra Day O'Connor declared that the female-only admissions policy at a state-run nursing school was unconstitutional on the grounds that the policy reflected "archaic and stereotypic notions" about "the roles and abilities of males and females."<sup>42</sup> In the *United States v. Virginia* decision, Justice Ginsburg emphasized that "supposed 'inherent differences'" between the sexes do not suffice to justify exclusionary policies that "create or perpetuate the legal, social, and economic inferiority of women."<sup>43</sup> In other words, "overbroad generalizations" to justify exclusionary practices are unlawful—regardless of whether the classification is premised on a value judgment or not.<sup>44</sup>

The controversy surrounding single-sex public schooling initiatives has made it abundantly clear, however, that the court of public opinion does not abide by the same rules as those enforced in actual courts of law. To the contrary, the account of debates over single-sex public education presented in the preceding chapters demonstrates that those observers with the clearest view of the law often have been most vigorously attacked as imposters in local education reform debates. Arguably, one of the greatest challenges confronting legal advocates in these debates has been the proliferation of misinformation about the relevant legal requirements by those in favor of creating greater latitude for experimental single-sex programs. Following a district court judge's decision to dismiss a challenge brought against a single-sex program at a public middle school in Breckinridge County, Kentucky, Leonard Sax mockingly declared of the opposition: "Either they're really stupid and not able to grasp what the judge is saying in the ruling, or they're being deliberately misleading."<sup>45</sup> Sax's suggestion that stupidity might explain

objections to a decision that in fact has thus far proven anomalous, and could well be declared legally unsound in the future, is not just uncharitable; it is also evasive. While Sax promotes the idea that the Breckinridge challenge is just one more instance of a promising public schooling initiative being attacked by ideologically driven critics, the record tells a very different story. Indeed, a review of the complaint filed by ACLU attorneys on behalf of students in the school reveals that the challenge did not rest on a dogmatic opposition to sex segregation but, rather, arose from troubling reports concerning the implementation of the school's program of "differentiated instruction" on the basis of sex, such as the fact that quiet music and soft lighting were provided in girls' classrooms, while a decidedly harsher, and better lit, environment was maintained for the boys.<sup>46</sup>

Recent experience with single-sex public education raises grave doubts about the practicality of "different but equal"; whatever the intent may be going in, inequality easily can be the outcome. A study by sociologist Cecilia Ridgeway, *Framed by Gender*, offers important insight into this phenomenon by demonstrating how a simple belief in gender as a mark of fundamental difference suffices to perpetuate gender inequalities. As Ridgeway explains, "Through gender's role in organizing social relations[,] ... gender inequality is rewritten into new economic and social arrangements as they emerge, preserving that inequality in modified form over socioeconomic transformations."<sup>47</sup> Ridgeway's analysis harkens back to an argument set forth some decades earlier by feminist legal scholar Catharine Mackinnon, who observed with characteristic incisiveness: "If gender were merely a question of difference, sex inequality would be a problem of mere sexism, of mistaken differentiation, of inaccurate categorization of individuals.... But if gender is an inequality

first, constructed as a socially relevant differentiation in order to keep that inequality in place, then sex inequality questions are questions of systematic dominance, of male supremacy.<sup>48</sup>

#### RETHINKING THE GENDER SYSTEM

Reflecting on debates over single-sex K–12 public schooling initiatives from the late 1980s to the present, it is notable that transgender students have been almost completely ignored, at least until very recently.<sup>49</sup> While explicit references to transgender students have been rare in discussions of single-sex K–12 public education, some attention has been given to gender-nonconforming students. Notably, these discussions generally have proceeded on the basis of what transgender theorist Julia Serano calls the “cissexual assumption”—that is, the assumption that everyone naturally identifies as the sex they happened to be assigned at birth.<sup>50</sup> That is, discussion of gender nonconformity largely has centered on students associated with such familiar cultural archetypes as the tomboy or the science nerd—figures whose gender performance may be regarded as deviant or in some way flawed, but who are nonetheless presumed to accept, and to be accepted as, their assigned sex. Some advocates argue that one significant advantage of single-sex education is to provide greater latitude to gender-nonconforming students to explore interests outside of stereotypical gender roles. After all, the argument goes, someone has to play the flute in the orchestra at an all-boys school, and a girl always gets to be class president when the student-body is all-female. In discussions of adolescents in particular, it is sometimes suggested further that boys and girls are more likely to adopt stereotypical modes of self-presentation, such as acting tough or wearing makeup, when they are in the presence of members of



the opposite sex. Such claims point both to the pervasive presumption of heterosexuality characteristic of debates over single-sex public schooling initiatives generally and, more fundamentally, to the mutually constitutive relationship of gender and sexuality.<sup>51</sup> This entanglement presents a certain difficulty for advocates who, on the one hand, stand to benefit from the argument that single-sex environments are a particularly good choice for gender-nonconforming students, but whose tolerance, on the other hand, for gender-nonconformity is strictly bounded by a homophobic sensibility.<sup>52</sup> Consider in this regard Leonard Sax's reflections on "gender-atypical" children in *Why Gender Matters* (2005). Sax acknowledges that some of these children may need to be given "special consideration" as they navigate everyday activities, but he is quick to affirm that his overarching claims about the biological basis of gender generally "apply equally" to gender-atypical and -typical children.<sup>53</sup> In a chapter near the end of the book titled simply "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Sissy and Tomboy," Sax offers advice to parents of gender-nonconforming kids, particularly "the anomalous male."<sup>54</sup> Sax instructs parents of these boys to "adopt and maintain a firm disciplinary style" and "encourage competitive sports," regardless of whether their sons seem interested or not.<sup>55</sup> That way, Sax argues reassuringly, there is some hope the child will "outgrow" his troubling "tendencies" by the time he reaches the socially critical teenage years.<sup>56</sup>

While long consigned to the margins of the debate, questions concerning the educational interests and needs of gender-nonconforming students have been gaining visibility in recent years, propelled to the fore by widely publicized controversies involving transgender students in particular. At the postsecondary level, the issue of sex-exclusionary admissions policies has garnered significant media attention. In 2013, it was reported that

officials at Smith College refused to consider an application from a transgender student because the gender listed on the applicant's federal financial aid forms was male. In the wake of the public controversy that ensued, many women's colleges moved swiftly to clarify their admissions policies. Mills College in Oakland was the first to announce its policy for "transgender or gender questioning applicants," stating that the school "admits self-identified women and people assigned female at birth who do not fit into the gender binary. . . . This includes students who were not assigned to the female sex at birth but live and identify as women at the time of application. It also includes students who are legally assigned to the female sex, but who identify as transgender or gender fluid."<sup>57</sup> Mount Holyoke College soon followed, with college president Lynn Paquerella explaining, "Early feminists argued that reducing women to their biological functions was a foundation of women's oppression. We don't want to fall back on that."<sup>58</sup> By actively positioning venerable institutions at the very forefront of a growing social movement in support of gender diversity and inclusivity, statements such as this one pointedly challenge the assumption that women's colleges are mere relics of the past.

At the K–12 level, too, there are important shifts taking place. In 2011, a school district in California was investigated for discriminating against a fifth-grade student who was denied access to the boys' restroom, even after the student had completed a legal name change and notified school officials that he was undergoing a transition from female to male. Rather than allow this student to use school facilities for boys, the school administration compelled him to use a restroom in the nurse's office. Later, on a school camping trip, he was prohibited from sleeping alongside his classmates and instead forced to bunk in isolation

from other students with only the company of a supervising adult. Federal officials determined that the school's actions constituted sex discrimination, and pledged to clarify relevant legal guidelines "to reflect that gender-based discrimination, including discrimination based on a student's gender identity, transgender status, and nonconformity with gender stereotypes, is a form of discrimination based on sex."<sup>59</sup> In April 2014, the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights issued a new guidance document on Title IX's regulation of sexual assault, stating plainly that "Title IX's sex discrimination prohibition extends to claims of discrimination based on gender identity or failure to conform to stereotypical notions of masculinity or femininity[,] and OCR accepts such complaints for investigation."<sup>60</sup> Several months later, the agency issued a second guidance document, this one addressing Title IX in the context of single-sex schooling. Here, the OCR once again affirms that transgender students are protected by Title IX against sex-based discrimination. In addition, the guidelines recommend that self-identification be the primary factor in determining a student's placement in a single-sex setting. "All students, including transgender students and students who do not conform to sex stereotypes, are protected from sex-based discrimination under Title IX. Under Title IX, a recipient generally must treat transgender students consistent with their gender identity."<sup>61</sup> Taken together, these two guidance documents provide a powerful indication of the OCR's concerted commitment to protect transgender students from unlawful discrimination at school.<sup>62</sup>

The increased visibility of transgender youth in school settings has the potential to move the debate over single-sex education in new and important directions. Can single-sex schools rearticulate their mission in a way that does not reinforce "cis-

sexual privilege”)? How might the mission and practice of current single-sex programs be altered by the presence of transgender students in single-sex spaces? Should the ultimate goal be to ensure that single-sex programs accommodate transgender students—or to move beyond the demand that individuals sort themselves into neat gender categories in the first place? In recent years, transgender activists have brought to light the daily psychological and physical distress suffered by transgender students in the course of such routine activities as using school restrooms and attending physical education classes. Undeniably, the pressure to define oneself within the terms of the gender binary is intense for any child, regardless of whether he or she attends a single-sex or coeducational school.<sup>63</sup> However, even if participation in public single-sex programs is voluntary—as is required by law—for those students who choose to participate, this creates an additional dilemma that can be exceedingly painful, and difficult, to resist. As one recent commentator observes, “The reality is that young children do not often know they are trans and should not be put in a situation where they have to decide their sexual identity and articulate why they may not feel comfortable in their bodies or traditional sex-based roles to authority figures.”<sup>64</sup>

Clearly, we are a long way off from a world reimagined from the presumption of gender fluidity as the norm. In the more immediate term, one question we might consider is whether continued public support for single-sex public education will reinforce the idea that most children naturally fit into the categories “girls” and “boys.” Recent experience certainly suggests that the answer is yes, and at least one observer concludes that, “in a world of ever-increasing visibility of gender diversity,” single-sex schools are nothing more than a dangerous “anachronism.”<sup>65</sup>

Then again, if we look at women's colleges, we see the possibility for single-sex schools to be at the vanguard in supporting gender diversity. In the end, it all comes down to the nature of gender ideology at play in the school. And unfortunately, what we've seen in K–12 public schools should make us very worried.

#### CONCLUSION

*The Separation Solution?* examines controversies surrounding single-sex public schooling initiatives to assess how ideas about gender difference are being constructed—and reconstructed—in the age of formal legal equality. While closely examining recent debates sparked by these initiatives, *The Separation Solution?* does not offer categorical pronouncements in favor of or against this approach. However, it is my hope that the analysis presented here will prove useful in helping set a more constructive trajectory for future debate. As I have recounted in the preceding, in recent decades the emergence of single-sex public schooling initiatives has enabled the proliferation of gender ideologies rooted in sexist and racist stereotypes. This book makes the case for focusing our attention more squarely on a consideration of the particular ways gender differences are defined and engaged in single-sex public school settings.

At the same time, this analysis demonstrates the critical importance of keeping issues of racial and economic inequalities at the forefront in efforts to understand the potential benefits and harms in separating students by sex at school. While issues of gender inequity in education are serious and in urgent need of redress, we must nonetheless be careful not to obscure or deny other forms of educational injustice in the pursuit of progress on that front. When the separation of boys and girls is presented as a

panacea for all that ails the public school system, a pernicious kind of gender-scapegoating takes place—one that props up post-racial, neoliberal fantasies of fair educational opportunity by attributing the problems of public education to a simple failure to reckon with gender difference. At the same time, gender-specific initiatives are surely doomed to fail if program designs ignore the profound effects of factors like racism and poverty that contribute to educational outcomes.

In a 2014 guidance document on single-sex education, the Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights addresses at length the risk of unlawful sex-stereotyping in single-sex public schools, a clear indication that federal officials have taken notice of the work of the ACLU and others who have documented rampant gender stereotyping in single-sex public school settings.<sup>66</sup> While the OCR guidance document does not take an official stance in opposition to single-sex education, federal officials unmistakably recognize that there is a problem and are taking a hard look at the legality of existing programs.<sup>67</sup> In the coming years, these officials will have a critical role to play if there is ever to be an honest and accurate accounting of what is and isn't working when it comes to single-sex education. And as I have argued throughout, any such assessment must make allowance for the intersection of gender inequality with other forms of social injustice.

At the heart of the campaign for single-sex education is an insistence that gender matters. But how? Given the ongoing social salience of gender, it seems safe to assume, at least for the foreseeable future, that many girls and boys will continue to share the experience of gender-specific challenges and vulnerabilities, in school and in life. The fundamental question is whether gender-specific problems can be presumed to demand

gender-specific solutions. Can the differential effects of gender be acknowledged and addressed without essentializing gender differences and losing track of other drivers of social inequality? There are no easy answers here, but the analysis of single-sex public schooling initiatives presented in this book underscores the risk that interventions premised on categories of difference ultimately may reinforce the very social divisions that have enabled the maintenance of social hierarchies and attendant disadvantages in the first place.

## NOTES

### I. RETHINKING GENDER EQUALITY

1. 347 U.S. 483 (1954).
2. Minow (2010).
3. 20 U.S.C. § 1681. For more on Title IX, see Sandler (2000) and Hanson et al. (2009).
4. *United States v. Virginia*, 518 U.S. 515, 596 (1996).
5. *Newberg v. Bd. of Pub. Educ.*, 26 Pa. D. & C.3d 682 (1983).
6. See, e.g., Streitmatter (1999) and Stabiner (2002).
7. The story of the struggle to open Central High School to female students is vividly reconstructed by filmmaker Darlene Craviotto in her engaging documentary *No Girls Allowed* (2012).
8. Two of these schools trace their roots to the nineteenth century: the Philadelphia High School for Girls, and Western High School in Baltimore. The third school was Spectrum High School in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, an alternative school founded in 1982 for at-risk girls.
9. Klein (2012: 3, 14). The Department of Education puts the number much higher, counting over five thousand schools offering single-sex classes for academic instruction between 2007 and 2010. Klein (2012: 14–15) challenges the validity of this figure. See discussion in Cohen and Levit (2014: 2–3).



10. South Carolina State Department of Education, “Single Gender Initiatives,” last updated March 3, 2015, <http://ed.sc.gov/agency/se/School-Transformation/SingleGenderInitiatives.cfm>.

11. Mael et al. (2005: x–xi, xvii).

12. See, e.g., Cable and Spradlin (2008: 5); Cavous (2013); Sommers (2013c).

13. Piechura-Couture, Tichenor, and Heins (2007).

14. Table on file.

15. Email on file, sent February 22, 2011.

16. See American Civil Liberties Union (2012: 55n30).

17. In 2011, the National Association for Single Sex Public Education was renamed the National Association for Choice in Education. The organization explains that the name was changed to more “accurately describe our work of promoting single-gender education in the public sector AND the private sector AND the Catholic sector” (National Association for Choice in Education, “What Is the National Association for Choice in Education?” last visited July 22, 2015, [www.4schoolchoice.org/](http://www.4schoolchoice.org/), emphasis in the original). The original National Association for Single Sex Public Education website remains operational, and the organization reports that it receives ten thousand hits per month (National Association for Single Sex Public Education, last visited August 23, 2015, [www.singlesexschools.org](http://www.singlesexschools.org)).

18. National Association for Single Sex Public Education, “Schools,” last visited August 23, 2015, [www.singlesexschools.org/schools-schools.htm](http://www.singlesexschools.org/schools-schools.htm).

19. American Council for CoEducational Schooling, “Mission,” last visited August 24, 2015, <http://lives.clas.asu.edu/acces/mission.html>.

20. R. W. Connell defines a “gender order” as “a historically constructed pattern of power relations between men and women and definitions of femininity and masculinity” (1987: 98–99).

21. In 1992, relationship counselor John Gray published *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*. The title phrase quickly was adopted as popular shorthand for the neo-essentialist notion that in human relationships, sex differences can be constructively engaged but are never entirely overcome.

22. Butler (2004: 176).

23. Butler (2004: 176).

24. Within the legal sphere, the term *gender discrimination* has come to be used interchangeably with, and indeed, largely to have replaced, the older phrase *sex discrimination*. Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg played a pivotal role in producing the shift. As Justice Ginsburg has explained, “I owe it all to my secretary at Columbia Law School, who said, ‘I’m typing all these briefs and articles for you and the word sex, sex, sex is on every page. . . . Don’t you know that those nine men (on the Supreme Court)—they hear that word, and their first association is not the way you want them to be thinking? Why don’t you use the word gender? It is a grammatical term and it will ward off distracting associations.’” (Quoted in Crocker [1993].)

25. Epstein (2007: 29).

26. While less overtly sexually charged, the term *gender* has proven controversial as well. Notably, in the late 1990s the Vatican declared its opposition to use of the term *gender* on the grounds that it was merely a code word for homosexuality. See Butler (2004: 184–186).

27. See Gurian (2002); Sax (2005a); James (2007); Gurian et al. (2009); Gurian and Stevens (2011). The popular neuroscience literature draws heavily on the authority of works such as Moir and Jessel (1989); Blum (1998); and Baron-Cohen (2003).

28. See Cohen (2009); Halpern et al. (2011); Eliot (2011); and Rivers and Barnett (2011).

29. Weil (2008: 38).

30. This phrase is drawn from the subtitle of Sax (2005a).

31. Gurian Institute, “Training for Brain-Based Teaching—with a Gender Focus,” last visited on July 22, 2015, <http://gurianinstitute.com/professional-development/>.

32. See generally McRobbie (2009); McRobbie (2011).

33. See W. Williams (1982: 15–34, 17).

34. Minow (1991).

35. Scott (1988: 48).

36. Scott (1988: 48).

37. As legal scholar Joan C. Williams has remarked, the facile conclusion that “sameness feminism has been discredited because ‘women and men obviously are not the same’” remains “widespread” (1991: 310).

38. See Mead (2006) and Rivers and Barnett (2006).

39. Among U.S. students, racial and income achievement gaps are significantly greater than the gender achievement gap. See Mead (2006: 9). See Reardon (2011) for a useful overview and assessment of achievement gaps among U.S. students. Based on an analysis of national education data in England, Strand (2014) offers one of the few studies that adopts an intersectional analysis in seeking to understand the interaction among factors such as race, class, and gender in producing educational achievement gaps.

40. See J.A. Williams (2010).

41. Weaver-Hightower (2009: 1).

42. See Faludi (1991).

43. This is not to suggest that all commentators raising concerns about the social development and educational experiences of boys in this period approach the subject from an antifeminist perspective. Indeed, some of the scholars who have done the most to draw attention to the contemporary challenges facing boys acknowledge a significant intellectual debt to feminist thought for its foundational contributions to the field of masculinities studies. See, e.g., Kimmel (2000) and Dowd (2010).

44. Leonard Sax, “Why Gender Matters,” last visited August 24, 2015, [www.boysadrift.com/gender.php](http://www.boysadrift.com/gender.php).

45. Brooks (2012).

46. The term *second wave* typically is used to designate the period of feminist activism initiated in the early 1960s and understood to have ended in the early 1980s with the failure to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment. However, this common periodization has been subject to compelling criticism. Considered broadly, the “wave” metaphor denies the continuity of women’s activism throughout U.S. history. See Taylor et al. (2001). Regarding the definition of the second wave in particular, Thompson (2002) demonstrates that standard narratives of the period privilege the standpoint of white feminists. Evaluating post-1960s feminist activism from the standpoint of women of color challenges the standard narrative by extending the arc of the second wave through the 1980s and centering it on the emergence of “multiracial feminism.”

47. Senator Danforth’s proposal would have amended the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Pub.L. 89–10, 79 Stat. 2720 U.S.C. ch. 70.

48. Salomone (2003: 139–140).

49. *United States v. Virginia* (1996: 752).

50. A U.S. Department of Education study, *Early Implementation of Public Single-Sex Schools: Perceptions and Characteristics*, reports that “survey and observational studies found that public single-sex schools served primarily nonwhite, high-poverty students in urban areas” (2009: xv). See also V. Williams (2004: 1526).

51. For a useful overview of intersectional scholarship in the social sciences, see McCall (2005).

52. McCall (2005: 1771).

53. See Crenshaw (1989) and Crenshaw (1991). While Crenshaw is credited with coining the term *intersectionality*, the concept is traceable to important writings published by women-of-color feminists in the preceding two decades. Among Crenshaw’s most important contributions has been to draw attention to the legal realm as a pivotal site for intersectional analysis. Given the extraordinary generativity of Crenshaw’s writings, it seems not only ungenerous but also patently inaccurate to dismiss Crenshaw—as at least one prominent commentator has done—as a merely derivative thinker who “recycles Black feminism without demonstrating what new tools it brings to Black feminism to help it fashion a more complex theory of identity” (Nash 2008: 109).

54. Cho et al. (2013: 790–791).

55. Crenshaw (1989: 140).

56. Crenshaw (1989: 140).

57. Crenshaw (1989: 140).

58. Crenshaw (1989: 163).

59. Crenshaw (1991: 1262).

60. Crenshaw draws particular attention to the way “women of color can be erased by the strategic silences of antiracism and feminism” (1991: 1263).

61. King (1988: 42–72).

62. King (1988: 52–53).

63. See, e.g., Cohen (1999); Hawkesworth (2003); and Strolovich (2007).

64. Cho et al. (2013: 795).

65. Cho et al. (2013: 797).

66. Hancock (2007: 65).

67. See Brown (1995) for a now-classic analysis of the perils of tethering liberatory politics to demands for state recognition.

68. Framing analysis has its roots in the pioneering work of sociologist Erving Goffman (1974). Particularly useful for the present study has been the extensive body of research on framing in the context of social movement mobilization. See, e.g., Gamson and Modigliani (1989); Benford and Snow (2000); Binder (2002); Tarrow (2005); Strolovich (2007); and Small et al. (2010).

## 2. SINGLE-SEX EDUCATION IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

1. Donsky (2003).

2. Lewin (2000: B28).

3. Salomone (2003: 7).

4. Tyack and Hansot (1990: 5); Woody (1929b: 225). It is a telling indicator of the deeply rooted nature of coeducation that at least one well-known account of public schooling in the United States contains not a single mention of single-sex education. See Reese (2005).

5. Tyack and Hansot (1990: 12).

6. Woody (1929b: 228).

7. Tyack and Hansot (1990: 15).

8. Tyack and Hansot (1990).

9. Cott (1977: 102).

10. Cott (1977: 103).

11. Rush ([1787] 1981).

12. Rush ([1787] 1981: 176).

13. Cott (1977: 105).

14. V. Williams (2004) reminds us that the doctrine of separate spheres was not understood to apply in the case of enslaved women, who toiled alongside men in the fields and elsewhere.

15. Woody (1929b: 225).
16. Tyack and Hansot (1990: 46).
17. Tocqueville (1969: 602).
18. Woody (1929b: 225).
19. Tyack and Hansot (1990: 58).
20. Cott (1977: 113).
21. Cott (1977: 115).
22. Cott (1977: 116).
23. Cott (1977: 118).
24. Sarah Pierce quoted in Cott (1977: 119).
25. Tyack and Hansot (1990: 5).
26. Woody (1929b: 255); Tyack and Hansot (1990: 50). Note that enslaved people were denied access to formal education altogether. When public, or “common,” schools for Black students were established during Reconstruction, these schools generally were coeducational (Tyack and Hansot [1990: 54]).
27. Tyack and Hansot (1990: 78–79).
28. Tyack and Hansot (1990: 92).
29. Tyack and Hansot (1990: 92).
30. Tyack and Hansot (1990: 101). This observation is echoed by historian Thomas Woody: “In view of the great skepticism [in the late eighteenth century] about women’s ability to do college work, it is proper to note here that those who had experience with coeducation reported almost without exception to the contrary” (1929b: 272).
31. Woody 1929b: 274).
32. Clarke quoted by Higginson in Howe (1874: 43).
33. Trecker (1974).
34. Smith-Rosenberg and Rosenberg (1973).
35. Clarke (1873: 34).
36. Clarke (1873: 5).
37. Clarke (1873: 150). See also Tyack and Hansot (1990: 150).
38. See Brown (1990: 497).
39. Trecker (1990: 359–362).
40. Brown (1990: 497).
41. Howe (1874).
42. Woody (1929b: 227).

43. *Majority and Minority Reports of the Special Committee on the Subject of Co-Education of the Sexes* (1890: 14).

44. Tyack and Hansot (1990: 104).

45. Harris quoted in Tyack and Hansot (1990: 102), emphasis in the original.

46. Tyack and Hansot (1990: 157–158, 162).

47. Brown (1990: 496).

48. Brown (1990: 496).

49. Brown (1990: 498).

50. Tyack and Hansot (1990).

51. For a more extended discussion, see V. Williams (2004: 59–65).

52. Mayeri (2006: 191).

53. See Mayeri (2006).

54. Mayeri (2006: 200).

55. Mayeri traces the term *Jane Crow* to women's rights activist and civil rights lawyer Pauli Murray (2006: 188n3).

56. Mayeri (2006: 189).

57. Mayeri (2006: 188).

58. Mayeri (2006: 218).

59. Mayeri (2006: 218).

60. Mayeri (2006: 267).

61. Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, 20 U.S.C. § 1681 (a) (2006).

62. See *United States v. Hinds County School Board*, 560 F.2d 619 (5th Cir. 1977).

63. *Vorchheimer v. School Dist. of Philadelphia*, 532 F.2d 880, 881 (3d Cir. 1976).

64. National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983).

65. National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983).

### 3. “WE’VE GOT TO TRY SOMETHING”

1. Salomone (2003: 131).

2. Quotes selected from back cover of paperback edition.

3. Salomone (2003: 8, 131).

4. Salomone (2003: 130).

5. Salomone (2003: 130).

6. Salomone (2003: 131).

7. See V. Williams (2004: 21–23).

8. See, e.g., Gross (1991); Dunkel (1991). Reflecting on this period, political scientist Cathy Cohen suggests that “any insistence by group members that the lived experience of young Black women also be recognized as part of the larger community narrative of racial discrimination and struggle is portrayed as denying the more dire position of young Black men” (1999: 12).

9. See, e.g., Wright (1991–1992).

10. See Butler (2013) for an insightful discussion of the “troubling metaphor” of Black men as an endangered species. Butler traces the first explicit use of the phrase to a 1983 special issue of *Ebony* magazine titled “The Crisis of the Black Male.” As Butler observes, the rhetoric of “endangered species” reinforces dehumanizing racist stereotypes of Black people as closer to nature or somehow less-evolved than people of European descent. In an important study, Goff et al. (2008) demonstrate the “subtle persistence” of implicit associations between Blacks and apes in U.S. society, thereby underscoring the importance in the present moment of addressing the complicity of phrases like “endangered species” in perpetuating, however inadvertently, ideologies of white supremacy.

11. Moynihan (1981: 47).

12. Moynihan (1981: 5).

13. Moynihan (1981: 29).

14. Moynihan (1981: 29).

15. Moynihan (1981: 29).

16. Pascoe (1996: 68). See also Omi and Winant (1986) and Gilroy (1993).

17. Pascoe (1996: 68).

18. Moynihan (1981: 16).

19. See Rainwater and Yancey (1967).

20. Crenshaw (1991): 1254n42. There have been prominent exceptions. For example, scholar and activist Angela Davis gestures with palpable consternation at the central thesis of the Moynihan Report, which attributes the oppression of Black people to something “deeper



than the racial discrimination that produced unemployment, shoddy housing, inadequate education and substandard medical care. The root of oppression was described as a ‘tangle of pathology’ created by the absence of male authority among Black people!” (1983: 13).

21. Aptheker (1982: 133). See also Mayeri (2011: 42–43). In her now-classic essay “Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference,” writer and activist Audre Lorde observes that “the necessity for and history of shared battle have made us, Black women, particularly vulnerable to the false accusation that anti-sexist is anti-Black” (1984: 120).

22. King (1988: 55).

23. Noguera (1996: 221).

24. Noguera (1996: 221). Similarly, in her landmark study of Black boys in school, sociologist Ann Ferguson remarks that the common characterization of Black males as an endangered species “has largely emanated from African American social scientists and journalists who are deeply concerned about the criminalization and high mortality rate among African American youth.” See Ferguson (2000: 78).

25. Raspberry (1987: A11).

26. Raspberry (1987: A11).

27. Raspberry (1987: A11).

28. Raspberry (1987: A11).

29. For a recent critique of “role model discourse,” see Maylor (2009), who argues that this discourse rests on the simplistic assumption that a shared racial or ethnic background is sufficient to establish that an adult will be an effective and willing mentor to a student in need. Martino (2008) contends that male role model discourse emanates from recurrent anxieties about the feminization of schooling. Brockenbrough (2012) provides an insightful analysis of the many dilemmas facing Black men who are recruited to serve as “father figures” for boys in school settings, including the expectation that they will play the role of the strict disciplinarian while simultaneously providing intensive emotional support (368).

30. Holland quoted in Wilkerson (1991).

31. Berns (1991).

32. Dickerson (1991).

33. See, e.g., Noguera (1996).

34. See, e.g., Sanchez (1990); Cooper (1990).

35. Dickerson (1991). See also Sanchez (1990); and Cooper (1990).

36. Wright (1991–1992: 15).

37. Wright (1991–1992: 15).

38. Wright (1991–1992: 15).

39. Wright (1991–1992: 16).

40. Salomone (2003: 221).

41. Salomone (2003: 222).

42. Raspberry (1989).

43. Raspberry (1989).

44. Holland (1989).

45. For a rare account of local dissent, see Walters (1991a).

46. See Epstein (2007: 30–52) for an illuminating exploration of the “histories of the human subject” in the United States. Epstein discloses the long history of medical and social experimentation on vulnerable subject populations, a history that is easily obscured amid more recent demands for more “inclusive” research practices.

47. Raspberry (1987: A11).

48. Binder’s (2002) definitive account of the Afrocentric school reform movement during this period includes no mention of efforts to implement sex segregation as a component of these initiatives.

49. I am grateful to sociologist Amy Binder for generously sharing transcripts from interviews she conducted for her pathbreaking study of education reform politics, *Contentious Curricula: Afrocentrism and Creationism in American Public Schools*. In a 1995 interview, Virginia Sanchez Korrol, professor and chair of Puerto Rican Studies at Brooklyn College, argued that critics trivialized the demand for more inclusive curricula by suggesting the campaign rested solely on a “feel-good rationale.” In her assessment, the primary goal was to “incorporate new knowledge into what we are teaching nowadays.” Interview transcript on file.

50. Daley (1990: A1).

51. See note 49.

52. Binder (2002: 54).

53. Innerst (1990: A1); Daley (1990: A1); Yoshikawa-Cogley (1991); Rodriguez (1991); Hotakainen (1992).

54. See, e.g., Leake and Leake (1992: 25).

55. Leake and Leake (1992: 26).
56. Leake and Leake (1992: 25).
57. Leake and Leake (1992: 26, 27).
58. Bryant (1991: A6).
59. Leake and Leake (1992: 24–25).
60. Leake and Leake (1992: 26, 25).
61. Leake and Leake (1992: 27).
62. Goodman (1991). See also Walters (1991b).
63. Goodman (1991).
64. Goodman (1991).
65. Watson and Smitherman (1996: 39), quoting Detroit Public Schools' *Male Academy Task Force Report* (1991).
66. *Garrett v. Board of Education of the School District of the City of Detroit*, 775 F. Supp. 1004 (1991), at 1006.
67. *Garrett*, 775 F. Supp. at 1006.
68. Watson and Smitherman (1996: 55).
69. Goodman (1991).
70. See, e.g., Moss (1991); Wilkerson (1991).
71. Wilkerson (1991).
72. Wilkerson (1991).
73. V. Williams (2004: 17–18).
74. Race discrimination was not at issue in the legal case. Although the Detroit academies had been established specifically to serve Black male students, admission technically was open to students of all races. Of course, given that over 90 percent of students in the Detroit public school system at the time were Black, an overwhelmingly Black student body was assured even without a racially specific admissions policy in effect (Goodman [1991]).
75. *Garrett*, 775 F. Supp. at 1007.
76. See *Mississippi v. Hogan* (1982).
77. *Garrett*, 775 F. Supp. at 1007.
78. *Garrett*, 775 F. Supp. at 1007.
79. See, e.g., Kelly (1991); Walters (1991a).
80. Walters (1991b).
81. Walters (1991b).
82. Dickerson (1991).

83. I am indebted to Verna Williams for drawing my attention to this *Nightline* episode. See her discussion in V. Williams (2004).

84. *Nightline* transcript, “Detroit Black ‘Male Academies’ Rule Unfair,” originally aired August 15, 1991, 1.

85. *Nightline* transcript, 4. Neuborne makes a similar point in an op-ed piece published two weeks later, titled “Girls Are Drowning, Too,” in which she argues that the Detroit plan would “throw a life preserver to boys and leave girls to fend for themselves.”

86. *Nightline* transcript, 9.

87. Crenshaw (1991: 1241–1299).

88. Crenshaw (1991: 1252).

89. Crenshaw (1991: 1252).

90. Carbado (1999: 7). See also Wilkerson (1991).

91. Cohen (1999: 12).

92. Sherwin (2005: 76).

93. Crenshaw (1989: 154).

94. See J. Williams (2014).

95. Raum (1991).

96. Raum (1991). President Bush’s comments put him awkwardly at odds with his secretary of education, Lamar Alexander. At a press briefing convened shortly after the *Garrett* decision was announced, Secretary Alexander had proclaimed his support for the decision, stating that “*Brown vs. Board of Education* is very simple and to the point. It says segregated schools are inherently unequal.” See Henry (1991b).

97. Henry (1991b).

98. Henry (1991b).

99. Salomone (2003: 130).

100. Salomone (2003: 138).

101. Adler (1991).

102. *New York Times* (1992).

103. *New York Times* (1992).

#### 4. WHAT ABOUT THE GIRLS?

1. Salomone (2013: 977).

2. Faludi (1991: 2).

3. For an especially nuanced account of backlash thinking in a more recent period, see Brake (2013).

4. Danforth's proposal would have amended the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Pub.L. 89–10, 79 Stat. 2720 U.S.C. ch. 70.

5. 140 Cong. Rec. S10 (daily ed. Aug. 1, 1994).

6. 140 Cong. Rec. S10, 170 (daily ed. Aug. 1, 1994).

7. Poor (1994).

8. Thorne (1993) played an important role in drawing scholarly attention to the way traditional gender roles are reproduced and reinforced in coeducational school settings.

9. The study *How Schools Shortchange Girls* was preceded by an earlier AAUW report, *Shortchanging Girls, Shortchanging America* (1991). In 1994, Mary Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* was published, and it spent twenty-six weeks in the number one position on the *New York Times* bestseller list. Peggy Orenstein's *Schoolgirls: Young Women, Self-Esteem, and the Confidence Gap*, also published in 1994, addressed similar themes and helped stoke popular concern about young women's social, emotional, and educational well-being.

10. American Association of University Women (1992: 3).

11. American Association of University Women (1992: 3).

12. American Association of University Women (1992: 3).

13. Sadker and Sadker (1994: ix–x, 3).

14. Sadker and Sadker (1994: ix).

15. Winegar (1994).

16. American Association of University Women (1992: 147–154).

17. Sadker and Sadker (1994: 233).

18. Sadker and Sadker (1994: 241).

19. See, e.g., Couloumbis (1994).

20. See, e.g., Riordan (1985); Lee and Bryk (1986); and Riordan (1990).

21. See, e.g., Riordan (1994).

22. Riordan (1998: 54).

23. Riordan (1994).

24. Riordan (1998: 53–54).

25. See, e.g., Merl (1992); Holding (1993); Sacks (1994); Winegar (1994); Couloumbis (1994).

26. Hartocollis (1998).
27. The Young Women's Leadership Network, "Who We Are," last accessed August 19, 2015, [www.ywln.org/history](http://www.ywln.org/history).
28. Hartocollis (1996).
29. Justice Clarence Thomas, whose son was a student at the Virginia Military Institute at the time, recused himself from the case.
30. *United States v. Virginia*, 518 U.S. 515, 596 (1996: 520).
31. *U.S. v. VMI* (1996: 533).
32. *U.S. v. VMI* (1996: 550). On the constitutional anti-stereotyping principle, see Case (1999); Vojdik (2005a); Cohen (2009); and Franklin (2010).
33. *U.S. v. VMI* (1996: 533).
34. *U.S. v. VMI* (1996: 533).
35. Hartocollis (1996).
36. Steinberg (1996).
37. Goodman (1996).
38. Steinberg (1997).
39. Edelman (1998).
40. Hickox (1996).
41. Lewis (1996).
42. California State of the State Address, January 8, 1996.
43. Lewis (1996).
44. J. Manuel Herrera, Ravenswood City School District trustee, quoted in Bazeley (1997).
45. California Education Code, section 58520–5852.
46. California Education Code, section 58520–58524.
47. Quoted in Datnow, Hubbard, and Woody (2001: 23).
48. Datnow, Hubbard, and Woody (2001: 62). See also Herr and Arms (2002, 2004).
49. Datnow, Hubbard, and Woody (2001: 24).
50. Datnow, Hubbard, and Woody (2001: 6).
51. Datnow, Hubbard, and Woody (2001: 6).
52. Datnow, Hubbard, and Woody (2001: 7).
53. Datnow, Hubbard, and Woody (2001: 7).
54. Datnow, Hubbard, and Woody (2001: 40–41).
55. Datnow, Hubbard, and Woody (2001: 41).

56. Asimov (1997).
57. Datnow, Hubbard, and Woody (2001: 74).
58. Salomone (2004: 70). See also Bigler and Eliot (2011) for a discussion of conflicting feminist perspectives on single-sex education.
59. Salomone (2004: 79).
60. Salomone (2004: 65).
61. Salomone (2004: 93). Salomone (2013) offers a similar portrait of feminist opposition since early in the first decade of the twenty-first century.
62. Salomone (2004: 70).
63. Mann (1996).
64. American Association of University Women (1998).
65. American Association of University Women (1998: 6).
66. Haag (1998: 14).
67. Haag (1998: 34).
68. Campbell and Wahl (1998: 63).
69. Goodman (1996).
70. Sherwin (2005: 78).
71. Kaminer (1998).
72. Sadker and Sadker (1994: 15).
73. Winegar (1994).
74. Mayeri (2011) provides a brilliant reconstruction of the vicissitudes of the “race-sex” analogy in U.S. law and society, focusing on the civil rights era and demonstrating how the analogy has at times pushed the courts toward more expansive understandings of antidiscrimination law in both arenas, while at other times advocates have emphasized the discreteness of these categories by way of moving beyond prevailing doctrine. Mayeri stresses the tactical nature of decisions to invoke or disavow analogical thinking. However, since the 1980s, analogical thinking has been regarded with heightened suspicion owing to its potential to obscure and misapprehend the distinctive experiences of multiply marginalized subjects, paradigmatically articulated in Crenshaw’s analyses of Black women’s precarious legal subjectivity. See Hull, Scott, and Smith (1982), and hooks (1982).
75. Salomone (2013: 977).

76. Salomone (2013: 981).
77. Salomone (2013: 980).

5. SINGLE-SEX EDUCATION AND THE POPULAR  
NEUROSCIENCE OF SEX DIFFERENCE

1. No Child Left Behind Act (2002).
2. No Child Left Behind Act (2002): 5131(a)(23).
3. 147 Congressional Record S5944 (daily ed. June 7, 2001), (statement of Sen. Collins).
4. Statement of Sen. Collins, S5943.
5. See, e.g., Cobb (2002).
6. See the discussion of choice discourse in Levit (2005).
7. Statement of Sen. Clinton, S5943.
8. Statement of Sen. Collins, S5944.
9. Statement of Sen. Hutchison, S5945.
10. Statement of Sen. Clinton, S5944.
11. *States News Service* (2002).
12. “Nondiscrimination on the Basis of Sex in Education Programs or Activities Receiving Federal Financial Assistance,” 67 Fed. Reg. 31098 (May 8, 2002).
13. Will (2002).
14. Will (2002).
15. See, e.g., Snyder (2002); Feller (2004).
16. Mendez (2004).
17. Austin (2004).
18. See discussion in Sherwin (2005).
19. *Associated Press State & Local Wire* (2003).
20. Jost (2002: 572). News reports at the time present conflicting numbers. Roth (2002) reports that there were ten single-sex public schools in 2002, but the count is put at twelve elsewhere. See, e.g., Hotakainen (2002); Markley (2002); Snyder (2002).
21. Weiss (2002).
22. The organization dropped “the Advancement of” from its name in June 2002, claiming the longer title “seemed cumbersome.” National



Association for Choice in Education, “History,” last accessed August 21, 2015, [www.4schoolchoice.org/](http://www.4schoolchoice.org/).

23. Weiss (2002).

24. Weiss (2002).

25. See, e.g., Lee and Nichols (2002).

26. Lee and Nichols (2002).

27. Donsky (2003). See also Shah (2005).

28. Howell (2005) and Elliot (2005). See also Snyder (2005); Goff (2005); and Marshall (2010).

29. Sax (2005b: 14).

30. Sax (2005a: 26). Sax’s sentiments are echoed by author Michael Gurian, who similarly declares, “We have discovered that feminist theory is able to take into account neither the hard sciences, like neurobiology, nor the sheer variety of emotional, moral, and spiritual needs girls have. Girls’ lives are far more about the four-million-year human history than they are about the few decades, or even centuries, of social life feminism helps us understand” (2002: 23).

31. Sax (2005b: 9). Sax dedicates his book to David Reimer, whose case was overseen by John Money following a circumcision accident that destroyed Reimer’s penis. Money persuaded Reimer’s parents to raise the child as a girl, and for many years Money used the example of Reimer as proof of his theory that gender identity is predominantly learned. Later it was revealed that Reimer was a deeply troubled youth who went on to assume a male identity at age fifteen. Reimer later committed suicide.

32. Sax (2005b: 9).

33. Sax (2005b: 7).

34. Sax (2005b: 28).

35. Sax (2005b: 90).

36. Sax (2005b: 92).

37. Sax (2006: 192).

38. Sax (2005b: 106).

39. Sax (2005b: 107).

40. Gurian Institute, “Training for Brain-Based Teaching—with a Gender Focus,” last accessed August 21, 2015, <http://gurianinstitute.com/professional-development/>.

41. Gurian, Stevens and Daniels (2009: 24–25).

42. Gurian, Stevens and Daniels (2009: 24).
43. Gurian, Stevens and Daniels (2009: 25–26).
44. Sax (2005a: 106). See, e.g., Hyde (2005); Eliot (2009, 2011); Fine (2010); Halpern et al. (2011). On his *Language Log* blog, linguistics professor Mark Lieberman of the University of Pennsylvania has challenged several of Leonard Sax’s “science-based arguments.” In *Brain Storm* (2010), sociomedical researcher Rebecca Jordan-Young provides an exceptionally rigorous analysis of the neuroscience of sex and sexuality, documenting fundamental flaws in published studies as well as demonstrating how existing research has been misinterpreted within research communities and in popular reporting on these findings.
45. Sax (2005a: 34).
46. Eliot (2011: 366).
47. Sax (2006: 195).
48. Eliot (2011: 3).
49. Eliot (2011: 14).
50. The role of the news media in mediating the public’s understanding of science is helpfully examined in Nelkin (1987) and Saguy and Almeling (2008).
51. Weisberg et al. (2008: 475).
52. Not all commentators who have addressed the challenges facing boys in school attribute their difficulties to neurological or other biological causes. See, e.g., Pollack (1998) and Kindlon and Thomson (2000). My point in the following is in no way intended to deny the possibility of significant developmental differences on average between girls and boys. Instead, my interest is in disclosing the way claims concerning developmental differences have been invoked to justify gender-differentiated pedagogies and practices that prove problematic, not because they assert that sex differences exist, but because of the particular account of these differences upon which these interventions rely.
53. Kimmel (2006: 198). See also Robinson (2000).
54. For an insightful appraisal of the “angry white men” phenomenon generally and its basis in a sense of “aggrieved entitlement” constitutive of contemporary masculinities, see Kimmel (2013).
55. The return to prominence of “boy crisis” discourse is not an exclusively U.S.-based phenomenon. For an illuminating discussion of

the “boy-turn” in Great Britain and Australia, see Mills et al. (2009). While highlighting significant differences in each national context, the authors find a shared “underpinning” in “an anti-feminist politics that works toward undermining girls’ educational experiences by constructing them as undeserving of their achievements (2009: 36). See also Epstein et al. (1998).

56. In the original edition of *The War against Boys*, Sommers charged that damaging “misinformation” about boys has been propagated by “girl-partisan books, pamphlets, and research popularized by women’s groups and feminist scholars (1998: 14). In 2013, an updated and revised edition of the book was issued with a new subtitle: instead of *How Misguided Feminism Is Harming Our Young Men*, it now reads: *How Misguided Policies Are Harming Our Young Men*. Sommers explains that the change reflects a shift in focus from the “culture wars” of the late 1990s to an investigation of “boy-averse” policies ranging from zero-tolerance discipline to shortened recess periods (2013c).

57. Goldberg (1998).

58. Wermers (2004).

59. “The Gender Gap: Boys Lagging,” *60 Minutes*, CBS, October 31, 2002, online transcript, last accessed September 14, 2015, [www.cbsnews.com/news/the-gender-gap-boys-lagging/](http://www.cbsnews.com/news/the-gender-gap-boys-lagging/).

60. *USA Today* (2002: 10A).

61. *States News Service* (2004).

62. *States News Service* (2004).

63. Mendez (2004).

64. Kunkle (2005).

65. Toppo (2004).

66. Mael et al. (2005: ix). Signorella et al. (2013: 438) make the case that the methodology of Mael et al. was “seriously flawed in many ways,” creating an exaggerated impression of the benefits of single-sex approaches. In particular, Signorella et al. found that the original study presented an inflated impression of the scope of independent findings because, in many cases, the authors relied on several different articles produced by the same author. After reexamining the same data with closer consideration given to control variables reported in

many of the studies, Signorella et al. concluded that evidence of an advantage for students in single-sex classes largely could be explained by the fact that “students enrolled in single-sex schools came from higher SES families and had higher levels of prior academic achievement than students enrolled in comparison mixed-sex schools.”

67. Mael et al. (2005: ix).

68. Mael et al. (2005: xv).

69. See Jenkins (2005–2006) for a particularly thorough and thoughtful analysis of the constitutional questions at stake, as well as for an elaboration of an alternative approach, one that would allow for single-sex public schooling initiatives while imposing more serious protections against the risk of sex discrimination.

70. Yen (2006).

71. Feller (2006).

72. See American Civil Liberties Union (2012: 10).

73. Adcox (2007).

74. Chadwell quoted in Weil (2008: 42–43).

75. Weil (2008: 43).

76. *USA Today* (2008).

77. Khan (2009).

78. In an article that appeared shortly after the publication of *Why Gender Matters*, Sax presents a number of “best practices” for teachers derived from his assessment of “the emerging science of sex differences” (2006: 190). Sax instructs that “girls are born with a sense of hearing significantly more sensitive than boys’,” and so he encourages teachers to consider speaking more loudly to boys, especially those who appear to be “slow learners” (2006: 191). In addition, Sax reports that “the ideal ambient temperature for boys is about 69°F, and about 75° for young women” (2006: 193–194).

79. Mendez (2004).

80. Mendez (2004).

81. Chandler and Glod (2008).

82. American Civil Liberties Union (2012: 18).

83. American Civil Liberties Union (2012: 21).

84. American Civil Liberties Union (2012: 43).

85. Hahn (2009).
86. American Civil Liberties Union (2012).
87. American Civil Liberties Union (2012: 3).
88. See, e.g., Feller (2006); Ghezzi (2006); Stickney (2006). Cohen (2009) observes that Sax's "statements about breaking down stereotypes are inevitably followed by or appear at the end of a long discussion of the stereotypes discussed," an irony Sax ignores (153).
89. Sax quoted in Burney (2004). See also Rossi (2004).
90. Kunkle (2005).
91. Snyder (2005). See also Howell (2005); Parker (2005); Ghezzi (2006).
92. See, e.g., Stephens (2005); Sebastian (2005).
93. Howell (2005).
94. Fernandez (2006).
95. Fennell (2007).
96. Gollub (2006).
97. Fabes et al. (2013: 3). See also Datnow, Hubbard, and Woody (2001) and Herr and Arms (2004).
98. Fabes et al. (2013: 1). See also Bigler and Liben (2006, 2007) for the elaboration of a Developmental Intergroup Theory frame suggesting that "when gender gains psychological salience among children, gender biases and stereotypes are more likely to develop." See also Pahlke, Hyde, and Allison (2014: 2).
99. Pahlke, Bigler, and Patterson (2014, 268). In an earlier study of secondary school environments, Lee et al. (1994) found evidence of sexism in all three settings they observed: boys' schools, girls' schools, and coeducational schools. While sexism was a constant, the researchers found interesting differences in the "forms of sexism" prevalent in each setting. While they found the sexism in the boys-only schools to be the most severe, they observed a "pernicious" tendency in all-girls environments to encourage "academic dependence and nonrigorous instruction" (92).
100. Salomone (2004: 93). For an insightful overview of feminist critiques of biological essentialism, see Rhode (1990).
101. Cable and Spradlin (2008: 4).

102. Salomone quoted in Weil (2008: 41). In the same article, Ann Rubenstein Tisch quips, “Nobody is planning the days of our girls around a photograph of a brain.”

103. 34 C.F.R. Part 106.34 (b)(iv)(4).

104. Rossi (2006).

105. See, e.g., Kissell (2005: B1); Aguilar (2005: B1); Sebastian (2005: 1B); Tareen (2006); *USA Today* (2006b).

106. See, e.g., Kunkle (2005: B1); Kissell (2005); Aguilar (2005: B1); Sebastian (2005); Tareen (2006).

107. This dynamic has been closely analyzed in the British case of the “boy turn” and the emergence of a “poor boys” discourse. See, e.g., Epstein et al. (1998).

108. See also J. Williams (2013).

109. I do not mean to suggest that the politics of visibility have been entirely overlooked. For example, in her innovative study of gender politics in the United States Congress, political scientist Mary Hawkesworth (2003) offers an especially insightful account of the marginalization of women of color who serve in that body. Hawkesworth identifies several ways in which women of color are “silenced,” but she also addresses tactics including “tokenism,” “stereotyping,” and “patronizing” that operate through flawed gestures of representation rather than simple erasure.

110. Tyre (2008: 44–45).

111. *USA Today* (2006a).

112. *USA Today* (2006a).

113. See Collins (2005).

114. For example, Toppo (2002); Lee and Nichols (2002); Donsky (2003); Leichman (2003); Simon (2004); Rossi (2004); Mendez (2004); Austin (2004); Shah (2005); and Snyder (2002).

115. Salomone (2013: 1007).

116. Uhlenhuth (2002).

117. Feller (2004).

118. Woodall (2006).

119. Bustamante (2006); Farrell (2007); Unmuth (2011); Chandler (2011); Sax (2012).

120. Unmuth (2011).

121. See Kalsem and Williams (2010) for a revealing discussion of the origins and contemporary uses of the term *social justice*.

122. See J. Williams (2014).

123. Zinn and Dill (1996).

124. Zinn and Dill (1996: 323).

125. Zinn and Dill (1996: 322).

126. Pahlke, Hyde, and Allison (2014: 24).

127. See also Bracey (2006); Hayes, Pahlke, and Bigler (2010).

128. Hayes, Pahlke, and Bigler (2010).

129. Hayes, Pahlke, and Bigler (2010).

130. See Noguera (2012). Several years ago, researchers in New York City set out to understand why a disproportionately high number of Black and Latino males drop out of the city's public high schools before graduation. The researchers encountered many schools with distressingly low graduation rates for at-risk students, but they unexpectedly came across nearly twenty local high schools where students consistently were beating the odds and earning their diplomas. What did the successful schools have in common that distinguished them from the rest? The researchers found that "strong, positive relationships between teachers and students are critical ingredients of their success. Equally important is the need to provide a personalized learning environment with mentors, counseling, and other supports that make it possible for schools to intervene early and effectively when problems arise.... These are safe schools where student feel as though they can be themselves, where the peer culture reinforces the value of learning, and where character, ethics, and moral development are far more important than rigid discipline policies." As it happens, some of the successful schools in the study were all-male, and other were coeducational. Nonetheless, there is an obvious temptation to attribute the success of a single-sex program to gender exclusivity, perhaps because this may be the most conspicuous point of distinction, even if there is no direct evidence to establish that it is in fact the decisive one.

131. This is not to say that all evidence favorable suffers from methodological sloppiness. Particularly notable in this regard is the rigorous research done by respected education scholar Linda Sax. Sax has

analyzed national survey data from first-year college students, comparing the responses of women who attended single-sex high schools to those who attended coeducational high schools. Acknowledging the limited ability to “draw unilateral conclusions” based on this data, Sax suggests that “while the benefits of single-sex education are fairly small, they tend to be in areas that have historically favored men and therefore represent a potentially effective vehicle for mitigating long-standing gender gaps” (2009: 11).

132. See discussion in Cohen and Levit (2014: 248–283).

## 6. DIFFERENT BUT EQUAL?

1. See, e.g., Hasday (2002); V. Williams (2004); Mayeri (2006).
2. V. Williams (2004: 68).
3. V. Williams (2004: 19–20).
4. Fergus and Noguera (2010: 9).
5. Terry et al. (2013: 4).
6. Terry et al. (2013: 2).
7. DuBois (1935: 328–329).
8. DuBois (1935: 335).
9. DuBois (1935: 333).

10. Other researchers similarly sideline the question of the justification for separating the sexes in the context of programs designed for disadvantaged youth of color. For example, Mitchell and Stewart (2013) argue that Critical Race Theory provides a “theoretical framework” to support programs designed for African American males. But while this study considers in detail the basis for providing race-specific programming, the logic behind separating African American boys and girls for the purposes of instruction is nowhere elaborated.

11. Terry et al. (2013: 25).

12. Office of the White House, Presidential Memorandum, 2014, “Creating and Expanding Ladders of Opportunity for Boys and Young Men of Color,” 79 *Federal Register*, no. 45, Washington, DC.

13. Participating school districts have committed to a roster of shared goals, including the creation of early-education initiatives to put “minority boys” on track for high school success; the development



of retention initiatives to address high rates of dropout and discipline problems among “males of color”; support for curricular reforms that “address the academic, social, and cultural needs of males of color”; and working to “spearhead a broader discussion about race, language, and culture in the districts.” Superville (2014).

14. Office of the Press Secretary, the White House. “FACT SHEET: President Obama Applauds New Commitments in Support of the My Brother’s Keeper Initiative,” July 21, 2014, [www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/07/21/fact-sheet-president-obama-applauds-new-commitments-support-my-brother-s](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/07/21/fact-sheet-president-obama-applauds-new-commitments-support-my-brother-s). Note that not all the activities supported by My Brother’s Keeper are targeted specifically at males. For example, according to the fact sheet, the high school redesign initiative aims to create schools that will better serve all underserved kids, and the College Board has created a program called All In “to ensure that 100% of African American, Latino, and Native American students with strong AP [advanced placement] potential enroll in at least one matched AP class before graduation.” Funding is also being provided to extend Americorps opportunities to “disconnected youth.”

15. Butler (2013: 486). See also Hartmann et al. (2015).

16. Hartmann et al. (2015: 5).

17. Increasingly, “Black male exceptionalist” discourse is being challenged. In 2014, the African American Policy Forum—a think tank cofounded by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw—coordinated a series of well-publicized open letters to President Obama calling for the inclusion of girls and young women of color in the My Brother’s Keeper initiative.

18. Butler (2013: 506).

19. Brizendine (2006: 1–5); Brizendine (2010: 1–8). For a critical overview of the popular literature, see Rivers and Barnett (2011).

20. For now-classic articulations of the social constructionist approach, see West and Zimmerman (1987) and Lorber (1994).

21. Messner (2011: 164).

22. See J. Williams (2013).

23. Messner (2011: 155).

24. See Bombardieri (2005: A1). The tendency to attribute evidence of a gender gap in math achievement to a natural advantage in favor of

men remains common, despite mounting research evidence establishing that the magnitude of the gender gap has been greatly exaggerated (Hyde 2005), and that the primary determinants of differential performance are related to sociocultural factors (Kane and Mertz [2012]).

25. Messner (2011: 155).
26. For an extended discussion of “recuperative masculinity politics” in education, see Lingard et al. (2009). See also Cohen (2009).
27. Weaver-Hightower (2010: 683–684).
28. Kimmel (2000: 20).
29. See, e.g., McRobbie; (2009); Scharff (2011); Ringrose (2013).
30. Ringrose (2013: 139). Anderson (2015) offers a parallel analysis of postfeminist discourse in education reform debates in the United States.
31. Howell (2005).
32. Salomone (2003: 120).
33. See Halpern et al. (2011).
34. Marshall (2007).
35. Sommers (2013a).
36. Salomone (2003: 119); *Brown v. Board of Ed.* (494).
37. *Brown v. Board of Ed.* (494).
38. Salomone (2003: 120).
39. Terry et al. (2013: 4–5).
40. See Hilliard and Liben (2010).
41. See Cohen and Levit (2014) for a rigorous assessment of the constitutional questions posed by single-sex public schooling.
42. *Mississippi University for Women v. Hogan*, 725.
43. *United States v. Virginia*, 534.
44. *United States v. Virginia*, 516. See Case (1999).
45. Bonner and Hollingsworth (2012).
46. Breckinridge complaint, Civil Action No. 3: 08-cv-00004-CRS, United States District Court, Western District of Kentucky, Louisville Division, May 19, 2008, 20.
47. Ridgeway (2011).
48. Mackinnon (1987: 42).
49. The term *transgender* first gained popularity among activists as an alternative to derogatory, pathologized labels such as *cross-dresser*

and *transvestite*. In this discussion, I follow gender studies scholar Susan Stryker in the use of *transgender* as “an umbrella term that refers to all identities or practices that cross over, cut across, move between, or otherwise queer socially constructed sex/gender boundaries” (1994: 251).

50. Serano (2007: 164–165). The terms *cissexual* and *cisgender* often are used interchangeably, generally to designate people who experience “a match between the gender they were assigned at birth, their bodies, and their personal identity” (Schilt and Westbrook [2009: 461]).

51. See discussion in Schilt and Westbrook (2009).

52. See Martin (2005).

53. Sax (2005b: 34).

54. Sax (2005b: 225). In a similar vein, Michael Gurian suggests that approximately one in seven boys, and one in five girls, are born with a “bridge brain,” leading them to behave in gender-atypical ways. See Gurian and Stevens (2011: 16).

55. Sax (2005b: 227–228).

56. Sax (2005b: 228). In the case of the “anomalous male,” Sax departs from his usual insistence on accommodating biology, instead encouraging parents to engage in the kind of “social engineering” he otherwise seems to deplore (2005b: 112).

57. See *Mills College Undergraduate Catalog*, “Applying for Admission,” last updated July 2, 2015, [www.mills.edu/academics/undergraduate/catalog/admission\\_applying.php](http://www.mills.edu/academics/undergraduate/catalog/admission_applying.php). The policy goes on to state that students assigned female at birth who have “undergone a legal change of gender prior to” seeking admission will not be considered.

58. Marcelo (2014). To date, Mount Holyoke has adopted the broadest policy, accepting applications from any candidate, except those who were assigned male at birth and identify as male at the time of seeking admission. (Mills College, for example, has a slightly more restrictive policy, because it will not accept applications from trans men who have legally changed their gender to male). Several other historically all-women’s colleges have adopted formal policies that govern the admission of transgender students.

59. Geidner (2013). For a helpful discussion of earlier attempts by transgender students to seek relief under Title IX, see Buzuvis (2013).

60. United States Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights (2014a: 5).

61. United States Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights (2014b: 25).

62. Steinmetz (2014). See also Thompson (2014).

63. See, e.g., Thorne (1993) and Martin (1998).

64. Waldron (2014).

65. Jackson (2009: 237).

66. Edwards (2014).

67. Edwards (2014).

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