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# DEFENDING ALL-MALE EDUCATION: A NEW CULTURAL MOMENT FOR A RENEWED DEBATE

Stephen H. Webb\*

Although all-female schools still prosper and are defended by members of the academic elite,<sup>1</sup> an all-male college has become a near-extinct species.<sup>2</sup> Many people are surprised such a creature still exists. All-male colleges strike many as vestiges of male privilege.<sup>3</sup> They evoke the traditional bastions of power that precluded women from advancing in public life.<sup>4</sup> Single-sex education is not for everyone, but if our educational system is to be truly pluralistic, such an education should be an option. Single-sex education for both genders can be a constructive way to address problems plaguing not only education but the culture as a whole.<sup>5</sup>

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1. See, e.g., CORNELIUS RIORDAN, GIRLS AND BOYS IN SCHOOL 49-61 (1990) (discussing the benefits of all girl schooling); CAROL B. SHMURAK, VOICES OF HOPE: ADOLESCENT GIRLS AT SINGLE SEX AND COEDUCATIONAL SCHOOLS 9-11 (Joseph L. DeVitis & Linda Irwin-DeVitis eds., 1998) (discussing various studies that indicate positive results from all-female schooling); JANICE L. STREITMATTER, FOR GIRLS ONLY: MAKING A CASE FOR SINGLE-SEX SCHOOLING 19-23 (1999) (describing academic support for creation of East Harlem Young Women's Leadership Academy).

2. Only three all male four-year colleges remain in the United States: Hampden-Sydney in Virginia, Morehouse College in Georgia, and Wabash College in Indiana.

3. See Mike Allen, *Separatism Is In, Except for White Males*, GREENSBORO NEWS & REC., July 7, 1996, at F1 ("Men's colleges are all but extinct in America, knocked off one by one as obsolete bastions of chauvinism."), available at 1996 WL 5776407; Marcia D. Greenberger, *The VMI Decision: Shattering Sexual Stereotypes*, CHRON. HIGHER EDUC., July 5, 1996 at A52 ("Virginia defended the exclusion of women from VMI by using arcane gender stereotypes").

4. See RIORDAN, *supra* note 1, at 17 (explaining that women in Medieval Europe were denied the right to attain higher education because they were ineligible for the highest positions in the Christian Church).

5. See, e.g., PEGGY ORENSTEIN, SCHOOL GIRLS xxi (First Anchor Books ed. 1995) (stating that changing our society requires changing the way in which all children are raised—boys and girls).

Indeed, the tide that swept away single sex education for men is now turning.<sup>6</sup> To understand why, today's emphasis on co-education should be placed in a historical context. The war in Vietnam and racism in the states stirred a storm of social upheaval defying traditional forms of authority.<sup>7</sup> All-male colleges were seen as an affront to egalitarian politics and democratic progress.<sup>8</sup>

When I joined the Wabash College faculty in 1987, the school was suffering an identity crisis. One of the last all-male liberal arts colleges,<sup>9</sup> Wabash acted like its single sex status was an accidental feature of the campus, something hardly worth noting.

The faculty could not accept Wabash for what it was. Dedicated to progress and democracy, professors were embarrassed and angry about the lack of women in the classroom. While the trustees and alumni were loyal to the character of the college, the faculty assaulted the very concept of single-sex education with the single-minded rhetoric they learned in the sixties. They framed the debate in terms of rights for the marginalized, rather than respect for differences. Men were already privileged in our society, they argued, so why should men have opportunities unavailable to women? Wabash was a good school that should be open to everybody. Anything less than equal access was blatant discrimination.

Nowadays, the culture, rather than the college, has radically changed. Wabash is taking advantage of two new movements ushering in a new excitement about single-sex education.

The first movement challenges structures of authority that legislate uniformity in education. Reformers now talk of school choice and work to decenter federal control over education.<sup>10</sup> This new

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6. Pamela Stallsmith, *College Leader Touts Single-Sex Education*, RICHMOND TIMES-DISPATCH, Mar. 4, 1997, at B4 ("[T]he pendulum of education is swinging away from an extreme position on coeducation and moving toward recognizing the advantages of single-sex education . . ."), available at 1997 WL 7611655.

7. RICHARD A. HAWLEY, *BOYS WILL BE MEN* 9 (1993) (discussing the personal liberation movement of the sixties that allowed men to break out of stereotypical male behavior).

8. David Whitman, *The Masculine Mystique*, U.S. NEWS & WORLD REP., Feb. 8, 1999 ("Faced with new pressures—such as the women's movement and the burden of recruiting top-notch faculty and students to all-male institutions—men's colleges rapidly went coed. . ."), available at 1999 WL 8432224.

9. See *supra* note 2.

10. See Susan Tifft, *Parent Power's First Big Test: Clashes Over Local Councils Roil Chicago Schools*, TIME, Mar. 26, 1990 (summarizing Chicago's decentralization plan and its consequences), available at 1990 WL 2759697; Mortimer B. Zuckerman, *Why Schools Need Standards*, U.S. NEWS & WORLD REP., Sept. 16, 1996, (discussing the option of school decentralization), available at 1996 WL 7811484.

emphasis on pluralism and local control is permitting educators to reconsider distinctive educational options that serve some students without being mandatory for all.<sup>11</sup> Equal educational opportunities do not necessitate homogenous educational experiences. If the American genius abides in experimental openness, its limit resides in a tendency toward conformity and uniformity. Public policy makers are sometimes too anxious that everyone be treated exactly the same way.

The second cultural movement leading to a renewal of single-sex education is the reconsideration of the role of gender in education. A concern for the well being of girls started it all. Mary Piper's book, *Reviving Ophelia*,<sup>12</sup> sparked a crusade against the gender gap separating the achievements of girls from those of boys.<sup>13</sup> Piper's alarming book depicted a cultural meltdown in the social neglect of girls. Girls can too quickly subordinate themselves to boys at a certain age, and this can lead to serious problems, both socially and academically. According to Piper and her followers, this subservience was not the result of biology but of a toxic educational environment.<sup>14</sup> For example, Peggy Orenstein explains that girls educated in a coed environment display a drop in confidence as well as achievement.<sup>15</sup> She offers the picture of a girl afraid to raise her hand in class, letting her insecurities affect her education.<sup>16</sup> Girls face problems in school that boys do not, especially sexual harassment.<sup>17</sup> The way in which girls cultivate self-esteem and manifest vulnerability also differs remarkably from that of boys. Nevertheless, the war to save girls was frequently fought as a war against boys.<sup>18</sup> It eventually became apparent that boys and

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11. Approximately one million American children, for instance, are home-schooled. See Laura Sessions Stepp, *Suburbs at Sea, Female Teen Angst, Scouts and Homeschoolers*, WASH. POST, Nov. 11, 2001, at T10, available at 2001 WL 29761559.

12. MARY PIPER, *REVIVING OPHELIA: SAVING THE SELVES OF ADOLESCENT GIRLS* (1994).

13. See Margot Hornblower, *Beyond the Gender Myths*, TIME, Oct. 19, 1998, at 90 (noting that Piper's book "triggered a surge of creative solutions" to the gender gap issue).

14. See, e.g., HELEN CORDES, *GIRL POWER IN THE CLASSROOM: A BOOK ABOUT GIRLS, THEIR FEARS, AND THEIR FUTURE* (1999); CARLA FINE & JANE FONDA, *STRONG, SMART, AND BOLD: EMPOWERING GIRLS FOR LIFE* (2001); ORENSTEIN, *supra* note 5; PIPER, *supra* note 12.

15. ORENSTEIN, *supra* note 5, at xvii.

16. *Id.* at xxvii.

17. See CHRISTINA HOFF SOMMERS, *THE WAR AGAINST BOYS* 64 (2000) (noting that much anti-social sexual behavior at school is perpetrated by males).

18. See *generally id.* (discussing the tendency to view boys as unfairly privileged and as obstacles to gender equality).

girls had both similar and different problems during their early school years.<sup>19</sup> While girls have the problem of being discouraged from pursuing “unfeminine” intellectual pursuits,<sup>20</sup> boys are more likely to disrupt their own education.<sup>21</sup> Concern about one sex, of course, does not preclude concern for the other. Prescribing all-female schools as a solution for girls’ educational problems does not preclude all-male schools as a solution for boys. Both kinds of schools can happily co-exist and, indeed, must stand or fall together.

The need for single-sex education hinges on the contested argument that some differences between girls and boys relate to their ability to learn. Feminists have argued that girls learn differently than boys.<sup>22</sup> Over time, educators realized it was not possible to discuss the distinctive traits of female learning without acknowledging that boys too have their distinctive patterns of development.<sup>23</sup> Educators are now more willing to reevaluate all-male education. Michael Gurian, a prominent therapist and educator, has explored the biological and neurological differences between boys and girls without pitting one gender against the other.<sup>24</sup> When the testosterone-driven behavior of boys is suppressed—rather than channeled into appropriate activities—biology will fight its way to the surface with unpleasant results.<sup>25</sup> Both boys and girls need heroes to admire and communities to join, but the structure of their socialization takes different forms. Boys can be especially tribal as they enter adolescence, and their physical development cries out for male mentors and guides. While girls also

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19. *Id.* at 25-26 (explaining that statistics show that boys, rather than girls, are the sex that is suffering academically).

20. MARY FIELD BELENKY ET AL., *WOMEN’S WAYS OF KNOWING* 5 (1986).

21. SOMMERS, *supra* note 17, at 25-26 (discussing statistics showing boys more often than girls drop out of school and get involved with drugs and alcohol).

22. *See generally* BELENKY ET AL., *supra* note 20 (arguing that women have cultivated their own way of learning which has been neglected by the dominant culture of our age); CAROL GILLIGAN ET AL., *MAPPING THE MORAL DOMAIN* (Carol Gilligan et al. eds., 1988) (describing fundamental differences between moral voice and orientation between girls and boys); CAROL GILLIGAN ET AL., *MAKING CONNECTIONS* 4-5 (Carol Gilligan et al. eds., 1989) (discussing the possibility that girls are taught to think differently than how they naturally think and in the process lose not only innocence but knowledge).

23. *See* RIORDAN, *supra* note 4 (describing modern context in which gender issues in education are analyzed).

24. MICHAEL GURIAN, *THE WONDER OF BOYS: WHAT PARENTS, MENTORS, AND EDUCATORS CAN DO TO SHAPE ADOLESCENT BOYS INTO EXCEPTIONAL MEN* (1997).

25. *See generally* DAN KINDLON & MICHAEL THOMPSON, *RAISING CAIN* (1999). Consequences may include use of violence, abuse of drugs, depression, or deviant sexual behavior. *Id.*

need discipline, mentors, and strong order, they generally have less testosterone, are less likely to rebel, and are less physical in their rebellion.<sup>26</sup> The trick to understanding adolescent boys, Gurian and others argue, is that their self-sufficiency is a mere mask.<sup>27</sup> Boys are socialized to hide their feelings in ways that girls are not.<sup>28</sup> Boys are supposed to be tough, and yet male posturing (often interpreted as evidence of social and academic confidence in psychological surveys and studies) is frequently a means of compensating for wounded pride and hurt feelings.<sup>29</sup>

This does not mean that boys are necessarily hard-wired for aggression. Yet the overwhelming evidence, from hyperactivity in grade schools to gangs and guns in high school—suggests that boys have basic needs for certain kinds of activities that are going unmet.<sup>30</sup> Boys need tough challenges and regimentation to gain self-esteem.<sup>31</sup> The message one boy received from his father is indicative of the lesson all boys learn from hard work, “You’ve cleaned toilets at a bus station, Mike, if you can do that, you can do anything.”<sup>32</sup> Boys also need to feel accepted by their own tribal group before they can appropriately seek acceptance by the opposite sex.<sup>33</sup>

Boys may suffer worse consequences than girls from the failures of public education.

Adolescent boys are more likely than adolescent girls to commit suicide, be emotionally disturbed, have learning disabilities, and commit acts of violence.<sup>34</sup> It is pointless of course, to competitively compare boys and girls to see who is most victimized. Educators, however, often quickly assume girls have more problems than

26. GURIAN, *supra* note 24, at 186.

27. See KINDLON & THOMPSON, *supra* note 25, at 75 (noting that self-possessed and popular boys often fear they will lose that popularity).

28. *Id.* at 4.

29. *Id.* at 151 (noting that in response to being criticized by parents or humiliated by peers, boys adopt a tough “I-could-care-less” attitude).

30. SOMMERS, *supra* note 17, at 25-26.

31. Gurian argues that although girls need constructive work, important work for boys is nearly as necessary as breathing. Any purposeful work supervised by adults provides the kind of tough challenge and strong order that helps boys mature. GURIAN, *supra* note 24, at 257.

32. *Id.*

33. See RICHARD A. HAWLEY, *BOYS WILL BE MEN: MASCULINITY IN TROUBLED TIMES* 41-42 (1993) (using figure of David to illustrate that loving friendships with other boys is an important precursor to relationships with females).

34. See generally JAMES GARBARINO, *LOST BOYS: WHY OUR SONS TURN VIOLENT AND HOW WE CAN SAVE THEM* (1999); KINDLON & THOMPSON, *supra* note 25; SOMMERS, *supra* note 17, at 25-26.

boys. Problems specific to boys, therefore, need to be highlighted. If all-female schools can best address the developmental problems of adolescent girls, all-male schools can do the same for boys.<sup>35</sup>

Single-sex education historically was framed in terms of protecting children from the complications of premature sexual interaction.<sup>36</sup> The argument was also made that boys and girls have different educational needs. Boys needed a strenuous education teaching them discipline and the virtues of hard work. Girls, on the other hand, were considered more fragile than boys and more likely to be preyed upon in a male-dominated world.

When large numbers of women entered the labor force in the 1960s, these arguments for separate educational tracks became moot. Young men no longer needed training in the rites of all-male societies, while young women needed the same skills and credentials as men to compete in the market. There was still talk however, about the value of all-female education. The rhetoric shifted from safeguarding women from worldly temptations to providing them with a sisterhood unencumbered by male dominance.<sup>37</sup> Since men already dominated the worlds of business and politics, the argument went, they did not need gender-specific training. Girls, however, have special needs in society that boys do not. What was once discussed in terms of girls' vulnerability now became contextualized in terms of their victimization.<sup>38</sup> The case for all-female education was updated rather than transformed; the case for all-male education was dropped altogether.

Such attention to the special plight of girls in an aggressively male world has instilled the movement for all-female education with urgency and passion.<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, while research on single-sex education focuses on women, its conclusions often show significant gains for both genders.<sup>40</sup> Those who argue that single-sex education is good for girls but not boys are committing a logical

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35. See generally RIORDAN, *supra* note 1, at 111 (explaining that boys in coed schools are more confident and more readily accept women as equals).

36. See RIORDAN, *supra* note 1, at 22.

37. Carol Chastang, *On Even Terms*, L.A. TIMES, 1994 (Westside), at 14. (noting that all-girls schools headed by female faculty offer students relief from sexual harassment and bias by male students and teachers).

38. See, e.g., STREITMATTER, *supra* note 1, at 53-55.

39. See DAVID TYACK & ELISABETH HANSOT, *LEARNING TOGETHER: A HISTORY OF COEDUCATION IN AMERICAN SCHOOLS* 285-87 (1990).

40. See RIORDAN, *supra* note 1; STREITMATTER, *supra* note 1, at 36-45.

error.<sup>41</sup> They imply girls do not do well in co-ed schools because they are with boys. Boys, thus, are a plague, the explanation for the poor performance of girls in co-ed schools. If this is true, boys should be removed from girls and given a place of their own, where they can work out their education without interfering with girls. Logically, then, defending single-sex education for one gender entails defending it for the other.

Indeed, those who experience an all-male education are usually eager to talk of its empowering effect. This is illustrated by Michael Ruhlman's book, *Boys Themselves: A Return to Single-Sex Education*.<sup>42</sup> Ruhlman returns to his alma mater, the all-boy's University School in Cleveland, to reflect on the culture of an all-male education. Ruhlman's astute observations about male camaraderie make this a necessary starting point for any debate about the future of all-male education.

To defend a particular institution, its story needs to be told well, and this is what Ruhlman does with University School. Indeed, just talking about young men working and playing together can be a radical project in today's climate. Most stories in the media about young men bonding together are parables about young men on the prowl, flirting with, or committing, some violent act.

To a certain extent, the media is right. We live in a culture that has shockingly few rituals and traditions to guide boys into manhood. We have become suspicious of all-male clubs, organizations, or fraternities. Our increasingly secular sensibility has rejected the importance of public rituals and traditions. Consequently, young men have only sports (and, to a lesser extent, the military) as an outlet for their aggressive sense of adventure and achievement. Sports, however, are for the victorious few, so that many boys feel left behind by their childhood dreams. We should not be surprised at the number of young men who join gangs and pursue perilous activities to prove themselves and find a sense of community.

To have an all-male school work, the school needs to be rich in tradition and ritual.<sup>43</sup> The school needs to be a sacred place, because young men need discipline and transcendent goals. Wabash College, for example, is full of traditions promoting male bonding

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41. See Amy Saltzman, *Lots on Girls, Little on Boys*, U.S. NEWS & WORLD REP. July 8, 1996 (explaining that there is little research indicating that coed schools are better for males), available at 1996 WL 7811087.

42. MICHAEL RUHLMAN, *BOYS THEMSELVES: A RETURN TO SINGLE-SEX EDUCATION* (1996).

43. Whitman, *supra* note 8, at 55 (explaining that old-school traditions such as wearing beanies and doing community service have helped Wabash College survive).

while channeling male energy into spirited and constructive purposes. The many fraternity houses provide communal living for students in a non-elitist manner, and the geographical isolation of the college gives it an ascetic feel. One of my favorite rituals at Wabash is the annual Chapel Sing, which occurs in the fall. The freshman pledge classes compete on the Chapel steps to see who can sing the school song the loudest. The song, according to tradition, is the longest in the nation, and there is nothing like saying goodbye to fall and bracing for a long Indiana winter by listening to over a hundred young men shouting their hearts out into wind.

Most mens' schools went co-ed in the late 1960s and 1970s out of a sensitivity to the changing role of women in society, but they also could no longer sustain the traditions necessary to make an all-male environment work. In the light of feminist critiques, male bonding rituals began to look more sinister than sincere. Moreover, the Vietnam War created a climate where authority and institutions were questioned in the name of freedom and progress. The curriculum was changed to increase electives over required courses and mandatory chapel became all-but-extinct in liberal arts colleges. Fraternities were marginalized or eliminated as archaic vestiges from a dark and distant past. Education began to look less like a rite of passage and more like the exercise of student rights. As universities became more politicized and disciplinary procedures became more bureaucratized, administrators reacted to male-bonding as a threat to their power and control and thus began dismantling many of the traditions that once made college a social as well as an intellectual experience.

Most of Ruhlman's stories in *Boys Themselves, A Return to Single-Sex Education* center on the classroom, the personal quality of teaching, the honesty about sexuality, and the lack of posturing that are the hallmarks of a single-sex education.<sup>44</sup> He spends much of his time in the classroom of a female English teacher who notes that boys are "just different."<sup>45</sup> His description of how boys fill up a classroom,<sup>46</sup> how they negotiate honor and deal with defeat,<sup>47</sup> and how they pursue their own way of doing things until the bitter end<sup>48</sup>—all in contrast to the students at a girl's school he visits<sup>49</sup>—are high points of the book.

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44. RUHLMAN, *supra* note 42.

45. *Id.*

46. *Id.*

47. *Id.*

48. *Id.*

One of his observations in particular struck me. He notes that many young men who graduated from University School told him, while later attending co-ed universities, that their best friends were women.<sup>50</sup> The experience of being deprived of women had strengthened their appreciation of the opposite sex. They recognized, contrary to much of the rhetoric in co-ed schools, that gender differences run deep and defy ultimate explanation. Young men at all-male schools often act like old-fashioned gentlemen around young women. Rather than take women for granted, they assume there is a lot to learn about women. Sensitivity to gender differences enables rich and full friendships. Friendships, after all, are based on an appreciation of what others give us that we cannot give to ourselves.

Richard A. Hawley, the author of *Boys Will Be Men* and one of the most articulate defenders of all-male education, explains that working in an all-boys school gave him a greater appreciation for the "astonishing individuality and range of females."<sup>51</sup> This is a phenomenon I repeatedly find at Wabash. There is no reason to think co-education results in better relationships between the genders than single-sex education. Distance and separation, at the right time, can deepen a sense of mystery and thus increase the opportunity for communication between the genders. Hawley, who is the headmaster of Ruhlman's book, illustrates this sentiment when he exclaims, "Romeo wasn't *pals* with Juliet . . . they didn't go to *school* together. She was an amazing alien. She was the other. She was a *Beatrice*."<sup>52</sup>

Richard A. Hawley has written several books reflecting on how culture can help boys navigate that narrow passage to manhood.<sup>53</sup> The core virtue at the center of University School, according to Hawley, is that it is hard.<sup>54</sup> To make a boy into a man, an institution must test him, push him, and challenge him to the very limit, while providing the environment that will not just support him but also send him back into the game after he has been knocked down.<sup>55</sup>

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49. *Id.*

50. *Id.*

51. HAWLEY, *supra* note 7, at 53.

52. RUHLMAN, *supra* note 42, at 20.

53. See HAWLEY, *supra* note 7; RICHARD A. HAWLEY, *THE HEADMASTER'S PAPERS* (1992).

54. RUHLMAN, *supra* note 42, at 25.

55. *Id.*

It is time for a new debate about all-male education. Historically, all-male education meant the exclusion of women from many educational institutions. More recently, all-female education has been defended apart from all-male education. But if some girls need a space of their own for their education, it makes sense that some boys do as well. If boys are disrupting girls' schooling, they may be disrupting their own development as well. If single sex education is to be defended, it must be defended as an option for both men and women on the margins of a predominantly co-educational system. It will never again become the norm. But it can become an option for many students who need and want it.

In our culture, adolescence marks an emotionally-charged period of transition and transformation. We have cast aside the old rituals that formerly guided adolescents through these troubled waters. For some people, this passage is best navigated apart (somewhat) from the other sex. In our society, sex is used and exploited as the primary means of self-expression and ultimate fulfillment. It is possible that the single-sex atmosphere might help put such distorted claims into a better perspective.

Separation also creates and encourages a special bonding between members of the same sex.<sup>56</sup> This is especially important today, when males are often not encouraged to articulate and express the full range of their human emotions and needs. Whereas many girls have problems with self-confidence when they hit adolescence, boys have the opposite problem. They put up a good front with bravado and posturing, but this is merely a mask for deep feelings of insecurity and inadequacy.<sup>57</sup> Education must penetrate those masks if it is to work. All-male education allows for an honesty and egalitarianism within a competitive and rigorous environment, with rituals and traditions that provide the foundation for teamwork and male-bonding. In this way, variety and diversity in the educational market can be encouraged, and one of the oldest means of helping children through adolescence can be saved from extinction.

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56. Kathryn Orth & Ruth S. Intress, *H-SC Welcomes Record Number of Freshman: Recruiting Emphasis on 'All-Male' Status Given Credit*, RICHMOND TIMES-DISPATCH, Aug. 24, 1997, at C4 (quoting Anita Garland, "Students have always recognized the byproducts of single-sex education—the brotherhood, the camaraderie, the alumni networking."), available at 1997 WL 7627225.

57. WILLIAM POLLACK, *REAL BOYS: RESCUING OUR SONS FROM THE MYTHS OF BOYHOOD* (1998).