Learning
The case for...
Susan Vincent reached into the cage and pulled out a small yellow bird, saying, “This is Kiwi. He loved us, but he was lonely.” It is a lovely spring day in Spanish Harlem on the Upper East Side of Manhattan and Vincent, a former children’s clothing designer turned award-winning high-school science teacher, is explaining some facts about the facts of life. “We had to get Kiwi a mate. It was a perfect way for the girls to learn something about nature, about birds, about”—she smiles, holding little Kiwi up—“about the birds and the bees.”

It was, as they say in the field, “a teachable moment.” And for Vincent it was much more teachable because all of her 10th-grade students were girls. “There was no giggling and whispering, no holding back,” she recalls. “The girls gathered round and we talked about the mating habits of birds and they asked good questions and learned a lot. Boys would have been a big distraction.”

It seems so logical. Separate boys and girls so they can get their work done. It was clear to me and my classmates 40 years ago, as we gazed out the window during English 

Separately single-sex schools

By Peter Meyer
Emma Willard

Founded in 1814 in Troy, New York, Emma Willard was among the first schools in the country to offer girls an academic curriculum. Emma Hart Willard, a teacher, principal, author, and mother of four, determined to offer girls the same education as boys then received in their schools, and over the ensuing 193 years, the school—renamed for its foundress in 1895—has cultivated a reputation for serious academic study. Today the school has more than 300 students in grades 9–12, 60 percent of them boarders, from all over the world; an ample endowment of more than $100 million; and a list of illustrious alumnae (from Elizabeth Cady Stanton to Jane Fonda). The school receives several hundred applications a year, accepts some 150 and ends up enrolling 90 new students, favoring the bright (61st percentile on the SSAT or higher) and the extracurricular-inclined. Tuition is $24,500 for day students and $37,300 for boarders, but 41 percent get aid of some sort. The school has a $2.5 million financial aid budget.

At the turn of the twentieth century the school moved to Mount Ida, just north of Troy. Its current 137-acre campus sits in a leafy, middle-class neighborhood, and three of its Tudor-Gothic stone buildings, built in 1910, are on the National Register of Historic Places. The setting is so gorgeous that two movies were filmed here—ironically, telling the stories of boys’ schools: The Scent of a Woman and The Emperor’s Club.

“Emma Willard was better at getting the atmosphere correct,” says recent alumna Louisa Thompson. “They know what’s good about single-sex education. It’s not about empowerment, but about getting a good education.”

Louisa’s parents, my neighbors Tony Thompson and Margaret Seliske, decided after years of trying to support their daughter in our troubled local public school to pull the plug in 7th grade. “I recall talking to her Spanish teacher [at the public school] for a half hour one time before I realized that the teacher wasn’t talking about Louisa,” explains Tony. “The teacher had 250 kids [in her various classes]. There were lots of disruptions in each class.” It was then that they decided to cut the ties. “Louisa was just not getting a serious education.”

Academics is in Emma Willard’s DNA. In the Hunter science building, for instance, Angela Miklavcic, a tall and serious woman, is lecturing her 18 students on fractals and helping them work on an esterification project. “An ester is formed when a carboxylic acid reacts with an alcohol in a process known as esterification,” the girls learn. “Esters are fragrant organic compounds used commercially in products such as perfume, deodorant, and processed foods....”

On a large wall in Slocum Hall a board is covered with college acceptances for the Class of 2007. They include the University of Paris, Barnard, Purdue, Princeton, Cornell, Yale, Vassar.

“You hear from girls who have left and gone on to college,” says Steve Ricci, the school’s manager of publications and public relations. He smiles. “And they’re amazed at how easy Harvard and Yale are. It’s okay, they say, but it’s no Emma Willard.”

Outside a big room on the second floor of Slocum Hall, 20 girls are scattered on the floor, taking a break from their jazz dance class and are more than happy—to talk about their single-sex school:

It’s easier to focus on your class work and to open up about how you feel.... The sports are nice. They push you. But it’s small and it feels like a community.... Last year I was in Troy public schools. And I was on a math team. Me and five boys. You get really tired of dealing with boys. They’re always a distraction in class.... Yes, boys are very immature. But teachers always favored them.... I’m an athlete and resented the fact that guys had the field, uniforms, all the good stuff. We got leftovers.... We still like boys. By now maybe they are mature enough to hang out with.
class in our all-boys high school (a Catholic seminary) and watched the teenage kids from town “making out” on a stone wall; at least it was clear to Father Ignatius, who would threaten a “bastinado with salt rubbed in the wounds” if we didn’t focus on the sentence that needed diagramming.

“We can concentrate a lot better without boys,” is a comment I heard dozens of times in the course of researching this single-sex education. Boys seem less sure of the benefits. “Yeah, it’s okay,” says a student at the private all-boys Roxbury Latin School, outside of Boston (see sidebar, page 14). But the headmaster, Kerry Brennan, is certain: “Young men are able to focus much more ably on academics without the girls.”

Rosemary Salomone, professor of law at St. John’s University and author of the 2003 book *Same, Different, Equal: Rethinking Single-Sex Schooling*, agrees: “Many students in single-sex classes report feeling more comfortable raising their hands and expressing uncertainty regarding a lesson or topic without fear of embarrassment or teasing from the opposite sex.”

The fact that researchers like Salomone are talking about single-gender education represents a sea change in attitudes—and policies and practices, a change that was formalized by the historic rewriting of Title IX of the federal Education Amendments in 2006. The new rules give local districts the option of offering single-gender public schools and programs for the first time in more than 30 years. The regulations permit single-sex classrooms when districts “provide a rationale,” “provide a coeducational class” as well, and “conduct a review every two years.” Districts may operate a single-sex school as long as they provide equal services either in a coed school or a school for the opposite gender. Charter schools are exempt from all restrictions. Prior to these changes, educators lived in a vague legal world, at the mercy of a Supreme Court decision (the 1996 Virginia Military Institute [VMI] case, United States v. Virginia), which required an “exceedingly persuasive justification” of anyone wanting to set up single-sex schools or classes.

As late as 1990, James Coleman remarked that it was considered suspect to even study the question of single-sex schooling. The famous University of Chicago sociologist noted that there were times when “a societal consensus” dictates that “one institution is right” and, he concluded, “coeducation is such an institution.”

At the time, Coleman was writing to introduce a pioneering book on the subject, *Girls and Boys in School: Together or Separate?* by Providence College sociologist Cornelius Riordan. The questions Riordan was asking—“just what are the consequences of single-sex and coeducational schools for those who pass through them? Specifically, what are the intellectual consequences, the psychological consequences, and the social consequences?”—had not been asked, or answered, before. Coleman attributed the research failure to “the force of conventional values.” Riordan’s research compared outcomes for graduates of single-sex Catholic schools with those for graduates of coed Catholic schools. He found that single-sex schooling helps to improve academic achievement, with benefits greater for girls than boys, and that underprivileged children derived the most benefit. His book concluded that we had to “give students some measure of access to single-sex education.”

**Districts may operate a single-sex school as long as they provide equal services either in a coed school or a school for the opposite gender.**

**Charter schools are exempt for all restrictions.**
Roxbury Latin

Sociologist Cornelius Riordan didn’t hesitate when asked which single-sex schools represented the best of the breed. “You have to see Roxbury Latin. They’ve been doing it longer than anyone else.”

Indeed, it was King Charles I, in 1645, who gave the Rev. John Eliot a charter to start a school in Boston to, as Eliot said, “fit [students] for public service both in church and commonwealth in succeeding ages.” And it has been going ever since. All boys, all the time.

Roxbury Latin—the school still requires three years of Latin—enjoys the distinction of being the oldest continuously operating school in America (though that statement always comes with a footnote: Boston Latin was founded ten years earlier, in 1635, but closed during the Revolutionary War: “War’s begun, school’s done,” announced Headmaster John Lovell).

So successful has Roxbury Latin been that it now has one of the largest endowments of any private secondary school (over $140 million), “an outlandish amount of money for just 290 boys,” says Phil Thornton, director of development at the school, who points out that over 50 percent of alumni give to the alumni fund. But this means that the school can have a need-blind admission policy—money is no object, brains are—and can keep tuition relatively low: $17,900, 30 to 50 percent less than most of its competitors, and some $11,000 below cost. Some of the students pay $50 a year. Not easy to get in, of course. There’s an application essay, an interview, an IQ test, ISEE and SSAT tests. The acceptance rate is 14 percent, which is why the student body scores in the 95th percentile on the SAT.

A third of its 36 teachers have been here for 25 years. There are no teachers unions. Top faculty make over $100,000. But they also do many different things. Tom Walsh, the school’s director of college guidance, also teaches Latin and Greek and coaches lacrosse. “One of the secrets to our success,” says Headmaster Kerry Brennan, who is also an English teacher and basketball coach, “is that we are independent. We can do what we want.”

Character also counts. “We care most of all what kind of person a boy is,” says Brennan. Keeping the school single sex is very important to both the character-building and academic mission. Paul Sugg, dean of students and a biology teacher at the school for 23 years (and currently varsity soccer and junior varsity wrestling coach), recalls a period, in the 1980s, when “the school had to actively advocate for single sex…. When parents came in for their interview, we asked them if they were prepared to back that. There was some hot discussion, and it got confrontational and combative, but we wanted total compliance. Now, thank God, for the last five to ten years we haven’t had to ask the question.”

As is the case in single-sex girls’ schools, faculty and students at Roxbury Latin see the single-gender environment as liberating rather than confining. More than 60 percent of the boys are in a choral group, and 90 percent are on at least one athletic team. “The big coed high school settings can be pretty repressed in many ways,” says Sugg. “Our kids don’t feel pigeonholed, don’t have to hold onto a role and so are more willing to take a chance…. You can get on stage and not have to be embarrassed because you’re an athlete and what would the girls think…. At this age, with the onset of puberty and the raging hormones, girls can be a very big distraction. It just makes academics easier without them.”

And academics here are not an afterthought, as is evident when looking at the Advanced Placement exam schedule: Government & Politics, French, Computer Science, Statistics, Calculus, English Lit, French Lit, U.S. History, Music Theory, Biology, Physics, Chemistry, Art History, Economics (macro and micro), Latin Vergil, Latin Literature…. “By the way,” says Brennan, with a smile, “we have no gangs here.”
Clear Differences (Figure 1)

On standardized tests, boys score higher in math and science, and girls outperform boys in reading. When it comes to graduating from high school and college, women are carrying the day.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Percentage at or above proficient</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>Females 36, Males 26</td>
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<tr>
<td>Math</td>
<td>Females 28, Males 31</td>
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<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td>Females 26, Males 32</td>
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<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Percentage at or above proficient</th>
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<tr>
<td>High school graduation rate, 2003</td>
<td>Females 72, Males 65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-to-24-year-olds enrolled in college, 2005</td>
<td>Females 43, Males 35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-to-29-year-olds with at least a bachelor’s degree, 2006</td>
<td>Females 32, Males 25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**Source:** National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Education Progress

**Sources:** Jay P. Greene and Marcus A. Winters, “Leaving Boys Behind: Public High School Graduation Rates” (Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, Civic Report No. 48); U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey

Going, Going, All but Gone

While there are no reliable counts of single-gender schools in the first half of the 20th century, best estimates are that most were schools for white boys. Many of the girls’ schools that did exist early on served as “finishing” schools rather than preparation for college. Coleman wrote, “Single-sex school was, at the outset, schooling for boys. Schooling for girls was an afterthought, either in single-sex institutions of their own, or with boys, where small numbers made single-sex institutions inefficient. Boys’ schools, however, were dominant, and the elimination of single-sex schooling could be seen as elimination of that dominance.”

As late as 1990, James Coleman remarked that it was considered suspect to even study the question of single-sex schooling. The famous University of Chicago sociologist noted that there were times when “a societal consensus” dictates that “one institution is right,” and “coeducation is such an institution.”
The Young Women's Leadership School

The New York Post headline last spring said it all: “Grad Tidings.” The paper noted that the graduation rates of the city’s schools had risen, to 50 percent, and ran a chart showing the “best and worst.” And there at the top, under “best,” was The Young Women’s Leadership School: 100 percent.

Ann Tisch recalls “as if it were yesterday” the day in 1988 when she conceived of an all-girls school. She was on assignment for NBC’s Nightly News with Tom Brokaw, reporting a story about a large inner-city Milwaukee high school that had just opened a daycare center at the school. “I was interviewing these teen moms, whose babies were down the hall, and I said to one of them, ‘So where do you see yourself five years from now?’ And she just started to weep.” The light bulbs went on for Tisch, and she recalls saying to herself at that moment, “I don’t think we’re doing enough for these kids.”

Several years later, when Tisch left NBC, she returned to that moment and that insight and said to herself, “Why not offer those girls the same path that affluent girls are offered. A completely different path. A college preparatory path—and keep them out of the daycare business altogether. You could really start to break some cycles.”

Tisch successfully fended off the National Organization for Women and the American Civil Liberties Union. She stared down the zeitgeist and started a school that educated only girls. And now her school is at the top. And it got that way by focusing on academics, discipline (the girls wear uniforms), and college—and eliminating the distraction of boys.

“Now that I’ve experienced the closest thing there is to a boyless society,” said teacher Emily Wylie in an NPR commentary, “I’m prepared to say that it is different. My girls-school girls are louder socially and more fearless than girls I’ve taught in coed schools. Everyone here wants to read Hamlet’s lines, not Ophelia’s, when we act out the play.”

The Young Women’s Leadership School (known to everyone as TYWLS, or “twills”) is a big city school, located on the top five floors of an 11-story office building on busy East 106th Street in Manhattan, one of the poorest neighborhoods in New York. The school has 420 students, all girls, in grades 7-12. There are no admissions exams. “Anyone eligible to be promoted who attends a family conference and agrees to wear a uniform and participate in the college-bound program may apply,” says Kathleen Ponze, principal of TYWLS for five years and now director of education at the Young Women’s Leadership Foundation. The school receives three to four times as many applicants as it has openings. And even after the selection process (“we try to select a range of students we think will benefit from what we offer,” says Ponze), all the students are from disadvantaged homes—many of their parents did not graduate from high school, let alone attend college. TYWLS has a full-time college counselor and tours of college campuses begin in 7th grade.

TYWLS is intensely focused on education. “We have to be,” says Ponze, who grew up an “Army brat” and attended 16 different schools before graduating high school. “These kids come from one of the roughest neighborhoods in America. I saw a report in the Daily News that said that the area between 119th and 126th streets along Lexington has the highest concentration of convicted criminals in the city. That’s their neighborhood.”

Ponze was assistant principal at a large, “dysfunctional” middle school in the city when she saw an ad for principal of a new all-girls public college-prep school and applied. “I read all the research, and thought that my own personal experience in all-girls schools had been quite rewarding. Girls in the public school system really do deserve a choice.” And as a mother of a boy, she related to the other side as well. “They’re always wanting to take boys to the neurologist and get them medicated up—for what? For being a boy.”
In the 1960s and 1970s, the civil rights and feminist movements combined their equality crusade fervor to “open” previously exclusive men’s schools to women, and white schools to blacks. Public single-gender schools were all but eliminated in the process. Boston Latin, one of the oldest and most prestigious public schools in America, succumbed to coeducation in 1972, the same year that Congress passed Title IX mandating equal education for the sexes. Central High School in Philadelphia, founded in 1838, may have been the last all-boys public school in America when it finally went coed in 1983.

Although insulated from laws governing public schools, private schools felt the pressure as well, and many single-gender institutions, often fighting for economic survival, opened their doors to both sexes after 1970. For example, the Nichols School for boys in Buffalo, founded in 1892, accepted girls in 1973. Tabor Academy in Marion, Massachusetts, began in 1876 with male and female students, was a school for boys by the 1950s, and became coed again in 1979.

Yale went coed (in 1969), as did dozens of colleges and universities. The wave of coeducation sentiment was intense: even institutions that had arisen to offer women opportunity they couldn’t get in a man’s world were closed. In barely more than two decades, from 1960 to 1980, over half of the 268 women-only colleges in America closed, and many others went coed. By 1993, according to the National Institute on Postsecondary Education, Libraries, and Lifelong Learning, there were just 83 women-only colleges.

“Single-sex schooling seemed to be dying a slow but certain death,” writes Salomone. Coeducational institutions were considered “more socially appropriate, liberating, and enlightened.”

There was ample evidence to justify feminists’ skepticism about single-gender education, since for many decades (even centuries) such schooling was meant only to reinforce gender stereotypes and prejudices. “Only in recent decades have societies seriously begun to unlock the full potential of girls,” wrote David Von Drehle in *Time* magazine last summer, “but the cultivation of boys has been an obsession for thousands of years.”

Tinkering Around the Coed Edges

Once single-sex schools were knocked out of the ring, the gender fights occurred almost exclusively inside the coed arena. The American Association of University Women (AAUW) published a series of studies in the 1990s called *Shortchanging Girls, Shortchanging America*, which highlighted the fact that girls aged 9 to 15 suffered from lower self-esteem, less willingness to stand up for their views with teachers, and lower interest in science and mathematics than boys. The AAUW report sparked an intense national debate, with its findings that girls were disadvantaged in classrooms by, among many inequities, being called upon less frequently and encouraged less than male students.

Great efforts were made to make schools more girl-friendly—introducing new math and science curricula and teaching methods, for example—which seemed to succeed only in creating a “boys crisis.” “[B]oys rather than girls are now on the short end of the gender gap in many secondary school outcomes,” said Cornelius Riordan in 2000. “Currently, boys are less likely than girls to be in an academic (college preparatory) curriculum. They have lower educational and occupational expectations, have lower reading and writing test scores, and expect to complete their schooling at an earlier age” (see Figure 1).
Brighter Choice Charter Schools It has no endowment, does not pay any of its teachers $100,000, is only five years old, and has a campus that is not much bigger than the single building it occupies. The K–4 school that building houses—a corridor of poverty and despair in Albany, New York, that would shake even the resolute bones of an Emma Willard or John Eliot—is the best in the city.

“We beat the white schools,” beams Tom Carroll, founder of Brighter Choice Charter Schools (BCCS). “We’ve turned the achievement gap upside down.”

Tom Carroll is white. And he looks more like an accountant than a school reformer (although many school reformers these days have MBAs). The news that his charter school kids—98 percent black and 98 percent poor—had gotten top honors in the city on the math and English language arts tests made the former legislative assistant positively ecstatic.

He opened his school in 2002 in a renovated public school building (for which BCCS won a preservation award) on the edge of Albany’s tough Arbor Hill and West End neighborhoods. The public schools in that part of town were among the worst in the state—some said, in the nation. And while many people may have been surprised by Brighter Choice’s quick success, Carroll isn’t.

“One thing that I think we’ve shown is that race and economics need not predict outcome,” he says, matter-of-factly. “It often does in life, but it’s because those children are often consigned to the crappiest schools and therefore they have the crappiest results. Which shouldn’t shock anybody.”

Carroll says that single-sex classes is just one of the secrets to BCCS’s success. He makes no bones about the fact that he believes in “stealing good ideas” from others, including Amistad Academy, a celebrated charter school in Connecticut. “We think that, on the management side, if you have a highly focused, mission-driven organization, where you have discrete standards, high expectations, a data system that allows you to get constant feedback on how well individual standards are being taught in each of the major subjects, that allows you to take those regular people and turn them into unusually gifted performers.”

Until this year, when Carroll opened a new all-boys school (an $8 million renovation of a former shirt factory), BCCS was a K–4 school with separate classes for girls and boys. “The first reason,” says Carroll, “is to eliminate social distraction. In the elementary years it’s mostly goofiness. And then, as early as 4th and 5th grades, you start getting the hormonal issues of attraction and sex and boys and girls being impressed with each other and so forth.

“The second element is that there are certain things that boys and girls won’t do while the other gender is present in the classroom. So, if the girls are out of the classroom, it’s much easier to get boys to recite poetry, for example.

“The next big thing is that boys and girls develop differently, which is masked if you run a coed school. Boys are slower to gain literacy skills and girls are slower to learn math skills. But what does it actually mean as a practical thing to the teacher? Well, no matter where you want to bring the kid at the end of the day, you have to start where they are. So, if you have a boys and girls English class, you have to drop that class initially down to the level of the boys, who have no idea what you’re talking about. But when you do that, you’re shortchanging the girls. They’re already a half year, year, ahead of the boys. And in math class, where the boys are picking up quicker, you’re disadvantaging the boys to dumb the class down to the girls. So, paradoxically, by separating the kids by gender, we’ve almost totally eliminated the gender gap in both subjects.”

So determined to do the right thing was Carroll that he asked Cornelius Riordan to evaluate the school, from opening day in 2002. Riordan, who says he was given “complete independence,” has just completed five years of data-gathering. Though his report is not due out until the end of 2008, Riordan says that the preliminary results confirm Carroll’s approach. “Students attending Brighter Choice Charter School score far below average at the beginning of kindergarten, confirming their at-risk status,” he says. “But by the end of third grade they are scoring above the national average in reading, math, and science.” It is too early to know how big a role single-gender plays, says Riordan, but the results are nevertheless “quite remarkable. It’s an enormous accomplishment.”
In June 1996, the Supreme Court declared VMI’s all-male admissions policy unconstitutional while noting the advantages of single-gender education. All the justices—from Ruth Bader Ginsburg to Antonin Scalia—agreed that single-sex education offers positive educational benefits.

The problem has gotten so far out of hand—schools have become, some argue, anti-boy—that *Time* put Von Drehle’s report on the cover with the provocative headline, “The Myth About Boys.” The writer paints a bleak picture of the state of boys in our current school system. He recounts meeting Christina Hoff Sommers, author of *The War Against Boys*.

“She ticked through a familiar, but disturbing indictment,” Von Drehle writes. “More boys than girls are in special education classes. More boys than girls are prescribed mood-managing drugs. This suggests to her (and others) that today’s schools are built for girls, and boys are becoming misfits.”

In *Same, Different, Equal*, Rosemary Salomone concludes, “The data demonstrate that the prevailing system of education (overwhelmingly mixed-sex) is failing boys as well as girls, if in different ways, regardless of resource allocations.”

**Back from the Brink**

Initial efforts to revive single-gender public education were done in by “conventional values,” buttressed by what was then a sturdy Title IX ethos. “During the early 1990s a number of school leaders tried to set up single-sex schools or single-sex classes,” Riordan recalls. “That was happening in Detroit, in Ventura, California, in Rochester, and other places. In all of those cases—it was a sad story—they were driven out or shut down by principals and teachers and parents. The one in Detroit went to court, but for the most part they were shut down by political pressure and threats of legal action.”

Both Riordan and Salomone say 1996 was a turning point in the single-gender school wars. In June of that year, the Supreme Court declared VMI’s all-male admissions policy unconstitutional while noting the advantages of single-gender education. All the justices—from Ruth Bader Ginsburg to Antonin Scalia—agreed that single-sex education offers positive educational benefits. In writing the majority opinion, Justice Ginsburg, a long and tireless advocate for gender equality, noted that “single-sex education affords pedagogical benefits to at least some students” and concluded, “that reality is uncontested in this litigation.”

A few weeks after the Supreme Court ruling, Community School District 4 in New York City announced the opening of The Young Women’s Leadership School (TYWLS) in East Harlem (see sidebar, page 16). While it was the VMI case that got most of the nation’s attention by seeming to strike a final blow against single-gender schooling in the United States, TYWLS seems to have won the day. The girls’ school now has two schools in Queens, and one each in the Bronx and Philadelphia.

“Twenty years ago, all-girl schools seemed headed for extinction, a footnote in the story of American education,” writes Ilana DeBare, author of *Where Girls Come First*, an account of public and private schools for girls going back into the 1800s. “Today they are experiencing an extraordinary renaissance. Between 1991 and 2001, more than 30 new girls’ schools opened throughout the United States from Harlem to Silicon Valley, Atlanta to Seattle.”

According to Leonard Sax, executive director of the National Association for Single Sex Public Education, in 1995 there were just 3 single-gender public schools in the United States; by 2007 there were 86, with an additional 277 public schools offering all-girls or all-boys education programs within their coeducational buildings.
This reversal of fortune has been spurred in part by “a growing body of research that single-gender, especially at the middle school level, works,” says South Carolina Superintendent of Education Jim Rex, who campaigned on a platform that included making single-gender schools an option in every school district in the state.

Kathy Piechura-Couture, a professor at the Institute for Educational Reform at Stetson University in Deland, Florida, has studied children at the Woodward elementary school in Deland, which has had separate classes for boys and girls for three years. She concluded that boys and girls are different enough that they demand, or should be offered, separate schools. “We looked at gain scores and concluded that there is a significant difference for boys when put in separate classes,” says Piechura-Couture. Over the years, she explains, other researchers have discovered a significant number of differences between boys and girls that affect their learning abilities at any given time. “Girls have better hearing than boys, for instance,” she says. “So, if you have a room full of girls you don’t have to yell.”

A research review undertaken by the American Institutes for Research in 2005 culled the most reliable studies from a decade of research on single-sex education. Most of the research had been done on Catholic schools and more on girls’ schools than on schools for boys. The review found that roughly one-third of studies favored single-sex schools on measures of short-term academic accomplishment. The researchers characterized most of the remainder as finding no difference or having null findings. They found little support, however, for coeducational schooling being more effective. This, argue proponents of single-sex schools, suggests that parents should at least be given a choice.

More Is Equal

The resurgence of single-sex schooling has also been the result of hard-fought battles to recapture the benefits of difference and take advantage of educational choice. The rewriting of Title IX addressed confusion created by the restrictions in the original 1972 statute and the support for single-sex education in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Among proponents of the changes were Senators Hillary Clinton, Kay Bailey Hutchison, and Dianne Feinstein—women who have arrived, both Clinton and Feinstein via single-sex schools. Senator Hutchison, a product of coed schooling, in a 2001 American University Law Review article wrote, “Talk to students and graduates of single-sex schools (mostly private or parochial), and almost all will say with gusto that they were enriched and strengthened by their experience…. Study after study has demonstrated that girls and boys in single-sex schools are academically more successful and ambitious than their coeducational counterparts. Minority students in single-sex schools often show dramatic improvements in attitudes toward school, greater interest among girls in math and science, and dramatically fewer behavior problems.”

It is true, as Salomone says, that sometimes “same is equal,” other times “different is equal,” and still other times, “more is equal.” Part of what single-sex schools do is redress historic and historical inequities; another part is minimiz-

“Study after study has demonstrated that girls and boys in single-sex schools are academically more successful and ambitious than their coeducational counterparts. Minority students in single-sex schools often show dramatic improvements in attitudes toward school.”
promise of equality. As those who have studied the racial educational gaps in our public elementary and secondary schools have noticed, throwing children together does not solve the problems of dominance; it can, in fact, exacerbate them. The two notions of peer effects—race and gender—have been joined as more and more attention is being paid to “black boys” and schools that cater to them. That is surely what Tom Carroll, chairman of the Brighter Choice Charter Schools in Albany, New York, has proved (see sidebar, page 18). Increasingly, the single-sex school movement is seen, as Martin Luther King III told an Albany audience celebrating Brighter Choice, as a means of “liberation—liberation from prejudice, liberation from socially imposed limitations, and liberation of the dignity, capabilities, and potential for excellence that dwells in the heart of every human being.” Choice is opportunity. The choice of single-sex education is affirmative action for the sexes.

In a front-page story, the New York Times called the 2006 amendments to Title IX “the most significant policy change on the issue” in more than 30 years. The decision, of course, came with what Martin Davis of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute characterized as “a flood of criticisms from women’s groups and some civil rights organizations.” But the dire predictions about the resegregation of public schools and turning back the clock on civil rights gains for women never materialized. And while various groups threatened legal actions, none have materialized. It is a new world, especially for women, and serious educators seem to realize that single-sex schools and classrooms are not a threat, but another arrow in the quiver of education quality.

Peter Meyer, former news editor of Life magazine, is a freelance writer and contributing editor of Education Next.