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USA
WEEKEND



Outstanding Illinois
high school students
Eunice Lee, left,
Kara Yokley and Denab
Bates are part of a
bold experiment to see
if all-girl classes can
tap their potential.

HOW SCHOOLS FAIL GIRLS

A new book documents gender bias — and controversial proposals for fixing it, from girls-only classes to new textbooks.

BY MYRA AND DAVID SADKER

37.5 MILLION READERS EVERY WEEKEND

Why schools must tell girls:

'YOU'RE SMART, YOU CAN DO IT'

Bias in education is an issue that has stirred debate since 1954's *Brown vs. Board of Education*, the Supreme Court decision integrating public schools. In a new book out this week, *Failing at Fairness: How America's Schools Cheat Girls* (Charles Scribner's Sons, \$22), the focus is on girls. Authors Myra and David Sadker document how teachers and schools unwittingly shortchange girls up and down the educational ladder, from kindergarten through graduate school. Here the Sadkers, professors of education at The American University in Washington, D.C., and among the nation's leading experts in sex discrimination, describe the problem — and what educators and students are doing to combat it.

RACHEL CHURNER, 15, remembers seventh grade at her McKinney, Texas, middle school as the year she was scared silent. "You couldn't be too dumb because then you would be laughed at," she says. "But if you were too smart, you would be called a brain."

Rachel decided it was best for girls to be completely average. She stopped answering questions in class and tried to hide her intelligence. "If I got an A and people asked me how I did, I would say, 'I just got a B minus.' There were even times I wrote down the wrong answer to make a lower grade."

Reading from the same textbook, listening to the same teacher, sitting in the same classroom, girls

and boys are getting very different educations. For 20 years, we've been watching girls in the classroom and studying their interactions with teachers. After thousands of hours of classroom observation, we remain amazed at the scope and stubborn persistence of gender bias.

These studies show that from grade school to grad school boys capture the lion's share of teachers' time and attention. Whether the class is science or social studies, English or math — and whether the teacher is female or male — girls are more likely to be invisible students, spectators to the educational process.

One reason that boys receive more teacher attention: They demand it. Boys call out eight times more often than girls — and get real feedback. But when girls call out, they're more likely to be reprimanded or to get the brush-off with responses like "OK."

Girls not only are less visible in classrooms; they're missing from textbooks, too. Brand-new history textbooks still devote only 2 percent of their space to women. A simple test demonstrates the impact of this male curriculum. We've walked into classrooms — elementary, secondary, even college — and asked students to name 20 famous American women from history. We've given only one restriction: no athletes or entertainers. Few have met the challenge. Many couldn't name 10, or even five. One class of Maryland fifth-graders, embarrassed at coming up with so few, put "Mrs." in front of presidents' names, creating an instant list of famous-sounding women they knew nothing about. Other students wrote down names like Mrs. Fields, Betty Crocker and Aunt Jemima in a desperate attempt to find famous females.

Education is not a spectator sport. Over time, the lack of attention by teachers and the

omission of women in textbooks takes its toll in lowered achievement, damaged self-esteem and limited career options. The proof:

■ In the early grades, girls are equal to or even ahead of boys on almost every standardized test. By the time they leave high school or college, they have fallen behind.

■ By high school, girls score lower on the SAT and ACT exams, crucial for college admission. The gender gap is greatest in math and science.

■ On the College Board achievement exams, required by the most selective colleges, boys out-score girls on 11 of 14 tests by an average 30 points.

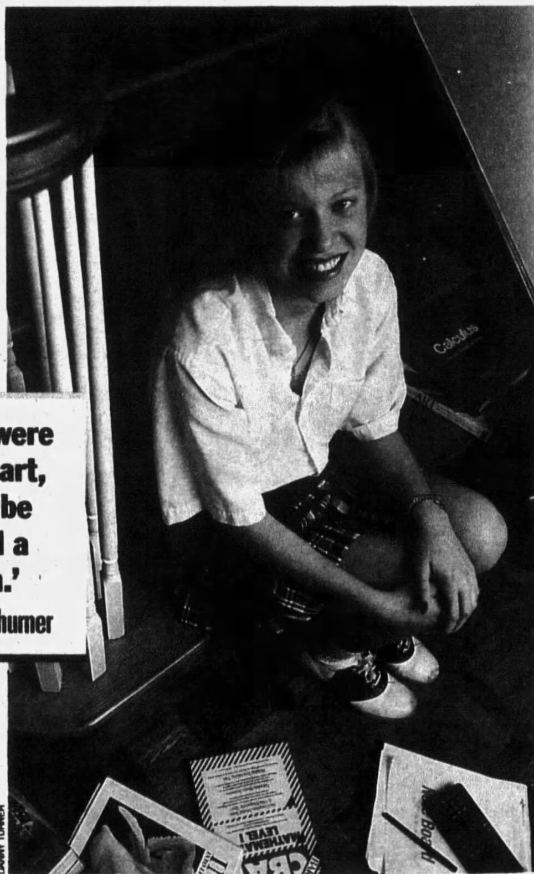
Today, in small towns and large cities across the nation, parents and teachers, concerned about the future of America's daughters, have begun to take action. From college professors in Urbana, Ill., to elementary school teachers in Portland, Maine, educators are asking for help, signing up for workshops that we conduct on fighting gender bias in the classroom. Women's colleges such as Smith and Mount Holyoke have started sponsoring special summer sessions to help elementary and secondary school teachers battle bias against girls, especially in math and science.

And high on the agenda for change is renewed interest in girls-only education, until recently an endangered species.

Although not everyone agrees, most studies show that girls in single-sex schools achieve more,

'If you were too smart, you'd be called a brain.'

- Rachel Churner



**BY MYRA AND
DAVID SADKER**

have higher self-esteem and are more interested in subjects like math and science.

Says Rachel Churner, now at Hockaday, a private all-girls school in Dallas: "Now I put my education first. I don't think that would have happened if I had stayed in my coed school."

Even coed schools are experimenting with single-sex classes. This includes some public schools, in one of the most surprising developments of the 1990s. After nine years of teaching coed high school math, Chris Mikles now teaches an all-girls Algebra II class at public Ventura

Girls are the only group who begin school scoring ahead and leave behind, a theft occurring so quietly that most people are unaware of its impact

(Calif.) High School. "The girls come in with such low self-esteem," she says. "I keep trying to get through to them: 'You're smart. You can do it.'"

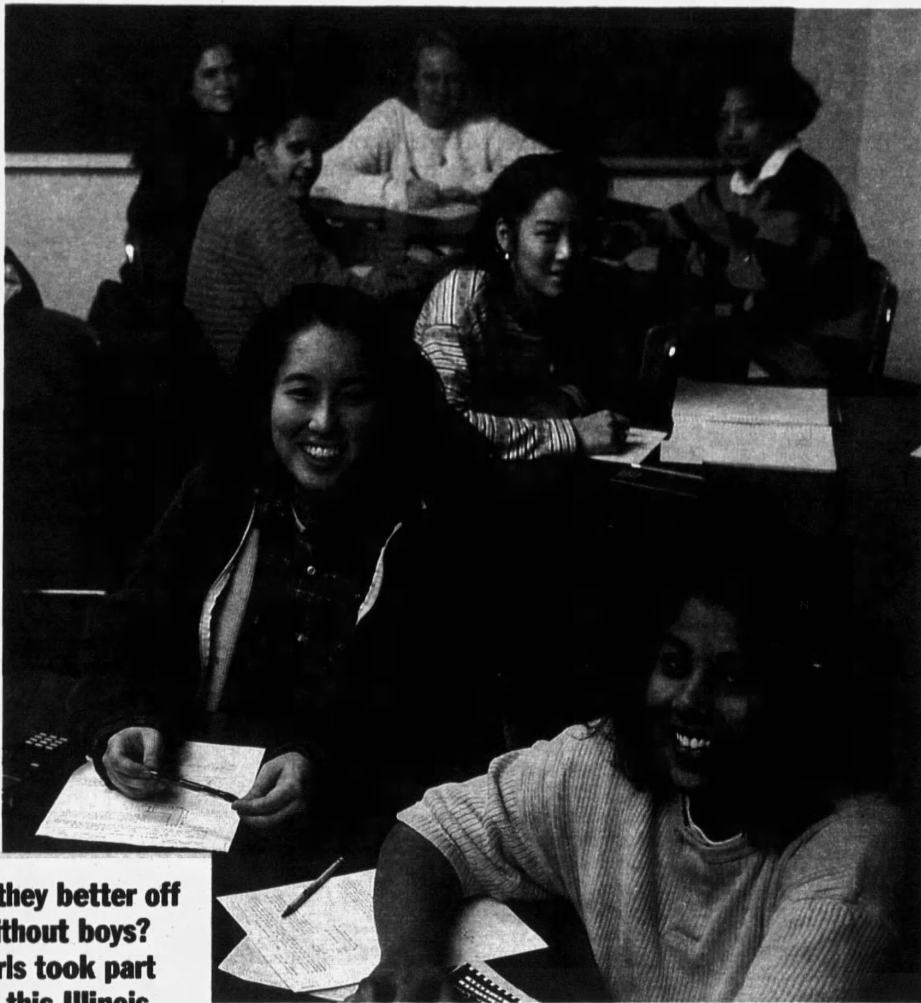
This year, the Illinois Math and Science Academy in Aurora, a public coed residential school for 620 gifted students, is trying for the first time an experiment that tests a girls-only class. In the first part of the year, the school separated 13 girls for an all-girls calculus-based physics class. For the second half of the school year, the girls have rejoined coed classes. School officials will compare their performance with and without the boys, as well as against the girls and boys in coed classes.

Girls in the experimental class are feeling the results. In the girls-only class, Denab Bates, 17, says she was "more enthusiastic, more there than in my other classes" — asking and answering more questions, jumping "out of my seat to put a problem on the board. In my other classes, I sink back — 'Oh, please, don't call on me.'" Kara Yokley, 15, also says she participated more, but she is not sure what will happen this semester as the class goes coed. "We need to make sure we don't lose our newfound physics freedom," she says.

Not every girl is as positive. "We took the same exams as the coed class, but the guys thought that girls weren't learning on the same level," worries 16-year-old Masum Momaya.

Legally, single-sex education in public schools is a sticky business. Laws like Title IX prohibit sex discrimination in public schools, including teaching girls and boys separately in most cases. In Illinois, educators say it works because IMSA is a laboratory school set up by the state to try innovations. In Ventura, Mikles says all-girls classes are permissible because they are open to male students, although not a single boy has yet enrolled.

Many educators have reservations that go beyond legal problems. They view single-sex education as a defeatist approach, one that gives up on girls and boys learning equally, side by side.



Are they better off without boys? Girls took part in this Illinois physics class in a test to find out.

Diane Ravitch of the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C., is outspoken in her view that girls already are treated fairly in the educational system. Ravitch, assistant secretary of Education under President Bush, points to the fact that more women than men are enrolled in college, more women than men earn master's degrees, and the number of women graduating with law and medical degrees has increased dramatically since 1970. "The success of women in education has soared in the last 20 years," Ravitch says.

Despite such progress, women still tend to major in lower-paying fields, such as education and literature. Today, a woman with a college degree earns little more than a man with a high school diploma.

The remedy? Realistically, most schools remain committed to coeducation for philosophic, legal and economic reasons. Increasingly, though, educators are becoming convinced that changes need to be made. And when teachers change, so do their students. Our research suggests these key ways to

Other critics say that the model focuses on "fixing up the girls" but leaves boys in the dust.

make girls more active and assertive:

■ Teachers and parents must encourage girls to speak up — both at home and in school.

■ Textbooks need to be monitored to make sure that enough women are included.

■ Seating arrangements in class need to be flexible, because students in the front or middle of the class get more attention.

■ Comments to girls should encourage their academic progress. "You look so pretty today" and "Your handwriting is so neat" — standard comments to girls — are less helpful than "What a great test score" or "That was an insightful comment."

Parents, girls and even traditional women's organizations are beginning to join educators in making such simple but important changes. And groups nationwide are providing support and service. The National Women's History Project in California, for example, develops books and posters on multicultural women's history. The Girl Scouts has featured images of active girls in printed materials and highlighted badges in math and science. The Women's Educational Equity Act Publishing Center in Massachusetts says requests for materials have surged

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recently, especially in science and math. The American Association of University Women has sponsored research projects and roundtables. The Gender Equity in Education Act, currently before Congress, proposes programs to help pregnant teenagers, combat sexual harassment and provide gender-equity training for teachers.

Throughout the history of education in America, the angle of the school door has determined the direction girls travel to various adult destinies. Sometimes the door was locked and barred; at other times it was slightly ajar. Today girls face subtle inequities that have a powerful cumulative impact, chipping away at their achievement and self-esteem. But as a new generation of teachers and parents enters the school system, and an existing generation becomes increasingly open to reform, schools and educators appear ready to adapt — and girls will be the winners. **W**

WHERE THE BOYS ARE

IT WAS NOT long ago that the focus was on boys — specifically, black boys, who some educators believed would benefit from

separate schools. That movement has since lost steam. "Without a body of research to prove their effectiveness," Myra Sadker explains, boys-only schools "ran into legal problems."

AN UPDATE:

■ **IN DETROIT**, the Malcolm X Academy, an elementary and middle school with 500 students, and two other public schools were established in 1990 as all-boys schools. They were forced to admit girls after a judge ruled the same year that single-sex schools violated Title IX. Today, Malcolm X is 92 percent male.

■ **THE MILWAUKEE** school board wanted to create three boys-only schools in 1990, after evaluating the poor performance of many black males in public schools. School officials halted the project after the Detroit decision; instead, schools changed their curricula.

■ **NEW YORK CITY'S** Ujamaa Institute, intended for black and Hispanic boys, has yet to open since the proposal was challenged in court by the New York Civil Rights Coalition.

— Myron B. Pitts