

South Carolina: Lessons from Two Years of a Statewide Initiative

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Single-gender education has exploded across South Carolina. Currently there are over 200 schools with single-gender classes and another 200 are exploring the option for the 2009-2010 school year. One of the reasons why single-gender education is thriving in South Carolina is due to the support of the State Superintendent, Dr. Jim Rex, and his creation in 2007 of a state level position to coordinate the single-gender initiative under the umbrella of public school choice.

Two years later, we have learned how to implement programs so that they have the best chance for success. Here are our Top Ten Tips for creating a single-gender program based on our experience.

1. **Choice.** All public school single-gender education must be a choice. Not only is this required by the Federal regulations of 2006, but it puts parents at ease. Many parents question the mandates of schools initially. By telling them upfront that single-gender programs are a choice, it turns the focus of these programs into an opportunity for them and their children.

2. **Designate a Point Person.** Someone at the school should be the coordinator or contact person for the single-gender program. This person may be the principal or the curriculum coordinator. A teacher could also fill the role. In any case, someone should be able to answer questions about the program, communicate with parents and the media, and be the liaison with the district or central office and other schools within the district who are considering single-gender programs. Coordination among schools will strengthen all programs.

3. **Know the Federal Regulations.** The school contact person should be familiar with the relevant federal regulations, which are available at our website www.ed.sc.gov/sgi. The attorney for the school district should also review all proposals for single-gender programs within the district.

4. **Make Gender a Schoolwide Focus.** Taking gender into consideration is not just a single-gender issue. Teachers in coed classes teach boys and girls too. And, in many schools, teachers teach single-gender classes as well as coed classes. All teachers should be involved in analyzing data through a gendered lens. Examining academic performance, attendance, discipline, and social issues in terms of males and females (as well as other subgroups) will help raise awareness among the entire school. That way, teachers of single-gender classes are not isolated from other teachers. This also keeps the school from creating a division among the single-gender program and coed classes.

5. **Support the Teachers.** All teachers in the school should be involved in some kind of training on gender. This can involve presentations by consultants, book studies, or sessions held district staff. Teachers of single-gender classes need to be interested and excited about the opportunity of teaching within a single-gender program. Teachers within single-gender classes may also receive additional training to focus on strategies that may work best within single-gender classes. These strategies may also be successful in coed classes and ultimately may be considered best practice, but how they translate within a single-gender class may also be different.

6. **Support is a Year-Long Process.** Teachers of single-gender classes need time to talk with one another about what is happening within their classes. They need to discuss what is working in their classes and what isn't working. They need to examine data from benchmark tests, student work, and anecdotal information. Teachers need to have time to visit one another's classes to see what happens there. If possible, they need time to visit other schools with single-gender classes. Teachers need to know that they are not alone in this process.

7. **Meet the Needs of Students; Do Not Limit Them.** In general, don't stereotype students. Use information about girls and boys to expand opportunities and build engagement. Understanding gender allows the teacher to further differentiate the classroom; it shouldn't restrict options.

8. **Community Comes First.** Take the time to build community among your students in single-gender classes. If students are not comfortable in the class, they will not take advantage of learning opportunities. Having all-girls and all-boys in a class can bring new challenges that should be addressed up front and routines should continue throughout the year. This is one of the reasons training and talking with educators who have worked within single-gender classes is so important.

9. **Procedures, Not Lessons.** Despite requests from teachers, there are no lessons that are just for boys or girls. Rather, teaching with gender in mind is all about differing procedures and strategies. Good lessons are still good lessons, but they may be implemented in different ways within a classroom that has different routines. In the beginning, teachers of single-gender classes should commit to five strategies or procedures that they will use within their boy classes and girl classes. Over the first quarter the teachers can meet to discuss, reflect, and perfect the use of these. After, they can add more strategies and procedures to their list.

10. **Communicate with Your Community.** Do not assume that your community understands the reason you are starting a single-gender program or what happens within single-gender classes. Host parent nights, curriculum nights, and morning meetings for questions and answer. Include highlights from single-gender classes within school newsletters. Invite the media to events that involve students from single-gender classes. It is important to build support and awareness of any new program, and this is especially important for single-gender programs as they are often misunderstood by the community members.

Publisher's Note: Additional information about legal issues regarding single-sex education in public schools in the United States is available at www.singlesexschools.org/legal.html.