

## Gender-Responsive Programming as a Pathway to Quality

---

Gender-specific programs, such as the Boys and Girls Scouts, have a long history in America. Founded in 1908, the Boy Scouts began in England under the guidance of Sir Robert Baden-Powell and quickly spread across Europe and America. Baden-Powell's approach to youth development influenced a Georgia-born woman named Juliette Gordon Low who established the first Girl Scout troop in the United States in 1912. From the beginning, the Girl Scouts explicitly addressed the issues of limited educational, professional and personal opportunities for women in American society. While early clubs focused on socially acceptable "domestic arts," the Girl Scouts quickly expanded programming to include ecology, physical health and civic leadership. Through the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Girl Scouts pushed a relatively progressive social agenda, establishing the first troop for physically disabled girls in 1917, troops for black girls in the 1920s, and a greater emphasis on the developmental needs of girls through multi-age programming in the 1960s. In the mid-1970s, the Girl Scouts re-affirmed their all-girl clubs and began to incorporate preventative and intervention programs on substance abuse, pregnancy and violence. Underlying these programs was a belief that girls and boys are different and require different types of developmental supports.

Like all social institutions, afterschool and out-of-school time programs reflect the values and challenges that shape civic life. Youth programs flourished in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as progressives such as Theodore Roosevelt expressed the need for a physically fit and moral citizenry that was uniquely American in the wake of successive waves of immigration. Midnight basketball leagues spread across America in the 1980s as activists looked for innovative ways to combat escalating youth violence. These were both explicit efforts, from two very different times, to provide youth development opportunities that build leadership, civic engagement and pro-social behaviors. Today, with the expansion of OST funding through departments of education and the increasing emphasis on achievement under No Child Left Behind, youth programs are under more pressure to align with the school day and adopt a more academic focus. Concerns about the future of America's economic standing worldwide are pushing more dollars into *STEM* (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) programs. Emerging research on early brain development and concerns over graduation rates and post-graduation success are refocusing efforts to get children and youth to both "*Thrive by 5*" and be "*Ready by 21*." Moreover, there is a shifting debate about the value of gender-specific programming in education and youth development both in and out-of-school.

### **Single-Sex Public Education**

In November 2006, the Bush Administration relaxed the Department of Education's Title IX rules that had made it illegal to discriminate by sex in schools that receive public money since 1972. School districts now have more freedom to provide single-sex education to address achievement as long as there are comparable coeducation offerings nearby. The ruling reversed more than 50 years of steady integration in public schools that began with *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 and later reaffirmed by Title IX. Single-sex education has become increasingly popular as advocates and policymakers nationwide wrestle with education reforms geared toward providing parents more choice as education consumers. It is also a hot-button issue for those who have used declining achievement and graduation rates for urban black and Hispanic males to argue that there is a "boy crisis" in public education. Many of these supporters, such as Leonard Sax of the National Association for Single Sex Public Education (NASSPE), believe that biological differences between boys and girls requires different approaches to education.

It is a trend with equally vocal opponents. Both the National Organization for Women (NOW) and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) challenge the validity of the research on learning, arguing that differences do not break down along gender lines. A recent study by the *Education Sector*, moreover, goes so far as to call the current emphasis on a “boys’ crisis” nothing short of hysteria. Looking back at national test scores over nearly 20 years, the report argues that boys have made significant gains in academic achievement in both math and literacy. Girls, however, have made even greater gains and in many cases are surpassing boys in achievement on indices where they have traditionally been behind. But there are more troubling trends that cannot be denied. Achievement for older high school youth has declined nationally for both boys **and** girls. Achievement levels for certain subgroups of students, specifically urban black and Hispanic males and students with special needs, are disturbingly low. Moreover, minority and disadvantaged boys are much more likely than girls to be diagnosed with developmental disorders such as autism or ADHD. As a result, boys make up two-thirds of all students in special education classrooms.

With research results mixed, the debate for or against single-sex programming seems to be as much social and cultural as it is scientific. In fact, some researchers who have found positive results in single sex education for girls, such as David Sadker (*Failing at Fairness: How Our Schools Cheat Girls*), question the movement to single-sex classrooms. “Here, 50 years after Brown, we’re actually codifying segregation,” notes Sadker, “the problem is fixing the coed classroom, not escaping from it.” Other researchers continue to poke holes in the single-sex argument, revealing that brain differences do not account for differences in ability and the developing brain has an enormous capacity for learning regardless of gender. Perhaps more relevant to advocates like NOW, the ACLU and the Feminist Majority Foundation, however, is the importance of integrated classrooms where boys and girls learn together to gain the relational skills and mutual respect needed in an increasingly integrated society.

Boston Public School Superintendent Carol Johnson has come out in support of single-sex classrooms as one strategy to address persistent achievement gaps. According to Johnson, “As we look at the data, we absolutely have to look at new ways to ensure the academic success of our young people.” The Massachusetts Secretary of Education, Paul Reville, has also endorsed looking more closely at single sex education, stating, “It strikes me as something that would be a worthwhile experiment for us to consider.” It is a sentiment that is shared by many powerful members of the state legislature. Currently, a few public schools in Massachusetts are experimenting with single-sex **classrooms**, including Boston’s Mario Umana Barnes Middle School and Smith Leadership Academy, a charter school in Dorchester that has utilized split boys and girls math and science classes for the past five years. Nationwide, there are currently 392 public schools that offer single-sex classes, only 97 of which are exclusively single sex schools. There are no single-sex public **schools** in Massachusetts.

Results are mixed. At Smith Leadership Academy, for instance, MCAS scores in math and science taught in single-sex classes were down, while test scores in English, taught in co-ed classes, were up. Teachers, however, report that students in single-sex classrooms are less distracted and participate more in class discussions. This may highlight a key limitation in the approach. A recent article in *The Boston Globe* refers to the all boys’ classrooms at East Boston’s Umana Barnes as the “flirt-free zone.” The implication is that we can better address the achievement gap by creating learning environments that are free of the natural expression of hormonal development, teasing, and other distractions that keep children and youth from focusing on their lessons. This conceptualization of single-sex classrooms is contrary to the advocacy of groups such as NASSPE who believe that the reason these attempts are unsuccessful in improving achievement is because they were not designed to offer an approach to teaching that incorporates brain differences in how boys and girls learn. In the fall of 2008, Superintendent Johnson has proposed opening two single-sex public schools in Boston, but the plan is currently on hold due to questions of legality under Massachusetts’ state law. Yet, there remain very real questions about the causes of gaps in academic achievement and graduation rates, especially with so many factors pointing to limited investment in youth development rather than pedagogy, curricula or the 6-hour school day.

### **Gender-Specific OST Programming**

A recent study of OST programming for girls in Boston, *Where Are the Girls?* by the Girls' Coalition of Greater Boston, outlines the challenges faced by youth programs serving girls. Whereas public education is seeing resurgence in single-sex schools and classrooms, youth programs, according to the study, are experiencing a "creeping coeducation" with limited investment in girls' programs. The authors attribute a decline in foundation dollars to a general perception that girls are doing pretty well. The report makes it clear that the problem is not coeducation programs themselves, but the fact that these programs cater to the needs of boys and in many cases reinforce gender differences and stereotypes. As such, boys generally have higher participation rates and there are overall lower retention rates for girls. This is very different from the argument against coeducation in public schools where classrooms are seen to be more girl-centric and not well suited to the developmental needs of boys.

Funding disparities are not new. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s various studies by organizations such as Girls Inc., found funding for boys' programs outpacing girls' programs at a rate of between 2 and 4 to 1. The majority of funding, however, was being directed toward coeducational programs. Significantly, programs serving both girls and boys rarely develop conscious policies around the value of a co-educational experience. For gender-specific programs, however, some conscious approach to serving either girls or boys is universal. Their gender identity provides the foundation for their mission and culture. This attention to program values has been shown to have a positive effect on the recruitment and training of adult staff, the types of activities provided, the nature of relationships and the physical environment. It is important to recognize that these characteristics of intentional programming are emblematic of quality OST opportunities. In fact, for many who promote the value of gender-specific youth programs, it is the intentional approach that drives the benefits youth will gain from participation. For girls' programs, the reasons include:

- Girls-only programs are designed with girls' experiences and strengths in mind.
- Adult women, who by example provide girls with inspiring role models, run most programs for girls.
- Girls-only programs help girls recognize the inequalities they face in the world and help them develop strategies to overcome those inequalities.
- Girls learn to respect themselves and one another.
- Girls learn the importance of connecting with other girls and focusing on issues of mutual concern.
- Girls learn about the different roles women can play in their families, in communities, and in the workplace.
- In terms of girls' development, these programs take on a role that other institutions (such as schools, communities, and families) do not.

Effective girls' programs come in many different forms, but they share certain characteristics. They tend to address the many different identities of girls, building cultural awareness around race, ethnicity and sexual orientation. Their program design and practices are structured to address the unique developmental needs and strengths of girls. Environments are both physically and emotionally safe and provide the opportunity for girls to connect in small groups that build relationships between participants and between participants and their adult mentors. Like all youth programs, girls' programs incorporate a variety of activities, from strength-based educational skill building to health awareness and career exploration. STEM programs have become more popular for girls. Girls Inc., for instance, runs a national *Operation Smart Program* (Science, Math And Relevant Technology) and is piloting a *Build IT* program to improve computer literacy and introduce girls to careers in IT. The curricula, however, uses more communications technologies and cooperative design work to leverage a natural tendency for girls to form relationships and collaborate. Health programs, moreover, increasingly focus on prevention and intervention services around sexual health, emotional well-being, pregnancy and parenting skills, mental health supports and

substance abuse prevention. Others provide opportunities for girls to engage in community service and career development.

### **Cultural Competency and Gender-Responsiveness as a Pathway to Quality**

Increasingly, cultural competence is being elevated as essential to quality programming, especially for middle school or older youth. A culturally competent program is able to respond effectively to people from diverse cultural, racial, economic, religious and ethnic backgrounds. They value and affirm the worth of individuals, families and communities and work with systems that build knowledge and skills in administrators and staff to provide supports for diverse populations. Culturally competent programs must also be gender sensitive, creating **context** (environment and staffing) and **content** (approach) that reflects an understanding of the role of gender in the lives of participants. When culture and gender are ignored, barriers to effective services will emerge and it will be difficult to achieve the short and long-term outcomes desired by communities. Being responsive to cultural and gender-specific needs is an investment that can lead to more effective service delivery, participation and positive outcomes. Culturally competent programs:

- Are customer-driven and responsive to the needs of youth served
- Reflect the youth served in their staffing and physical environment
- Value staff input in organizational decision making
- Attract a large pool of staff applicants because they exhibit an appreciation for diversity and a supportive working environment
- Are more desirable to funders who increasingly call for cultural competency
- Get more referrals from other community-based organizations because of their ability to support diverse needs
- Balance the needs of communities, organization, staff, and population served to maximize results

Most observers agree that attaining a high level of cultural competence is a process. It is a commitment that takes time and resources to educate staff and families about cultural diversity and community assets as well as an explicit recognition of the importance of cultural responsiveness in an organizational mission. Leaders of gender-responsive programs will have to be careful not to fall into common traps that inhibit quality. First, many programs approach **gender differences as fundamental**, often reinforcing traditional gender roles such as “*boys want to play basketball and girls want to talk.*” Second, many programs unconsciously make **boys the model**, emphasizing a common refrain that girls can do anything boys can do but not the opposite. Finally, many programs mistakenly fall into the trap of **emphasizing sameness** between boys and girls without understanding differences in physical and cognitive development, or social norms. Despite these challenges, there is evidence that gender-responsive programs that are either single-sex or coeducational can best meet the developmental needs of both boys and girls. According to the Girls Coalition of Greater Boston, effective practices of gender-sensitive programs include:

1. Needs assessment—determine needs of participants, their families and the community
2. Safe, supportive spaces
3. Shared responsibility and power
4. Mentoring relationships
5. Family and community involvement
6. Cultural appreciation and critique
7. Opportunities for new learning
8. Collaboration with other gender-sensitive programs
9. Gender sensitivity training and diversity training for staff and youth
10. Adequate funding for program implementation and evaluation

Again, it is important to note that these elements align with recognized practices of high-quality youth programs. Rather than creating new funding opportunities to address cultural competence and gender responsiveness as discrete competencies, funders and policymakers should re-focus on investment strategies that **improve the quality of all programs**. Improving service delivery across the spectrum of programs will go a long way toward improving opportunities and outcomes for both girls and boys. OST providers must reaffirm their mission to provide effective youth development, build intentional learning environments, and incorporate the needs and values of families and communities into their approach. Building awareness and empowering programs to create effective, culturally competent informal learning opportunities is critical. In order to do this, however, we need to advocate for more equitable funding that supports a true mixed system of opportunities for children and youth. As a field, OST needs greater control over the flow of money that supports programming. In order to gain this control, we need to advocate in a way that strengthens the identity and value of the field in relation to other public institutions that compete for funding.

### **References:**

- Bethany Carlson, "Career Perceptions of Middle School Youth: A Literature Review," *Career Resources Network Project, Gender, Diversities & Technology Institute, 2004*
- Christianne Corbett, Catherine Hill, and Andresse St.Rose, "Where the Girls Are: The Facts About Gender Equity in Education," *Washington: AAUW Educational Foundation, May 2008*
- Diana Jean Schemo, "Federal Rules Back Single-Sex Public Education," *The New York Times, October 25, 2006*
- Donald Meichenbaum, "Comparison of Aggression in Boys and Girls: A Case for Gender-Specific Interventions," *University of Waterloo, Department of Psychology, 2007*
- Elizabeth Weil, "Teaching Boys and Girls Separately," *The New York Times Magazine, March 2, 2008.*
- Kathryn Wheeler, et. al., "Where Are the Girls? The State of Girls' Programming in Greater Boston," *Boston: Girls' Coalition of Greater Boston, 2005*
- Heather J. Nicholson, et.al., "Gender Issues in Youth Development," *Carnegie Council on Adolescence, Washington, DC, February 1992*
- Lynn Knezevich, et.al., "Diversity of How Youth Relate . . . Examining Gender-Specific Issues & Responsive Programming," *Pennsylvania Council of Children, Youth, and Family Services, Membership Meeting, 2005*
- Rachel A. Metz, Julie Goldsmith and Amy J.A. Arbreton, "Putting it All Together: Guiding Principles for Quality After-School Programs Serving Preteens," *Public/Private Ventures, 2008*
- "Research on Education Boys and Girls Separately Versus Together Is Abundant But Far from Conclusive," *The Progress of Education Reform 2007: Same-Sex Schooling, 7(January 2007)*
- Sara Mead, "The Truth About Boys and Girls," *Education Sector, June 2006*
- Stacy Werber, "Cultural Competency and Gender Specific Services Resource Guide," *Oregon Commission on Children and Families, First Edition, April 2001*
- Teresa Mendez, "Separating the Sexes: A New Direction for Public Education," *The Christian Science Monitor May 25, 2004*