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COMMENTARY

Palaima: Single-sex education study flawed

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In the late 1960s, I learned how to read and think and talk and write at St. Ignatius High School, an all-boys school in Cleveland. Many of my teachers were Jesuit priests. They had doctor of divinity degrees and doctorates in a second subject area. They had done serious community service, like work among the urban poor in the United States or in foreign countries.

Our teachers at St. Ignatius were devoted to the life of the mind and to our minds. But they never forgot our souls and spirits and hearts. They taught us how to think. They even taught theology skeptically. My high school education prepared me to question my Catholic faith, but it instilled positive moral and social values that enrich my life to this day. I looked forward to school every day, although I had to travel 20 miles for 75 minutes on a public bus each way. I left home at 6:30 a.m. and got back in rush hour, about 6 p.m.

The buses were packed with working-class men and women and with teenage boys and girls going to Catholic high schools in the city. I felt lucky to be getting an education. I sensed how poor life could be without a cultivated mind and caring spirit. The worldly wise Jesuits reinforced this idea.

The controversy surrounding "single-sex schooling" and the Ann Richards School raised by a two-page article, "The Pseudoscience of Single-Sex Schooling," in the journal *Science* struck a deep chord in me and in others. I read the article as if it were assigned reading in a second-year English class at St. Ignatius. Here is my homework.

We might expect a priori that an article co-authored by eight active founders and board members of a national organization championing coeducational schooling would show some bias. It does.

Its authors, including a psychology professor at the University of Texas, accuse educators who support single-sex schooling of pseudo-science. For a psychology professor to join in doing this is "a pot calling kettles black." Psychology itself is not an exact science.

The eight authors criticize proponents of single-sex schooling for cherry-picking their arguments. But they cherry-pick a straw man, a random "teacher in a single-sex public school classroom," whose opinion they quote from a local newspaper, the *Gaston Gazette*.

Conforming to recent politically driven data mania within higher education, the *Science* article equates school success solely with standardized test scores. It declares that a sample single-sex school achieves the same high results as a sample magnet program. Instead of praising and supporting both kinds of schools, it proposes getting rid of single-sex schools. It then argues that

the high scores of students in both types of schools are linked to their admissions policies, as if this is somehow bad. Should we then eliminate both magnet and single-sex schools?

The *Science* article does briefly consider a larger social issue. But it has nothing to do with the wide range of reasons that make parents want to send their children to single-sex schools.

The eight authors cherry-pick a United Kingdom study that argues that men who have had single-sex schooling are more likely to get divorced than those with co-educational educations, yet "no parallel differences were found for women." We can make four points about this inept logical gambit:

Citing a U.K. study that isolates education as a factor in divorce is of dubious relevance to our American experience. British manners, customs, social attitudes and cultural values are very different from ours.

Does this mean that the authors think single-sex schooling is OK for women since they do not become more divorce-prone because of it?

If this were relevant and valid, why should we not isolate the factors in single-sex schooling that produce such results and adjust them to make men less divorce-prone?

My brother and I both went to coeducational grade schools. Unlike me, he went to coed high schools. He has been divorced twice. I have been divorced three times.

The factors leading to our divorces are many: family dynamics, religion, growing up in the 1950s, our individual personalities, our ex-spouses, bad luck.

I have seen therapists for more than 20 years now. Not one has said to me, "Tom, you should have gone to a coed high school."

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