

Successful Single-Sex Offerings in the Choral Department

By Nancy Smirl Jorgensen and Catherine Pfeiler

A Wisconsin school follows the lead of its choral directors to augment student learning.

Our choral program set the standard for a dramatic change in curriculum offerings at our high school. When administrators decided to incorporate a new approach to education, Gregg Wiczorek, our principal, knew of our department's successful reorganization of music classes to accommodate a variety of learning styles. He used choral department outcomes as proof of the benefits of single-sex classes.

In the United States, the opportunity in recent years for single-sex education in public schools has existed since a provision was added to the No Child Left Behind Act. To provide incentives and flexibility in setting up schools specifically for boys or girls, the provision designated same-sex schools and classrooms (consistent with federal law) as programs that can use federal funds. According to the National Association of State Boards of

Education (NASBE), proponents of single-sex education point to data and anecdotal evidence that demonstrate positive outcomes of single-sex schools in the private sector and for students who are at risk, as well as to new research showing the different ways boys and girls learn and develop.¹ Regulations that accompany the newly relaxed U.S. Department of Education rules that relate to single-sex education state that schools:

- Must have an "important objective," such as to improve educational achievement of their students.
- Must provide a "substantially equal coeducational class" in the same subject. In some cases, an equal single-sex class for students of the other sex may be required.
- Must make student enrollment in the single-sex class voluntary.
- Must reevaluate their single-sex programs every two years to make sure they're meeting federal requirements.²

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While there are no claims that single-sex education is a panacea for every educational problem, many experts believe it could solve some of the existing problems in American public schools.

A Look at the Evidence

The proposed benefits of single-sex education include an increased student commitment to academics, fewer sexually stereotyped behaviors, and higher student achievement.³ Detractors and skeptics question the benefits of single-sex education. Their claims state that most of the studies used to support single-sex education were completed in either private schools or overseas. They also suggest the documented higher achievement may have been a factor of family or the students themselves rather than the single-sex classroom.

Kathy Stevens of the Gurian Institute (located in Colorado Springs, Colorado), which studies learning, says, "Boys are just behind in general. We've worked with several high-performing schools where everyone is doing really well, and yet the boys are still behind. It's an across-the-board problem."

A June 2006 article in the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* reports on the success of an all-boys program at Kennedy Middle School in Germantown, Wisconsin. The program was begun in an attempt to remedy low test scores and discipline problems. According to the article, boys "accounted for the majority of office referrals, questioned their sense of belonging more than girls did, and their test scores were lower than girls', especially in reading." The school now offers one all-boys class per grade level for reading and social studies. Parents and administrators say the program has had a strong impact, and it is popular among the students. Anecdotal evidence described in the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* details the classroom success of Jesse Bowe-Fischer. Jesse had been reluctant to raise his hand or volunteer to read. After spending time in the all-boys setting, Jesse is no longer afraid to speak in front of groups and has encouraged his younger brother to conquer shyness through enroll-

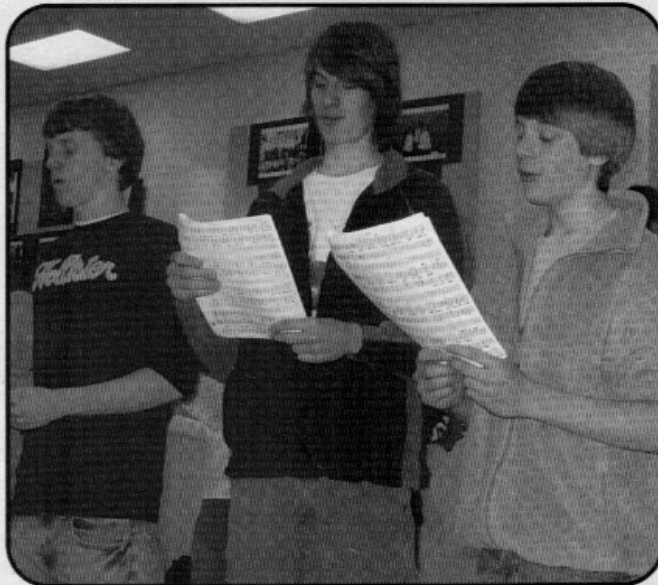


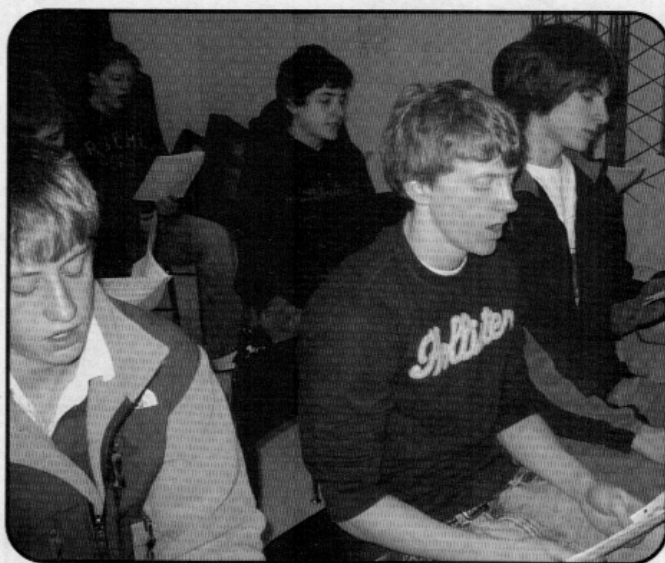
Photo by Nancy Yviri Jorgensen and Catherine Pieler

The chance to sing with peers of the same sex can be attractive to boys.

ment in the single-sex program.⁴

According to the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* report, another Wisconsin school district, Grafton, is also considering a self-contained all-boys class. With male-heavy eighth-grade enrollment, the class makes scheduling sense, but a state law requires schools that offer single-sex classes to also make available courses that are comparable for the opposite sex.

Strong arguments for single-sex classrooms are proposed by physician Leonard Sax, the founder of the National Association for Single Sex Public Education. He asserts that there are basic differences between boys and girls. According to Sax, "Girls and boys behave differently because their brains are wired differently."⁵ Rather than making educational approaches gender-neutral, Sax encourages teachers to use a method that takes advantage of the differences between boys and girls: "I suggest that the solution is



Boys often have positive musical experiences in single-sex choral ensembles.

first of all to recognize the differences in how girls and boys develop and second to embrace gender-separate educational and sports opportunities for both."⁶

It Works with Choirs

Single-sex public education may be making inroads as a fresh, new idea, but high school choir directors have a history of working with homogeneous groups. The ubiquitous Treble Choir has often been created to accommodate an abundance of girls; however, in addition to solving scheduling problems, it is an efficient way to address the unique characteristics and challenges of the female voice. A similar choir devoted to males can address the vocal challenges of the adolescent male voice. Being able to concentrate on these challenges (e.g., range, timbre, the changing voice) is easier and more productive in single-sex groups.

With the availability of literature for SSAA and TTBB choirs, it makes sense to organize choirs by sex. In other academic areas, it is rare to find content offered for only one sex. Math problems or science concepts do not demand a single-sex approach. Some

choral music, on the other hand, is naturally organized to accommodate all-girl or all-boy ensembles.

Seven years ago, the choral department in our high school created a new offering to better reach boys in the choir program. While the choral program was large (400-plus students) and fairly successful, the directors wanted to address several issues. Factors that influenced the decision to form an all-boys choir included:

1. Boys, whose voices are going through the most dramatic change in a lifetime, needed more time and attention.

2. The existing class dynamic, which included posturing, flirting, and attention seeking between sexes, stole time from instruction.

3. Intonation suffered because young male singers were confused. Singing against the girls, the boys struggled to find the right octave for their own voices.

4. Enrollment was satisfactory but not exploding.

5. For some, singing was considered a feminine pursuit.

6. There was little time to pursue high-quality TTBB music.

Based on these program needs, our

high school instituted a Baritone Chorale, an ensemble for freshmen and sophomore boys, open to any interested singer. Although there was an established Treble Choir (offered because of the abundance of girl singers) there had never before been a choir just for boys. The first year, about thirty freshmen and sophomore boys registered for the class. While pleased with the response, we learned later that enrollment might have been higher if the choir had a different name. There was some confusion about the term *Baritone Chorale* among not only the students but the guidance department as well. Apparently the students and counselors did not know that a baritone is simply a male singer possessing a range somewhere between tenor and bass. (Knowing the typical high school male vocal range, this seemed an appropriate description for the class, but the term was somewhat foreign to the average fifteen-year-old boy.) Questions about exactly what the Baritone Chorale was went unanswered, and for some students the unknown motivated them to register for other classes. The class description has since been clarified in the curriculum guide, where it is clearly explained as a choir for freshman and sophomore boys.

Since that inaugural year, our Baritone Chorale has gone from a class of thirty to one with ninety students. The majority of freshmen who complete the class sing well enough to join auditioned mixed choirs as sophomores. Some boys who are not yet qualified to pass the audition elect to take the class during both their freshman and sophomore years. There have even been some who choose to register for the class as juniors. The retention rate for boys who sing in Baritone Chorale is high, and many of the students sing all four years in the high school program.⁷ In addition, the Baritone Chorale introduces students to other opportunities in the choral program. Each year, thirty tenors and basses from the sophomore, junior, and senior classes are chosen by audition to participate in a credited music theater troupe. (These students are also required to continue their participation in a concert choir.)

Real Men Sing

A typical year begins with many of the boys unable (or unwilling) to match pitches. September and October find some of the singers speaking rather than singing, singing correct pitches in the wrong octave, or singing many inaccurate pitches. As the year progresses, the directors identify strong singers and place them strategically within each section to serve as leaders for the other boys. At the holiday concert, the choir usually performs in two- or three-part harmony, but still with some singers unable to sing pitches accurately. At the spring concert, however, the boys are singing challenging three- or four-part songs with almost 100 percent pitch accuracy. While some of the singers are unable to sing in tune alone, almost all can sing in tune when they are part of an ensemble.

For most of the year, the boys are organized in three parts (tenor, baritone, bass). Much work is done to correctly sort out voice parts. Some of the identification is accomplished by attempting easy, familiar songs that reach the outer ranges of the bass and

tenor voice. As most choral directors might expect, the majority of the singers are baritones. A few possess the low notes that are required by a typical bass part. A few have unchanged voices and therefore sing tenor, which at times is still too low for their vocal range. A few have changed voices that can be identified as tenor voices. The majority of the singers, who have neither the low bass notes nor the high tenor pitches, end up singing baritone.

Some years, there is an initial resistance to being identified as a tenor. Cultural factors that have been instilled in the typical junior high boy carry over to the freshman year in high school. These boys still believe it is masculine to sing low notes, but less than manly to sing tenor. This prob-

Single-Sex Ensemble Benefits

lem is easily remedied by featuring junior and senior singers in performance for the younger students. The Baritone Chorale tradition has led the program, creating a healthy supply of both tenors and basses. It is not difficult to find a tenor who also plays varsity football. An impromptu performance by such a student offers quick validation for hesitant young singers. While the football-playing tenor is in the room, his demonstration of the falsetto voice is a great way to encourage the underclassmen to experiment with this vocal range.

Seven years later, the creation of a boy's choir has proven extremely successful. What was designed to benefit a group of boys has proven beneficial also for girls and the program as a whole. Some of the specific beneficial results were:

- With only boys in the class, it is possible to explore the adolescent male voice. Every class period begins with a falsetto warm-up. Throughout the year, time is spent singing in bass range, tenor range, and falsetto range.
- An exciting class dynamic is possible with single-sex choirs. Boys can truly be boys.⁸ Their natural energy and exuberance, when channeled into the performance, results in robust singing without reservation. In our Treble Choir, girls readily accept positions of leadership and demand much of themselves and each other. In both groups, confidence develops. An atmosphere of encouragement and support is cultivated, with singers encouraging each other to perform and excel.
- Leadership in both the male-only choir and the female-only choir is easily fostered and encouraged by the staff. It is readily accepted and recognized by the student population. Through the prudent selection of instructor-chosen leaders, students

themselves promote discipline, positive attitude, and a strong work ethic. Peers of both sexes model positive behaviors and standards.

- Most of the singers will eventually sing in a mixed choir where they may explore the standard literature for mixed voices. The single-sex choirs offer an opportunity to explore TTBB and SSAA music as well.

- There is a high comfort level for both boys and girls in a single-sex classroom. Those who may be embarrassed or intimidated in the presence of the opposite sex can relax and feel comfortable. For both sexes there is a stronger tendency to perform in class. Students are more willing to attempt a new performance skill in class when fellow classmates are the same sex.

- Competition has been a natural by-product of single-sex classes. The Baritone Chorale members have a strong desire to compare favorably with their counterparts in the Treble Choir. Similarly, the Treble Choir members are inspired by the progress of the male singers. This competition has been a positive aspect of the class organization, motivating each ensemble to strive for improved vocal performance.

- Based on a tradition of high-quality performance, there is a keen sense of pride in the Baritone Chorale and Treble Choir. Students who spend two years in the group pass on this pride, as do brothers or sisters who have been members of the groups.

- In each single-sex choir, singers provide validation for fellow singers. A quick look around confirms that one's peers value singing. In high school, a student's activities can define his status in the classroom. The high enrollment in the single-sex choirs affirms the merit of choral participation.

- Recognizing the value of singing as a serious pursuit, a significant percent of each choir studies voice privately. The choral ensembles benefit from the refined training of their individual members.

- Enrollment has been strong and growing since the inception of the Baritone Chorale. An esprit-de-corps develops among the boys and makes membership in choir an enjoyable one. Their initial success in this beginning level choir motivates them to continue their music studies. Even in

“Students are willing to attempt a new performance skill in class when fellow classmates are the same sex.”

upper level choirs, the men enjoy performing TTBB music, and there is strong competition among those who want to be included in male-only ensembles, such as barbershop quartets and male octets.

Around the country, in response to low test scores and discipline problems, schools are exploring single-sex public education. As of January 2006, 211 schools in the United States offered some form of single-sex education.⁹ At our high school, the initial single-gender classes have begun. The 2006–2007 school year was the first time single-sex classes were offered outside the music department. For the 2007–2008 school year, our school offers one section for each sex in tenth-grade biology, tenth-grade

English, and ninth-grade English. Students were assigned to these classes on a voluntary basis. More students expressed interest than could be accommodated. As reported in the September 4, 2006, edition of the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, the American Civil Liberties Union will “be monitoring Arrowhead’s efforts to make sure the school doesn’t discriminate.” Based on the success of single-sex offerings in the choir department, administration can expect a positive result for both the young men and the young women.

Notes

1. NASBE (National Association of State Boards of Education) *Policy Update* 10, no. 11.

2. Michelle R. Davis, “New U.S. Rules Boost Single-Sex Schooling,” *Education Week* 26, no. 10 (November 1, 2006): 5–13.

3. Valerie Lee and Anthony Bryk, “Effects of Single-Sex Secondary Schools on Student Achievement and Attitudes,” *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 78 (1986): 381–95. The research that led to this conclusion compared graduates of Catholic single-sex high schools with graduates of Catholic coeducational private schools.

4. Katharine Goodloe, “Schools Trying All-Boy Classes,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, June 6, 2006.

5. Leonard Sax, *Why Gender Matters: What Parents and Teachers Need to Know About the Emerging Science of Sex Differences* (New York: Doubleday, 2005), 28.

6. *Ibid.*, 242.

7. Enrollment in the Baritone Chorale (freshmen and sophomore males only) for school years 2004–05 and 2005–06 was 143. Enrollment of junior and senior males for 2006–07 was 58. Baritone Chorale is a popular choice for students who need to fulfill a one-year fine arts credit. Many choose to continue with choir after their initial year in the program but must pass a rigorous audition to be admitted to the junior/senior concert choir.

8. Consideration should be given before assigning presumed “natural” male tendencies to all boys. In an extensive Australian study of single-sex education, this inclination is acknowledged: “The tasks this teacher set were designed to promote boys’ supposedly natural predisposition to compete with one another which, in turn, is tied to their desire for public recognition and validation. Alternatively, girls were constructed as passive in their approach to learning tasks, but intrinsically motivated, concerned more about process and committed to working carefully and, by implication patiently, to produce a polished product.” The study draws the conclusion that, “This suggests that pedagogies that are modified to cater for boys’ perceived learning needs often involve masculinising practices which reinscribe what is constructed as a ‘natural’ masculinity. In short, rather than opening up such a gender regime for critical interrogation, it is reinstated and reinforced.” Wayne Martino, Martin Mills, and Bob Lingard, “Interrogating Single-Sex Classes as a Strategy for Addressing Boys’ Educational and Social Needs,” *Oxford Review of Education* 31, no. 2 (June 2005): 237–54.

9. Naomi Thiers, “Do Single-Sex Classes Raise Academic Achievement?” *Educational Leadership* 63, no. 7 (April 2006): 70. ■

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