

**Perceived Benefits of Single-Gender Education:
Why Do Parents Choose Single Sex Charter Schools**
by
Joseph Strzempka
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*We accept this report as conforming to
the required standard.*

[Dr. JoVictoria Goodman]

(GIE Program, School of Education, Drexel University)

[Dr. Kristy Kelly]

(GIE Program, School of Education, Drexel University)

[Dr. Noah Tennant]

(Principal, Boys' Latin of Philadelphia Charter School)

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Abstract

Parents now have unprecedented choice in selecting schools for their children to attend. An increasingly popular school option for parents is the single-gender charter school. This report aims to elucidate parental motivations for sending their child to a single-gender charter school.

The research was conducted at Boys' Latin of Philadelphia Charter School (BLPCS) in Philadelphia, PA. A mixed-methods approach for data collection was used in this study. A survey to gather data on parental perceptions of single-gender charter schools was sent to 512 parents. Three focus groups were conducted with parents in groups of two to six.

Overwhelmingly, parents stated that they chose a single-gender charter school for their son because they believed it to be the best environment to maximize schooling outcomes. Parental motivations for sending their son to a single-gender school included "the opposite sex as a distraction", "academic growth", "personal growth", and "peer effects". While the single-genderedness of BLPCS played a role in nearly every parent's decision-making model, no parents stated it was the primary reason for enrolling in a single-gender school. Rather, the single-gender nature of BLPCS allowed for an environment in which other goals of schooling could be more easily attained, especially academic achievement. This case study highlights a parental demand for single-gender schools in order to maximize schooling outcomes including academic achievement. With federal dollars available for educational innovation through NCLB to improve low performing schools, including the opening of single-gender charter schools, there are opportunities for educators, government, and private firms to supply single-gender schools in the education marketplace especially in districts where there is school choice. Finally, similar case studies should be conducted at other charter schools so that school administrators can better understand parental motivations for selecting schools with unique characteristics.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Background and Overview of Research Problem

Parents now have unprecedented choice in selecting schools for their children to attend. Schools with detailed, narrow charters now abound across big cities in America. For example, parents in Philadelphia, PA can send their children to Afro-centric charter schools, technology-based charter schools, performing arts charter schools, Freirian-inspired charter schools, language immersion charter schools, and single-gender charter schools. With so many choices how should families decide to which type of charter school, if any, to send their children? School choice movements have been implemented across the country as a remedy for underperforming and failing public schools. Pro-school choice reformers lean on market-based principles to raise student achievement. Additionally, legal groundwork and federal legislation laid in the early to mid-2000s provide footing and incentives for the opening of single-gender public and charter schools. Families that are unable or unwilling to pay for private schooling should have an opportunity to choose the school that their children attend and the government has an interest in providing parents with a diversity of school choice options (Sullivan, 2003). Finally, in a widespread choice environment it is important that charter schools have a robust understanding of parental decision-making models for selecting schools for their children. This is a case study that involves one such school site, Boys' Latin of Philadelphia Charter School (BLPCS), to explore perceived reasons parents have for sending their children to single-gender charter schools.

Problem Statement

Single-gender charter schools, having proliferated in a climate of school choice, now enroll a growing market share of public school students. However, there is no research known to me detailing the benefits perceived by parents of enrolling their children in a single-gender charter school. This void in the research will be addressed by conducting a case study of benefits perceived by parents at one such school, BLPCS, an all-boys, charter high school in Philadelphia, PA. This study will collect data on forces driving the selection of a single-gender public school over the plethora of other public, charter, religious, and private choices in Philadelphia. Knowledge gained will aid Boys' Latin, and perhaps other single-gender public and charter schools, in recruiting and retaining students by amplifying desirable attributes of single-gender education as perceived by parents.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to elucidate parental motivations for sending their children to single-gender public schools, specifically sending their sons to BLPCS. Currently, research in this area is focused on the choice between public and charter schools or academic performance of students at public schools compared to charter schools. Regarding choice, research is often placed in a particular context and is not generalizable. Regarding performance, research is conflicted largely along ideological lines or finds negligible differences in public versus charter school performance. Understanding parental motivations will aid single-gender charter schools to better recruit and serve students. Single-gender charter schools can magnify and scale desirable attributes and discard features unimportant to parents or the learning process. Finally, by determining why parents choose single-gender charter schools, such schools can scale up to offer a single-gender setting to a broader segment of the population.

Research Questions

The following questions guide this research study:

- Why do parents/guardians choose to send their children to single-gender charter schools?
- What role do single-gender charter schools play in a school choice environment?
- What perceptions do parents/guardians have of single-gender education?
- Are the motivations for sending children to single-gender charter schools purely academic or do parents perceive favorable social/peer factors?

Theoretical Framework

This research will be conducted as a case study of BLPCS. The parental choice to send a child to a single-gender school is a distinct, “naturally existing unit” capable of being studied (Bogden & Biklen, 1998, p. 55). The unit to be studied is the parental perceived benefits derived from choosing a single-gender charter school for a son. The group to be studied is the parents of BLCPS students. Because this group shares a common *trait* (a son at BLCPS) but may or may not share an *identity*, a mixed methods approach will be employed (Bogden & Biklen, 1998). Internal sampling will occur because not all parents are expected to participate, but the aim is to garner the highest rate of participation possible over a one-month period in July 2014. Finally, this will be a substantively focused case study to tell something about parental motivations and perceived benefits of single-gender charter schools.

In this study I plan to utilize both focus groups and closed-ended survey questions. I intend to use focus groups because they allow for “participants [to] express multiple perspectives on a similar shared experience,” in this case, selecting a single-gender charter school (Glesne, 2011, p. 130). Presumably, each parent wants what is best for his or her child and thus differing

motivations for choosing BLPCS can be taken as genuine and unique (Kelly & Scafidi, 2013). A focus group will also allow for dialogue among parents on their school choice process and what was most important when selecting a school for their son. As a teacher I am comfortable with the pressure placed on moderating the focus group, doing such tasks on a daily basis with students. To gain base-line experiential data, I will ask parents to introduce themselves, share the names and grade levels of their sons, and indicate why they chose BLCPS (Glesne, 2011). I will conduct three to five focus groups with parents in groups of six to ten. I intend to involve parents of current students who are members of the Boys' Latin Extended Family Network (EFN), which is something like a PTA, and parents of incoming freshmen. These groups of participants are both homogenous and heterogeneous. They are homogenous in that they all have chosen Boys' Latin as the school for their sons; they are heterogeneous in that they may be male, female, of differing socioeconomic status, sexual preference, or religion. Participants will not be compensated but refreshments will be offered. Focus groups will last between one and two hours. I will audio-record the discussions, transcribe them, and code participant responses into categories such as, but not limited to: "academic concerns," "peer effects," "safety," and "convenience."

However, because focus groups are not generalizable due to the small number of participants I will also conduct a closed-ended survey (Glesne, 2011). The focus groups will help to understand parental ways of thinking about single-gender education by having conversation with small groups of parents. The survey will be conducted electronically (on mobile device or computer) and disseminated via the *Boys' Latin Ledger*, a weekly email correspondence from the school to parents. Though case studies are never generalizable, this mixed-methods approach will lend validity to the study. Participation will be voluntary.

Importance of the Study

While scholarship abounds on traditional public school academic outcomes versus charter school academic outcomes and there is emerging research on who chooses charter schools and why, literature on parental motivations for choosing single-gender charter schools is non-existent. However, the number of single-gender public education settings has increased 200-fold since 1996, with nearly 600 such settings today (NACE, 2014). This study will illuminate parent perceptions of single-gender charter schools that will allow for charter schools to better market themselves to consumers which will result in better matching between school and student. With billions of federal education dollars at stake for educational innovations and reform through grant programs like NCLB and RTT, single-gender charter schools may also provide states an avenue for increased federal funding for education. While there is no research on the perceived benefits of single-gender education in the public or charter school system, this study will complement previous studies of school choice, especially research identifying who chooses charter schools and why (Stein, 2009) and what parents want from schools (Finn & Petrilli, 2013; Kelly & Scafidi, 2013) by providing single-gender charter schools with parental perceptions of single-gender education.

Providing a framework for others to conduct research on parental motivations for single-gender charter schools will allow the study to be replicated in other school or charter contexts. In academia, this will provide further research opportunities. In the private sector, this will provide consulting opportunities. The benefits of this framework are:

1. Single-gender charter schools will be able to recruit more students. Single-gender charter schools can tailor marketing strategies that magnify the aspects of single-gender schools to which parents are most attracted.

2. Single-gender charter schools will retain more students by adopting school policies that reinforce positive perceptions and alter negative perceptions parents may have of single-gender charter schools.
3. Individuals, groups, and firms wishing to open a single-gender charter school will be able to create a brand that maximizes parent demand for the new school.
4. Traditional public schools wishing to implement single-gender class offerings or single-gender schools in a non-competitive environment (i.e. an environment without charter schools or vouchers) will have more information regarding what parents like and dislike about single-gender environments.

With more information, parents and schools will be matched with greater efficiency by reducing the number of student transfers due to poor matching. Transferring schools affects student achievement and engagement (Galton, Gray, & Ruddock, 1999) and costs schools both time and money.

Study Limitations

As a current teacher and grade level chair at Boys' Latin I must be aware of potential dangers in conducting my research. Parents may be reluctant to express reasons for attending a single-gender charter school that may be viewed as illegitimate by me or may feign that single-genderedness was a reason for attending Boys' Latin. For example, a parent may hesitate citing convenience of location as the primary reason for attending Boys' Latin because it has no relation to academic performance or positive peer effects. Additionally, I have to be wary that parents may have chosen Boys' Latin for reasons entirely unrelated to its single-gender setting and should take care not to influence discussion or interpret data through only this lens.

As a qualitative study, in no way do I expect this study to be exhaustive of all of the reasons why parents send their children to single-gender charter schools. Nor do I intend to uncover the perceptions all parents have of single-gender charter schools because I will only be interviewing and surveying parents of students already enrolled at single-gender charter schools. The research site for this study is Boys' Latin of Philadelphia Charter School (BLPCS). BLPCS is a college-preparatory, public charter school for boys, founded in 2007 and located in West Philadelphia. Because this study will only be conducted at one site, findings will not be generalizable. Study findings may only illuminate why parents choose Boys' Latin, why low-income black families choose single-gender public schools, why parents of boys choose single-gender public schools, why parents choose single-gender public schools in Philadelphia, why parents choose single-gender public schools in urban contexts, or any other host of factors associated with school choice. I will also only have access to parents willing and able to participate in the study who may not be representative of the entire school's population. While results may not be generalizable, this study will provide a methodological framework for how to conduct research on parental motivations for selecting a school in a choice environment. That is, the research methods will develop a replicable framework for use at other charter schools.

Definition of Terms

School choice environment – A public environment in which parents have an option of public and/or charter schools to send their children.

Charter school – A free, public school that is funded by local, state, and federal entities and private donations that is issued a charter from the local governing school district to operate.

Traditional public school – A free, public school that is funded by local, state, and federal entities, operates under the local school district, and enrolls students based on geographical proximity (neighborhoods).

College preparatory – A schedule of high school courses aimed at preparing students for four-year college.

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) – Federal education legislation enacted in 2001 that established mandatory annual growth in academic performance as measure through state testing.

Race to the Top (RTT) – Federal education legislation awarding grant money to states for educational innovations.

Summary

School choice in the form of charter schools is abundant throughout the city of Philadelphia. However, research on parental motivations for the type of charter school they choose is nonexistent. This study will illuminate why parents have chosen Boys' Latin of Philadelphia Charter School, a single-gender charter school located in West Philadelphia, for their children. Additionally, the research methods will develop a replicable framework for use at other charter schools. I will employ focus groups and surveys to collect data. This will complement previous studies of school choice, especially research identifying who chooses charter schools and why (Stein, 2009) and what parents want from schools (Finn & Petrilli, 2013; Kelly & Scafidi, 2013) by providing single-gender charter schools with data about parental perceptions of single-gender education.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction of Problem

Today, charter schools are still championed to close achievement gaps both domestically and internationally (Ravitch, 2011). In 1996, there were over 800 charter schools operating in 25 states (Welk, 2010). In 2009, there were about 4,600 charter schools with 1.4 million students (Ravitch, 2011). Included in these 4,600 charter schools are college preparatory schools, remedial schools, STEM schools, constructivist (afro-centric, Freirian, feminist, etc.) schools, visual and performing arts schools, bilingual schools, vocational schools, and single-gender schools. The National Association for Choice Education (NACE) (2013) also demonstrates that there are districts, charter operators, families, and students that desire a single-gender setting with the almost 200-fold increase in single-gender schooling options for families from 1995 – 2013, from 3 to 590 such settings. This increase can largely be attributed to revisions to the NCLB legislation in 2006, which identified single-gender schools as an acceptable innovation to turn around failing traditional public schools (Sullivan, 2013).

There is a mountain of literature on academic achievement in charter schools versus traditional public schools (CREDO, 2013; Booker, Gill, Zimmer, & Sass, 2009; RAND, 2009), much of it conflicting or finding little, if any, statistical difference on test scores or proficiency levels. With the proliferation of charter schools, there is an emerging corpus of literature on who chooses charter schools and why (Stein, 2009; Allen & Consoletti, 2010; Kelly & Scafadi, 2013). Moreover, advocacy groups like the NACE have formed to disseminate best practices in public single-gender education and to protect single-gender public schools from lengthy and/or expensive legal battles. Numerous studies have been conducted that show benefits of public single-gender education (Park, Behrman, & Choi, 2013; Kessels & Hannover, 2010; Riordan,

1990; Mead, 2006) or not (Hyde, 2014; Sommers, 2013; ACLU, 2013). However, there is no research-supported evidence on *why* parents choose single-gender charter schools in competitive environments or parent perceptions of non-private single-gender traditional public or charter schools.

I intend to use these sources on school choice to provide background on how and why the school choice movement came to prominence in the arena of education reform. On the most basic level, proponents of charter schools argue that charters can do a better job educating students for less money per pupil and competition among schools for students will raise the quality of institutions. That single-gender charter schools (and even traditional single-gender public schools) have emerged in force indicates a belief, at least among educators, that there is a niche for single-gender schools and/or course programs in an education marketplace. In economic terms, parents have a demand for single-gender school settings and charter operators are entering the market with supply. While the issue of single-gender charter supply and demand is outside the scope of this study, this study may act as a starting point for determining a market equilibrium for single-gender public schools. As charter operators continue to supply single-gender schools with the use of public dollars and ostensibly take market share from coeducational public schools and perhaps private single-gender schools, it is of utmost importance to understand why parents demand and choose single-gender schools. Thus, this study will inform suppliers of single-gender education about what makes their schools desirable to parents. Because BLCPS is both a charter school and a single-gender school, my research comes at the intersection of school choice and single-gender education.

Historical and Current Studies

Background of school choice

Education and international competition

In the 1950s, President Eisenhower mobilized the power of the federal government to pass the National Defense of Education Act (NDEA) in order to compete with the launching of *Sputnik* by the USSR (ed.gov, 2014). America needed more engineers, scientists, and mathematicians to win the space race. The stakes were high with America's social and economic preeminence at risk. The NDEA is an early landmark in the United States for linking national educational attainment with international economic competitiveness and a launching point for educational reforms aimed at increasing the economic welfare of the nation. Specifically, the Act was designed to increase the accessibility of college through loans and grants in order to generate more graduates in math, science, and engineering to help in defending the US against the encroachment of communism and the USSR (ed.gov, 2014). It broadened the choices Americans had following secondary education, namely, attending college.

The Battle for Access and Equity.

Less than a decade later when President Lyndon B. Johnson declared the War on Poverty, Congress passed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) (Whilden, 2010). The Act affirmed that access to education was a key component to ending poverty (Whilden, 2010). Furthermore, the ESEA is the far removed antecedent of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001, a critical juncture in the school choice and accountability movement that has grown in tandem with charter schools and single-gender public education. However, in 1956 when the original ESEA was passed, the aim was to grant women and people of color equality of access to a public education as a means to end poverty (ed.gov, 2014). Unfortunately, persistent racial

discrimination, white flight, and *de facto* segregation have shown poverty to be one of the great intransigent problems in the United States, with access to education making up only a small piece of the solution. Nevertheless, ESEA increased choices for a broader segment of the American population, the freedom to achieve their personal dreams through education. With ESEA legislation and Title IX, the number of public single-gender schools decreased dramatically (Kiselewich, 2006). Interestingly, as single-gender schools have proliferated in the last two decades, opponents of such schools have argued single-gender public schools and classroom settings violate the requirements of the Fourteenth Amendment's Equal Protection Clause and/or Title IX (*Craig v. Boren*, 1976; *Vorchheimer v. School District*, 1977; *Mississippi University for Women v. Hogan*, 1982; *United States v. Virginia et al.*, 1996; *A.N.A. et al. v. Breckenridge County Board of Education et al.*, 2011). Yet, educational access and choice were identified as key to social mobility in ESEA legislation.

As the fight for equality of access and the quality of education raged on into the 1980s, conservatives began to fight for school choice in order to instill free-market principles into public education (PBS, 2001). The landmark *A Nation at Risk* report published in 1983 under the Reagan administration declared a "rising tide of mediocrity" in the US public education system (Ravitch, 2011). This critical juncture marked the start of the accountability and choice movements in the public education sphere and mainstream media and has paved the way for single-gender public education settings today. The accountability and choice movement in schools is a smaller piece of the neoliberal economic movements of the Thatcher government in the U.K., Finance Minister Deng in China, and President Reagan in the United States that sought to privatize a host of government services. Reagan's legislative pushes for choice through school vouchers were largely unsuccessful in part because the Congress, which was controlled by the

Democratic party at the time, was closely aligned with the teachers' unions that were strongly opposed to any system of choice and political wrangling ensued over whether or not vouchers could be used at Catholic and private institutions (Ravitch, 2011). However, the narrative of the failing public school system has remained and is still cited by reformists today.

School choice as a panacea.

While vouchers were soundly defeated in districts and states throughout the 1980s, the need for school choice, accountability, and responsiveness to market demands, including single-gender settings, remained in the public's consciousness and was propagated in articles and books like Chubb and Moe's (1990) book *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools*. Many business and civic leaders now believe instead of the government monopolizing public education, the government ought to endow parents with options for their children's education (Kelly & Scafidi, 2013). Chubb and Moe (1990) audaciously proclaimed that "reformers would do well to entertain the notion that choice *is* a panacea [and]...has the capacity *all by itself* to bring about the kind of transformation that, for years, reformers have been seeking to engineer in myriad other ways" (p. 217). Eventually vouchers would gain limited popularity in the US, most notably in Milwaukee, where, in 1990, the state legislature, governor, mayor, and the city's business leadership came together to establish the first large-scale voucher program (Ravitch, 2011).

However, just as the voucher proponents won a large battle in Milwaukee (Ravitch, 2011), a new form of school choice was taking root in the form of charter schools. Charter schools are publicly funded schools that are granted a charter, usually five years in length, and that are managed by a private organization, either non- or for-profit in nature (Ravitch, 2011). Charter school proponents argue that because charter schools must react to market forces they will innovate new teaching and learning methods that raise overall academic achievement and

close the achievement gap for urban minorities. Both liberals and conservatives adopted support for charter schools; liberals saw them as a politically viable alternative to vouchers, while conservatives embraced the deregulation of the education market (Ravitch, 2011). The federal government began to incentivize education reform, including proliferating choice, first under No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and today under Race to the Top (RTT) (Sullivan, 2013). Finally, as Ravitch (2011) states, “not only would charter schools unleash innovation and produce dramatic improvements in academic achievement [at charter schools], but competition would cause the regular public schools to get better” (p. 125). Choice and competition as drivers for school improvement have become conventional wisdom among some school reformers.

The growth of charter schools.

By the mid-1990s, from Texas to Minnesota, California to Pennsylvania, school choice, whether in the form of vouchers or charters, was touted as a cure for fiscally or academically failing public school systems, asserting many incontestable outcomes derived from charter schools such as “learning, cost efficiency, teacher professionalization, integration (or desegregation), family responsibility, tolerance and the accessibility of schools” (Coons, 1998, p. 535). By 1996, there were over 800 charters operating in 25 states (Welk, 2010). In 2009, there were about 4,600 charter schools with 1.4 million students (Ravitch, 2011). Today there are 162 brick and mortar charter schools and 14 cyber charter schools operating in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania (portal.state.pa.us, 2014). This proliferation of charter schools underscores perceived increased academic performance in charters, especially in an era of school accountability and innovation under NCLB and RTT. Finally, when Senators Hutchison (R – TX) and Clinton (D – NY) proposed an amendment to NCLB in 2001 that included \$450 million for educational innovations, including single-gender charter schools, public schools, and

classrooms, they affirmed government support not only for school choice, but for parents to be granted the choice of single-gender charter and public schools (Sullivan, 2003).

Charter school champions such as Geoffrey Canada, founder of the Harlem Children's Zone, and Michelle Rhee, former chancellor of Washington, D.C. schools, cite poor teaching and the inflexibility of teacher unions as the problem (Vasagar & Stratton, 2010; Bryan, 2013). Others, such as Finn and Osberg (2005) see charter schools as "an outlet for committed citizens and entrepreneurial educators to do something about the appalling school options facing hapless children and desperate families" (p. v). Sullivan (2013) finds legal defense specifically for single-gender public schools under NCLB legislation. She notes (2013) that single-gender public schools "advanc[e] the full development of our nation's youth" (p. 388), "remedy past discrimination" (p. 392), and "provid[e] diversity of educational options" (p. 397).

In Pennsylvania, the push for charter schools gained popularity in the mid-1990s in order to allow "citizens to custom-design [viz.] local education" without "heavy-handed Harrisburg mandates" (Hickok in Langland, 1996). Bureaucracy and alleged unresponsiveness to community wants and needs of public institutions fueled the push for charter schools (Langland, 1996). The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and the city of Philadelphia had identified that schools were in need of reform, but the traditional vehicles in place (e.g. School District of Philadelphia) were too big and slow to reform a broken system. Additionally, low achievement in many urban schools, especially in the School District of Philadelphia, led to a push for charter schools "as a way to inject competition into the public system and demonstrate successful models of education" (Eshleman & Mezzacappa, 1997, para. 34).

Background and legality of single-gender education in public schools

Historically, education has been segregated by gender in the United States. Then, Title IX of the 1972 Education Amendments prohibited discrimination of women in education on the heels of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Previously, single-gender public schools were supported and warranted using the doctrine of “separate but equal” as a justification. However, after Title IX legislation most public schools became co-educational to minimize the chance of discrimination on the basis of sex in education (Kiselewich, 2006). By 1995 there were only three single-gender public schools in the United States, one of which is located in Philadelphia, the Philadelphia High School for Girls (Kiselewich, 2006).

Today there are 116 institutions that qualify as single-gender schools and an additional 390 that offer single-gender classrooms (NACE, 2013). What has driven this explosion in the number of single-gender public institutions and why are parents choosing single-gender settings for their children? Carlotta Joyner (1996), former Director of Education and Employment Issues at the US Department of Education, identifies three main issues surrounding single-gender education, including:

- (1) Legality of single-gender programs;
- (2) Effectiveness of such programs in promoting desired educational outcomes; and
- (3) Even if effective, desirability of using such programs to achieve identified goals, such as fostering improved academic and social performance in boys and teaching girls mathematics in a nonthreatening setting. (Joyner, 1996, pp. 1-2)

First, the legality of single-gender public schooling has been established in at least five Supreme Court cases outlined by Kiselewich (2006) and Sullivan (2003), namely *Craig v. Boren* (1976), *Vorchheimer v. School District* (1977), *Mississippi University for Women v. Hogan*

(1982), *United States v. Virginia et al.* (1996), and *A.N.A. et al. v. Breckenridge County Board of Education et al.* (2011). *Craig v. Boren* (1976) “requires that any gender classification serve important governmental objectives and be substantially related to the achievement of those objectives in order to be constitutional” (Kiselewich, 2006, p. 232). In *Vorchheimer v. School District* (1977), the Supreme Court upheld the US Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit’s ruling that single-gender schools are a “respected educational methodology” (p. 231). In *Mississippi University for Women v. Hogan* (1982), the Supreme Court referred to the *Craig v. Boren* (1976) case while adding that because the Mississippi University for Women was a nursing school, denying admission to a male student “fixed notions concerning the roles and abilities of males and females” and maintained an “archaic and stereotypic notion” (p. 458) of gender. *United States v. Virginia et al.* (1996) maintains that single-gender schools may be used if it serves an important government interest such as cultivating youth talent. Finally, *A.N.A. et al. v. Breckinridge County Board of Education et al.* (2011) demonstrates that single-gender classrooms are not *ipso facto* “injurious to the school’s students” (p. 6). Thus, while single-gender public schools have been challenged in the US court system, there is a growing body of work that demonstrates judicial support for single-gender public schooling.

Research Problem and Theoretical Framework

Who chooses and why? Previous studies

With 1.8 million students in charter schools as of the 2010-2011 school year (NCES, 2014), it is important to understand who chooses charter schools and why. Stein (2009) finds that in Indianapolis, charter schools attract families across racial-ethnic groups. Regarding why, Stein (2009) cites school quality, or at least the perception of quality, is a main driver to switch from traditional public school to charter school. Kelly and Scafidi (2013) find similar results in their

study of low-income families enrolling their children in private schools in Georgia through the GOAL scholarship program. The GOAL scholarship program subsidizes private school tuition for poor and minority families (Kelly & Scafidi, 2013). Over 95% of respondents in their study cite a “better learning environment” and over 91% cite a “better education” (Kelly & Scafidi, 2013, p. 10). However, in this study only 4.4% of students who utilized the GOAL scholarship attended a single-gender school, making the sample too small for wide application (Kelly & Scafidi, 2013). According to Allen and Consoletti (2010), “parents demand more personalized, smaller schools,” which they believe they can find in a charter environment (p. 3). However, Allen and Consoletti (2010) are writing for the Center for Education Reform, a pro-charter organization, and they rely heavily on aggregated data such as the growing number of students on waiting lists and average enrollment.

There is no data comparing student achievement in single-gender charter schools to coeducational charter schools, probably due to experimental control issues, but there are a number of works in circulation that either support single-gender schooling through increased academic performance or defame single-gender schooling as unconstitutional and as reinforcing gender stereotypes. Thus, while parents may cite higher academic achievement as a reason for enrollment in a single-gender charter school, there is no definitive study in the US of which I am aware to support such a claim. It is the key to understanding parent *perceptions* of single-gender charter schools. The most conclusive study supporting an improved achievement hypothesis resulting from single-gender schooling is Park, Behrman, and Choi (2013), who find that attending single-gender public schools is associated with higher average scores on Korean and English tests as well as a higher percentage of enrollment in a four-year college compared to a coeducational school. Park, Behrman, and Choi’s (2013) study is important because in South

Korea, students are randomly assigned to either single-gender or coeducational public schools across districts, thus eliminating any selection bias. Because of the rigorous methodology that removes selection bias, Park, Behrman, and Choi (2013) provide data that supports parental perception of higher academic achievement in a single-gender setting. Other research is less conclusive, like Kussels and Hannover (2010), who found that girls in single-gender physics classrooms reported better knowledge of physics while boys experienced no such gain. Both sexes reported a decrease in gender-related self-knowledge in the coeducational classroom (2010). That is, both female and male students are less likely to access gender-specific content knowledge in coeducational classrooms than in single-gender classrooms. Single-gender advocates usually lean on “girls do better in STEM and boys do better in the arts” arguments because there is no need to act in gender stereotyped ways in single-gender classrooms.

Opponents of single-gender classrooms like the ACLU (2013) and AAUW (2013) argue that single-gender public schooling is segregation and violates either Title IX or the Equal Protection Clause. Hyde (2014) perhaps gives the most compelling argument against single-gender schooling by demonstrating that while a majority of studies find single-gender schooling to be more beneficial than coeducational schools, benefits accrued in the single-gender setting were due to economic or parental factors. Hyde (2014) does not find any evidence of decreased academic performance in single-gender schools. Finally, SCOTUS and federal circuit courts have routinely ruled in favor as long as the single-gender educational setting “advance[s] full development of the talent and capacities of our Nation’s people.” (United States v. Virginia, 1996, p. 534)

Theoretical framework of school choice

The school choice movement is founded in large part on market-based principles in which schools are the suppliers and students are the demanders. Champions of market-based education reform cite increased competition, decentralization, consumer sovereignty, and improved efficiency and performance (Schneider, Teske, & Marschall, 2000). However, market approaches are built on the assumption of low barriers to entry and exit, perfect information, homogeneous goods, and individuals making rational choices (Schneider, Teske, & Marschall, 2000). Simple market assumptions cannot hold true when evaluating a school choice environment for several reasons:

1. There are high barriers to entry. Individuals must submit an application to open a school to the local school district, demonstrate how the proposed school will “enhance student learning opportunities” and “offer substantively unique and innovative educational options for the community” (portal.state.pa.us, 2014, para. 1). This proposal can be approved or rejected by the local school board.
2. There are high barriers to exit. Closing a school displaces students and forces them to begin the school selection process anew.
3. Parents do not have perfect information. Even experts disagree on what makes a good school. Therefore parents, especially those in low-income, urban contexts, have imperfect information on schools and what characteristics would make a good school for their children. A main objective of this study is to uncover what information parents do use when selecting a school in order to provide more perfect information about single-gender charter schools, specifically BLCPS, to them.

4. Schools in a choice setting are not homogeneous and thus are not perfect substitutes. A STEM-centric charter school can hardly be considered in the same market as a performing arts-centric charter school, though according to simple market-based models, they are.
5. Individuals do not always make rational choices. This study may find that the single-gender aspect of BLCPS has little to do with parental motivations or perceived benefits, some of which may be irrational.

Hill (1995) notes, “The choice of a school is more akin to the choice of a family doctor or pastor than to the choice of a car dealer or grocery store” (p. 29). There are a number of non-school factors that may play a role in school selection: peer effects, safety, proximity to home, the core mission of a school, reputation, uniforms, student legacy, etc. Simple market-models handle the complexities of choosing a school in summary fashion and “fail to explore the resulting complications adequately” (Schneider, Teske, & Marschall, 2000, p. 41). This study’s intention is to illuminate at least some of these complexities.

Scholars and policy makers actually know very little about how parents learn about schools, what sources parents use to gather information, how good the information is, and how parents use the information to find appropriate schools for their children. BLCPS is an example of option-demand choice; in the first stage of choice, parents opt out of the neighborhood-zoned school. In the second stage, parents select their preferred school from a variety of alternatives, in this case, BLCPS, a single-gender charter school. This places more responsibility on individual parents and students because the onus is placed on the individual to collect information on schools. The result is that parents and students who are more capable of gathering information are able to make more informed choices and potentially leads to stratification in the school

selection process (Schneider, Teske, & Marschall, 2000). Additionally, in an option-demand choice setting, alternative schools (i.e. charter schools) may disproportionately target a certain demographic of students (Schneider, Teske, & Marschall, 2000). These factors may lead to stratification and self-segregation in charter schools. For example, over 95% of students at BLCPS are students of color and 78% of students receive a free or reduced-price lunch, a marker of poverty (boyslatin.org, 2014). This stratification and self-segregating behavior occurs despite no stated mission of serving students of color or students in poverty. The purpose of this study is to understand the parental perceived benefits of choosing a single-gender school like BLCPS and what motivated them to do so. The underlying assumption is that parents act on gathered information that motivates them to make the best educational choice for their children.

In a choice environment, parents should have high motivation for selecting the best school for their children. Therefore, parents should be able to express their general wants in a school – mission, teaching style, demographics, location, etc. (Schneider, Teske, & Marschall, 2000). Second, parents have to perceive some benefit in enrolling their children in a school of choice that outweighs the cost of searching for a school with desired attributes. Next, parents enroll their children in schools that best fit their criteria of a good school for their child. Finally, parents can give feedback to schools regarding performance through avenues such as parent-teacher conferences, PTAs, informal interactions with teachers and administrators, and choosing to go to another school. This study is a part of the feedback process that will help BLCPS, and if replicated elsewhere, other schools, improve their product by assessing how the school meets parental expectations. Parental actions, such as participating in a study, help to improve schools in a competitive environment (Van Dunk & Dickman, 2003).

Summary

While scholarship abounds on traditional public school academic outcomes versus charter school academic outcomes and there is emerging research on who chooses charter schools and why, literature on parental motivations for choosing single-gender charter schools is non-existent. However, the number of single-gender public education settings has increased 200-fold since 1996, with nearly 600 such settings today (NACE, 2014). This study will illuminate parent perceptions of single-gender charter schools that will allow for charter schools to better market themselves to consumers which will result in better matching between school and student. Parents should be able to express their general wants in a school – mission, teaching style, demographics, location, etc. (Schneider, Teske, & Marschall, 2000). Parents also have to perceive some benefit in enrolling their children in a school of choice that outweighs the cost of searching for a school with desired attributes. Moreover, parents enroll their children in schools that best fit their criteria of a good school for their child. After enrolling their children in schools, parents can give feedback to schools regarding performance. Finally, with billions of federal education dollars at stake for educational innovations and reform through grant programs like NCLB and RTT, single-gender charter schools may also provide states an avenue for increased federal funding for education.

Chapter 3: Methods and Methodology

Introduction

This is a case study at Boys' Latin of Philadelphia Charter School (BLPCS), an all-boys charter school in Philadelphia, PA, for the purpose of examining parental motivations and perceived benefits of single-gender education. Primary modes of data collection will include three to five focus groups and a survey of parents of students at Boys' Latin of Philadelphia Charter School. This will complement previous studies of school choice, especially research identifying who chooses charter schools and why (Stein, 2009), what parents want from schools (Finn & Petrilli, 2013; Kelly & Scafidi, 2013) and what parents want from charter schools (Delaney, 2008) by providing single-gender charter schools with data about parental perceptions of single-gender education and motivations for selecting such schools.

Research Questions

The following questions guide this research study:

- Why do parents/guardians choose to send their children to single-gender charter schools?
- What role do single-gender charter schools play in a school choice environment?
- What perceptions do parents/guardians have of single-gender education?
- Are the motivations for sending children to single-gender charter schools purely academic or do parents perceive favorable social/peer factors?

Research Design and Rationale

Description of research site

The research site for this study is Boys' Latin of Philadelphia Charter School (BLPCS). I have been a Latin teacher at BLPCS for the past four years and the freshman grade level chair for

the past three years. I have also served as a varsity football coach, varsity crew coach, freshman basketball coach, support team member, leadership team member, freshman summer academy teacher, and freshman summer academy mentor teacher. BLPCS is a college-preparatory, public charter school for boys, founded in 2007 and located in West Philadelphia. The school enrolls 500 students from across the city of Philadelphia in grades 9-12. The student population is 99% African-American. Approximately 78% of students qualify for free or reduced lunch. Students participate in an extended school day Monday, Tuesday, and Thursday with optional bi-monthly Saturday school. All freshmen and sophomores are required to participate in a sport or clubs after school in a program called Leadership Academy; extra- and co-curricular offerings include debate, robotics, mural design, Certamen (Latin trivia team), Sea Perch, the National Society of Black Engineers (NSBE), along with a full complement of athletics including football, basketball, track, baseball, wrestling, tennis, bowling, and the city's only public school crew team. All incoming freshmen are required to attend a four-week primer in the month of July before beginning the school year in September. Ninety-six percent of the members of the Class of 2011 and 99% of the members of the class of 2012 were admitted to colleges. Over 75% of the Class of 2011 is still enrolled in a post-secondary institution (boyslatin.org, 2014).

Research procedures

For this study I plan to utilize three focus groups and a closed-ended survey. I intend to use focus groups because they allow for “participants [to] express multiple perspectives on a similar shared experience,” in this case, selecting a single-gender charter school (Glesne, 2011, p. 130). Presumably, parents want what is best for their children and thus their differing motivations for choosing BLPCS can be taken as genuine and unique (Kelly & Scafidi, 2013). A focus group will also allow for dialogue among parents on their school choice process and what

was most important when selecting a school for their sons. As a teacher I am comfortable with the pressure placed on moderating the focus group, doing such tasks on a daily basis with students. To gain base-line experiential data, I will ask parents to introduce themselves, share the name and grade of their son(s), and why they chose BLCPS (Glesne, 2011). I will conduct three focus groups with parents in groups of six to ten. I intend to use parents of current students who are members of the Boys' Latin Extended Family Network (EFN), which is something like a PTA, and parents of incoming freshmen. These groups of participants are both homogeneous and heterogeneous. They are homogeneous in that they all have chosen BLCPS as the school for their sons; they are heterogeneous in that they may be male, female, of differing socioeconomic statuses, sexual preferences, or religions. Participants will not be compensated but refreshments will be offered. Focus groups will last between one and two hours. I will audio-record the discussions, transcribe them, and code participant responses into categories such as, but not limited to, "academic concerns," "peer effects," "safety," and "convenience."

However, because focus groups are not generalizable due to the small number of participants (Glesne, 2011), I will also conduct a closed-ended survey. The focus groups will help to understand parental ways of thinking about single-gender education by having conversation with small groups of parents. The survey will be conducted electronically (on mobile device or computer) and disseminated via the *Boys' Latin Ledger*, a weekly email correspondence from the school to parents. Though case studies are never generalizable, this mixed-methods approach will lend validity to the study. Participation will be voluntary.

As a current teacher and grade level chair at Boys' Latin I must be aware of potential dangers in conducting my research. For example, parents may be reluctant to express reasons for attending a single-gender charter school that may be viewed as illegitimate by me or may feign

that single-genderedness was a reason for attending Boys' Latin. For example, a parent may hesitate citing convenience of location as the primary reason for attending Boys' Latin because it has no relation to academic performance or positive peer effects. Additionally, I have to be wary that parents may have chosen Boys' Latin for reasons entirely unrelated to its single-gender setting and should take care not to influence discussion or interpret data through only this lens.

Survey sample

This survey will be administered to the parents of students at Boys' Latin of Philadelphia Charter School (BLPCS), my current place of employment. The survey will be distributed to 432 parents; this is the number of email addresses available to contact parents. Seventy-three parents responded to the survey for a 16.9% completion rate.

Strategies to increase response rates

Strategies to increase response rates include:

- 1.) Notify parents one week in advance that an online survey will be conducted regarding parental motivations and perceived benefits of single-gender charter schools. (cdc.gov, 2010)
- 2.) Send a reminder to complete the survey one week after initial mailing including a link to the survey. (cdc.gov, 2010)
- 3.) Allow the survey to be delivered and completed in an electronic format
- 4.) Include link to survey in weekly school newsletters
- 5.) Encourage completion of the survey at the beginning of focus groups
- 6.) Frame the survey as a tool to improve single-gender schools.

Summary

This case study about perceived benefits of single-gender education will be conducted at Boys' Latin of Philadelphia Charter School. It will be a mixed-methods study employing both closed-ended survey questions and three focus groups. Survey data will be compiled and analyzed with statistical measures such as mean, median, mode, and frequency. Focus groups will be audio-recorded, transcribed, and coded.

Ch. 4: Findings

Introduction

A mixed-methods approach for data collection was used in this study, employing both focus groups and a closed-ended survey at Boys' Latin of Philadelphia Charter School (BLPCS). Three focus groups were conducted over a two week period in July 2014. Participants included the parents of incoming freshmen, current students, and parents of recently graduated students. Participants volunteered to participate in a focus group at the end of the closed-ended survey. Focus groups varied in size, including groups of two (7/7/2014), five (7/8/2014), and three (7/17/2014). Sessions were audio-recorded, transcribed, and coded by the researcher. Because participants were assured anonymity in the case study, the names of participants and their sons will be changed as needed.

One closed-ended survey was electronically distributed to the master BLPCS parent/guardian contact list, which included 512 contacts. Eighty surveys were undeliverable because the email address supplied was invalid or no longer in use. Thus, the survey was delivered to 432 parents/guardians. Seventy-two parents/guardians completed the survey, generating a response rate of almost 17%. Participants were not required to include any personally identifiable information in their responses unless they chose to participate in a focus group. If a respondent chose to participate in a focus group they only needed to supply their email address.

Focus Group Findings

Focus groups yielded four common themes about the perceived benefits of single-gender education. These themes included "the opposite sex as a distraction," "academic growth," "personal growth," and "peer effects." While the single-genderedness of BLPCS played a role in

nearly every parent's decision-making model, no parents stated it was the primary reason for enrolling in a single-gender school. Rather, the single-gender nature of BLPCS allowed for an environment in which other goals of schooling could be more easily attained, especially academic achievement. There were several themes repeated by participants that are exogenous to this study because they centered on the parental motivation to choose BLPCS (personal relationships, recommendations from friends) and will not be included in these findings.

The Opposite Sex as a Distraction

The common thread between all of the themes parents expressed is that the opposite sex is a distraction in coeducational schools. Therefore, that largest perceived benefit of single-gender schools is the absence of the opposite sex. This allows for academic growth, personal growth, and positive peer effects. One participant had not yet noticed his son being distracted by the opposite sex in school, yet but worried that it would become one:

I can definitely say the opposite sex is a distraction...that was definitely a consideration. You know there's always going to be distractions, but that's one less distraction throughout the course of the school day. And you know, that was definitely a big consideration.

Another participant already saw their son's grades fall in his middle school years:

I noticed a kind of a change in my son in middle school and a lot of his teachers were mentioning the fact that he seems to have caught the attention of the young ladies. And my husband and I noticed the difference in his behavior in the classroom with the girls present. So we figured, we started looking into sending him to a school where that was not a factor.

Another participant imagined volunteering to answer a question and answering incorrectly in a coeducational school:

'Is she going to like what I say?' Because my son in his other school, he didn't want to raise his hand that much and he didn't want to answer questions that much. Even though

he believed he know the answer to the questions he didn't want to answer the questions because if he was wrong and there was a giggle then she - Becky or somebody - might think he's stupid. That would end his entire day. His entire day would be wrapped around that wrong answer. Now here [at a single-gender school] he isn't as distracted.

For many parents, the single-gender setting is a starting point for other school-related goals like academic growth and personal growth.

Academic Growth

Overwhelmingly, parents shared that they chose a single-gender school because it provided their child with the greatest opportunity for academic growth. Repeatedly, parents stated that the purpose of secondary school is to learn course content and matriculate to college. Without the distraction of the opposite sex, students are better able to “focus” on “what’s important.” As one parent proclaimed, “...if you do the research, which I’m sure everybody did, it says it’s proven that the [single-gender] schools do better...It’s kind of proven.” While this is not proven, it is important to this study that at least one parent perceives single-gender schools to be categorically better than coeducational schools. Another participant spoke of the opportunities for differentiating instruction to be tailored specifically to boys.

Getting the knowledge out of males in a different way than getting it out of females. And specifically, public school it was just one slate...There's a square, there's a circle, and then there's a triangle and in the public school system your kid was supposed to be a square. If he was a circle you had to push him into the square and shove the triangle in there. But there was nothing like, "he's artistic, let him draw something about Shakespeare."

And another participant spoke of the benefit of competition among boys in the learning process, not just athletics:

I do believe that boys learn different from girls and also what I think is that when there's men or boys in a room you do have a lot of testosterone [and] you have a lot of competitiveness...That's what's going to drive, "I'm getting an A! I'm getting an A plus!" I'm not getting a B!" I feel like that's going to drive it.

Personal Growth

In addition to academic growth, parents related that they believe single-gender schools allow children more opportunities for personal growth. This includes all non-academic pursuits that occur in schools including participation in extracurricular activities, building friendships with peers, and having the freedom to explore a number of activities to find one's identity without being labelled by peers. One participant stated

I have found that that whole weight of masculinity, or being the man, or dressing this way, or making sure you walk down the hall with your knuckles dragging. That whole mantra is very heavy. You have to put this armor on all the time that you're big, bad, bold as everyone else... And I have found that in this boys' school because you're surrounded primarily by males that these young men tend to be more open than males like me. Males that... are always protected by that masculinity. I don't want to say anything silly... because it might be perceived as weak. So in a boys' school...they seem to be sillier - and I think actually they will find a better wife by being sillier than trying to be all macho and manly... I like the fact that they're learning to speak with other men in a room with men without losing their...youthfulness.

Another participant talked about the dangers of being labelled "weird" for being smart. "If you smart, you don't want to show how smart you are because it gets weird after a while to be intelligent in school. Because you're like a nerd - that's when the labels start coming when you get older." Another participant discussed the opportunities her son was able to pursue because there was not peer pressure to be stick to traditional gender roles:

He likes to play the guitar. And I know that's something that I don't think he would have done [at a coeducational school]. He don't really show that side but when he came here and he saw that they were offering that here, he really perked up. He came and he tried out and everything. But I think that if he was in another setting and there was girls then he would have just kept at home and not showed anybody because that's not masculine enough for him to play the guitar.

Whether it was the freedom to try non-traditionally masculine activities, like playing guitar for one's peers, not worry about being labelled, or being able to "shed [one's] armor", participants were in agreement that there is more room for personal growth in single-gender schools.

Peer Effects

Parents also believe that their children are surrounded by higher quality peers which improves both the quality of the school and their children's academic performance. Especially in Philadelphia where the School District of Philadelphia has been under state control for over a decade due to consistent under-achievement, the expected positive peer effects of a single-gender school have great sway with parents. Furthermore, juxtaposing the School District of Philadelphia with the number of prestigious single-gender, independent schools in the suburbs, parents may begin to perceive a connection between single-gender schooling and academic achievement. One parent wondered about the independent schools in Philadelphia's suburbs:

If you honestly look at it, a lot of the prestigious Main Line schools are not coed. You've got Haverford Boys, Agnes Irwin - you've got Baldwin. They're all single-gender, single-sex education schools. And they are some of the top schools in the area... in the country. And you wonder, "Okay, why?" Why do you have some of the top schools that are single-sex schools... It's...having just the boys or just the girls in a single environment.

By sending her son to a single-gender school, albeit in West Philadelphia, she is able to place her son in a broader peer group that has a higher level of academic achievement. Another parent worried about the negative peer effects at the coeducational public schools in Philadelphia:

For Boys' Latin, being a man is being respectful, respectable, and responsible. But in [coeducational] public schools being a man means I have to grow up faster because I have to defend myself, defend my turf... and that sort of thing, defend my girl. So it's a totally different mindset when you look at [coeducational] public versus Boys' Latin for me. I think that you're teaching them to be responsible men. Leaders in the community, leaders at home, and wherever else. But in public school, it's a little bit different. Beyond the academic issue, you do get teased, you do get assaulted. But the thing is, it's like, "I got to be a man! I got to stand up! I can't let them see I'm a punk! I got to be a man! I

*need to be stronger! I can't be weak because I may need to fight just so I can get home!"
So it's a totally different mindset.*

Unfortunately, for many of the positive peer effects mentions by parents in focus groups it is difficult to disentangle if parents were suggesting the positive peer effects of the single-genderedness of BLPCS or other academic and socio-cultural norms at BLPCS. Additionally, because a majority of parents were so “disgusted” with the public schools in the School District of Philadelphia, BLPCS may be viewed simply as a good school relative to traditional public schools in the District.

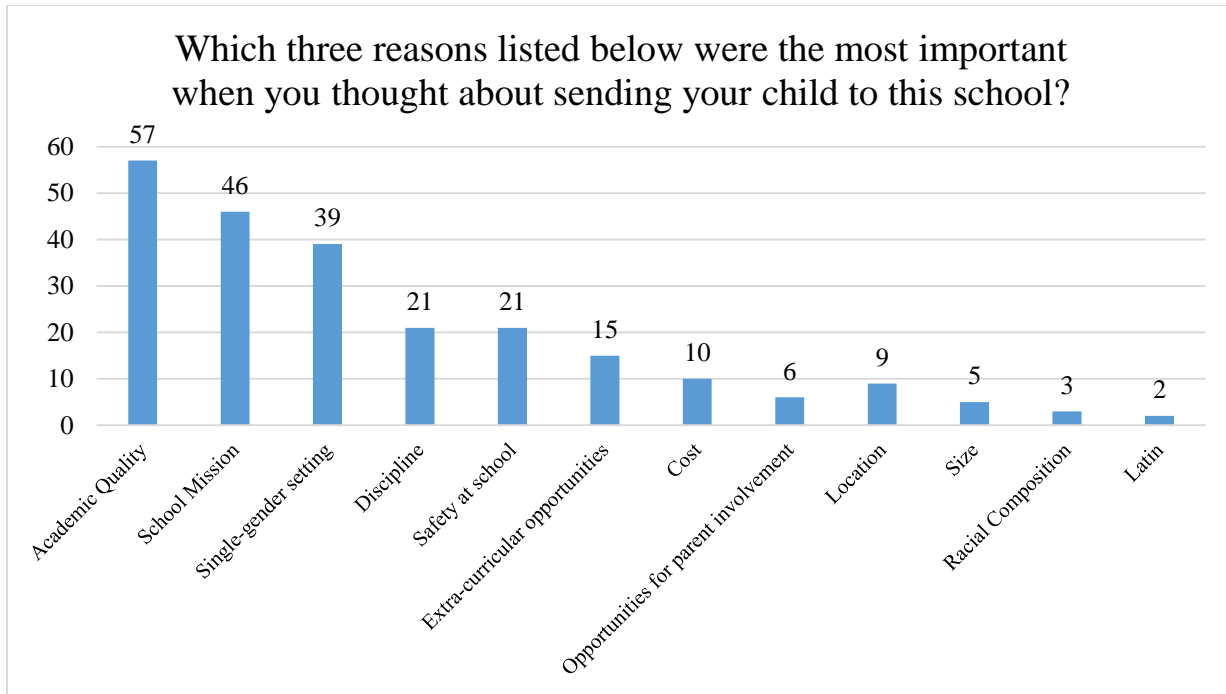
Closed-Ended Survey Findings

Parents overwhelmingly perceive single-gender schools to be better than coeducational schools; 87% of respondents said that single-gender schools are “better” or “considerably better” than coeducational schools while zero respondents said single-gender schools are “worse” or “considerably worse”.

Table 1.

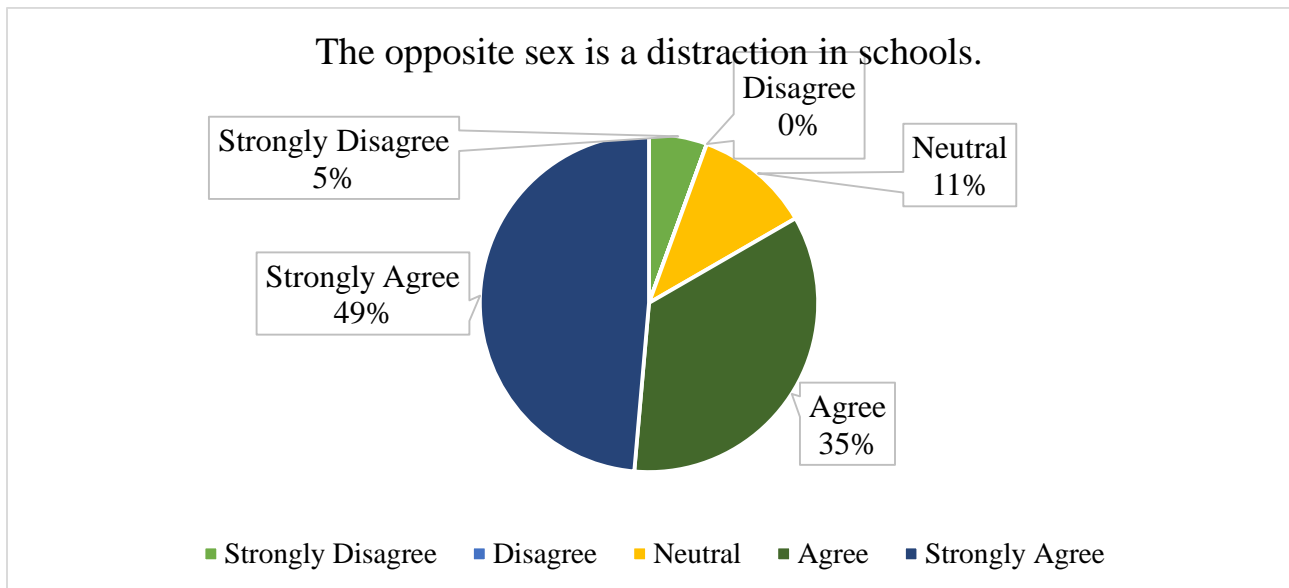
Single-gender schools are _____ than coeducational schools.					
No Response	Considerably worse	Worse	The same	Better	Considerably better
1	0	0	8	32	31

When asked to select the three most important attributes when applying to a school, almost 80% selected “academic quality” and almost 55% selected “single-gender setting”, two of the three most selected responses. It is ambiguous if “school mission” also encompasses “academic quality” and “single-gender setting”.



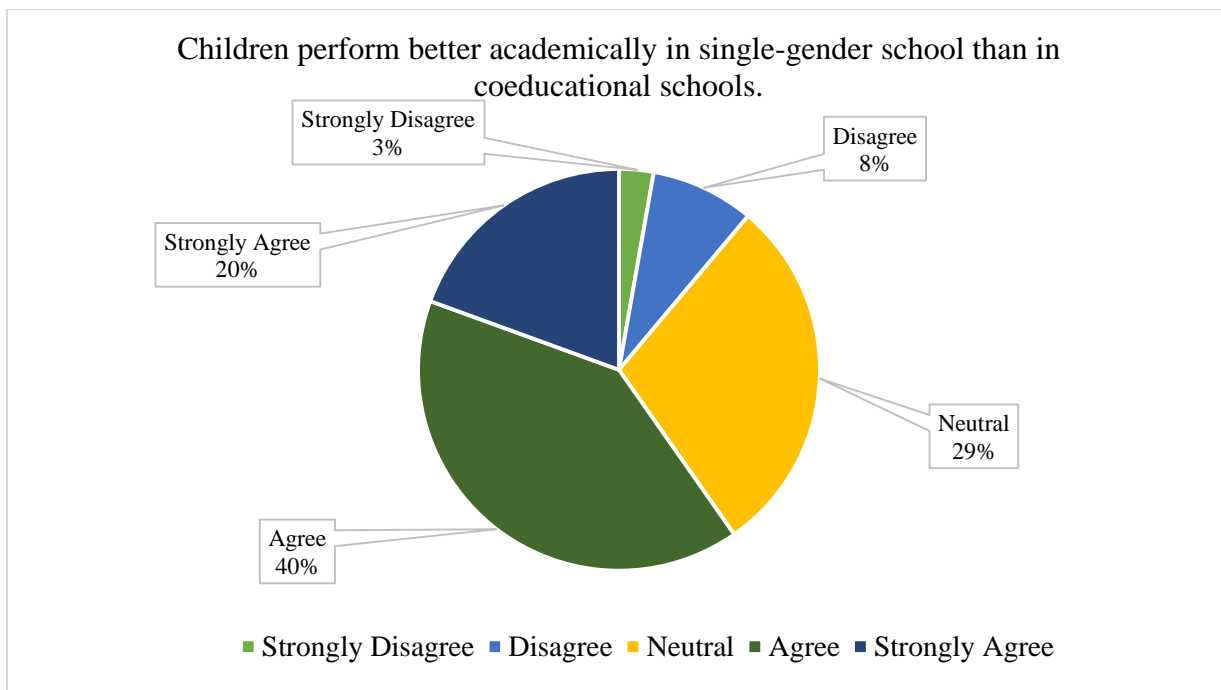
Graph 1. Three Most Important Reasons for Parents When Sending Child to School.

Additionally, over 80% of respondents “agree” or “strongly agree” that the opposite sex is a distraction in school.



Graph 2. Percentage of Respondents Who Believe the Opposite Sex is a Distraction in School.

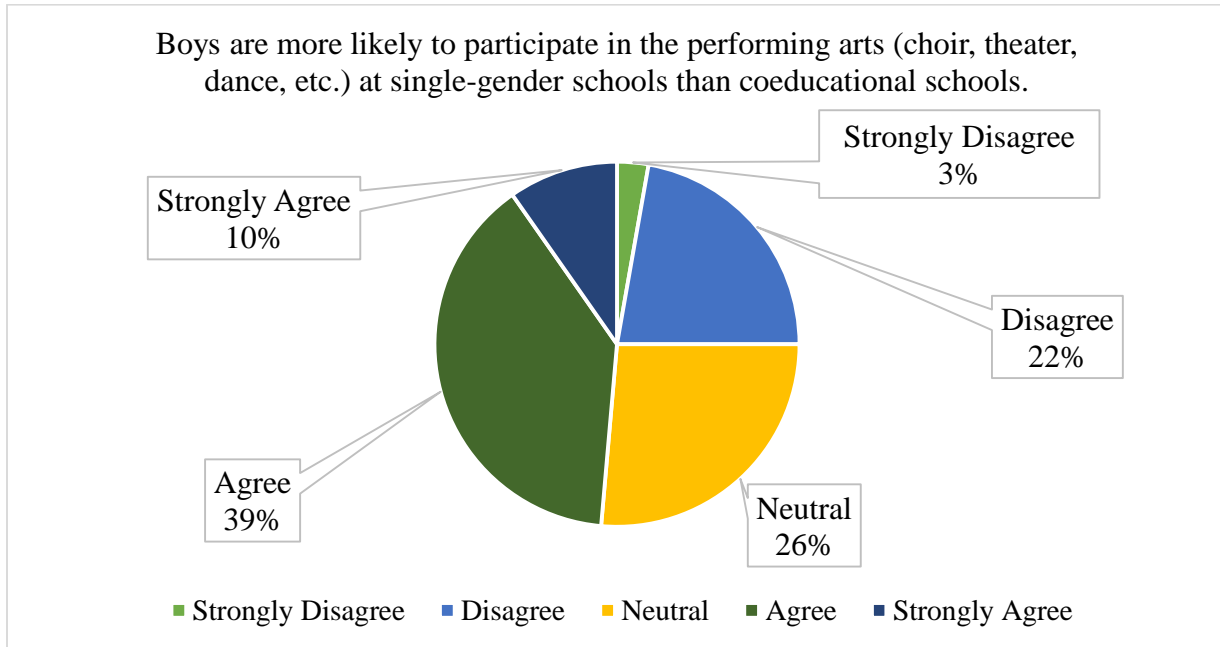
No other questions elicited a higher consensus than these two questions. Supporting focus group findings that parents are motivated to select a school for their children that maximizes academic performance, almost 60% of respondents “agree” or “strongly agree” that children perform better academically in single-gender schools than in coeducational schools while less than 12% of respondents believe children perform “worse” or “considerably worse”.



Graph 3. Percentage of Respondents Who Believe Children Perform Better Academically in Single-Gender Schools.

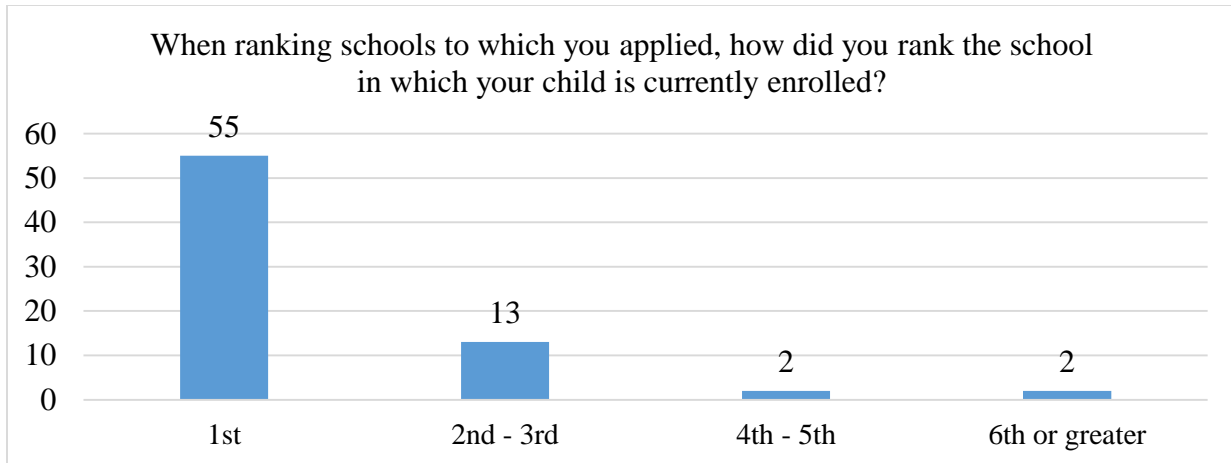
Moreover, 75% of respondents stated that they “disagree” or “strongly disagree” that single-gender schools reinforce gender stereotypes and almost 50% “agree” or “strongly agree” that boys are more likely to participate in the performing arts (choir, theater, dance, etc.) at a single-gender school compared to a coeducational school. This aligns with the parental perception that

there is more room for personal growth and realization of one's identity at a single-gender school.



Graph 4. Percentage of Respondents Who Believe Boys Are More Likely to Participate in the Performing Arts (Choir, Theater, Dance, etc.) at Single-Gender Schools than Coeducational Schools.

Similarly, parents do not perceive children to suffer a lack of developing social skills at single-gender schools; over 75% of respondents stated that they “disagree” or “strongly disagree” that students who attend single-gender schools do not know how to appropriately interact with the opposite sex.



Graph 5. Respondents Ranking of BLPCS When Applying to Schools.

Finally, to verify that parents desire the perceived positive attributes of single-gender schools detailed above and have an aversion to the perceived negative attributes of single-gender schools, over 75% of respondents stated that they ranked BLPCS as their first choice when applying to schools compared to less than 6% who said BLPCS was their 4th or greater choice.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

Parents now have unprecedented choice in selecting schools for their children to attend. Schools with detailed, narrow charters now abound across big cities in America with the intention of improving schooling outcomes, especially for low-income and minority students. One such innovation has been the proliferation of single-gender public and charter schools. While scholarship abounds on traditional public school academic outcomes versus charter school academic outcomes and there is emerging research on who chooses charter schools and why, literature on parental motivations for choosing single-gender charter schools is non-existent. However, the number of single-gender public education settings has increased 200-fold since 1996, with nearly 600 such settings today (NACE, 2014).

This mixed-methods case study illuminates parent perceptions of single-gender charter schools that will allow for charter schools to better market themselves to consumers, which will result in better matching between school and student. With billions of federal education dollars at stake for educational innovations and reform through grant programs like NCLB and RTT, single-gender charter schools may also provide states an avenue for increased federal funding for education. Finally, while results may not be generalizable, this study provides a methodological framework for how to conduct research on parental motivations for selecting a school in a choice environment.

Discussion

Aligning with previous studies (Kelly & Scafidi, 2013; Schneider, Teske, & Marschall, 2000) parents choose the school that they believe is best for their child. Parents do not believe that single-genderedness *per se* makes a better school but that it affords an environment in which

traditional goals of schooling (learning academic content, preparing for college, socialization, personal growth, etc.) can be better achieved. Primarily, parents stated that the opposite sex is a distraction in traditional public schools. The distraction of the opposite sex does not allow for students to reach their full academic potential. Additionally, in the absence of the opposite sex, parents believe single-gender schools allow children more opportunities for personal growth including joining clubs and activities not traditionally associated with masculine behavior in urban settings, such as the performing arts. Finally, parents perceive positive peer effects at single-gender schools likening BLPCS to prestigious private and independent schools in the greater Philadelphia area.

Focus Group Findings

Parents have unanimously invested in the notion that good education provides a pathway to future earnings. Focus groups yielded four common themes about the perceived benefits of single-gender education. These themes included “the opposite sex as a distraction,” “academic growth,” “personal growth,” and “peer effects.” While the single-genderedness of BLPCS played a role in nearly every parent’s decision-making model, no parents stated it was the primary reason for enrolling in a single-gender school.

The Opposite Sex as a Distraction

All parents who participated in focus groups stated that the opposite sex is a distraction in schools. Therefore, the largest perceived benefit of single-gender schools is the absence of the opposite sex. Parents believe that this absence allows children to achieve the traditional goals of schooling, such as academic growth and preparation for college or the work-force. However, only Park, Behrman, and Choi (2013) have shown that there is an actual academic benefit to attending a single-gender school as measured by test scores and four-year college attendance.

Nevertheless, as one participant stated, single-gender schools lift the “whole weight of masculinity [and] being a man” for students of color in an urban setting, allowing for richer learning opportunities. While only explicitly stated by one parent, this “weight of masculinity,” or preoccupation with a masculine appearance for the opposite sex, was implicit in other parents’ comments. For example, parents feel that their children participate more in a single-gender classroom because it is more socially acceptable, or, as one parent stated, being smart and participating at a traditional public school can result in being labeled a “nerd” or “weird.” This may be unique to low-income students of color in urban contexts because of social factors that have defined masculinity as being “big, bad, and bold” and academic participation as making one appear “weak” (Focus group, 2014 July 7).

Academic Growth

Parents explicitly stated that the opposite sex is a distraction that impedes academic growth. Additionally, participants stated that they chose a single-gender school because it would provide the greatest opportunities for academic growth. This aligns with parental perceptions of the purpose of schooling; parents repeatedly stated that the purpose of secondary school is to learn course content and matriculate to college. Parents believe that single-gender schools differentiate instruction to accommodate boys or girls, which maximizes student achievement. This includes promoting academic competition among students in an all-boys setting. The perception that single-gender schools differentiate instruction for boys and girls may be more wishful thinking than reality as few parents have ever observed a class period. However, this is important for administrators of single-gender schools when marketing the school in a choice setting because parents perceive differentiation as something that takes place and as a positive attribute of single-gender schools that contributes to academic growth.

Personal Growth

In addition to academic growth, parents related that they believe single-gender schools allow children more opportunities for personal growth. This includes all non-academic pursuits that occur in schools, including participation in extracurricular activities, building friendships with peers, and having the freedom to explore a number of activities to find one's identity without being labelled by peers. Interestingly, participants believed that their sons would become more responsible, well-rounded men in the absence of girls. As one participant stated, boys in a single-gender setting can remove their "armor" of masculinity, including trying to impress girls, and explore who they are as individuals. This includes the realization of academic prowess as well as exploring extracurricular activities that contribute to well-roundedness. Again, this may be closely connected with masculinity as it is defined in low-income, African-American, urban settings and may not hold true in middle-income, white settings.

Peer Effects

Parents also believe that their children are surrounded by higher-quality peers, which improves both the quality of the school and their children's academic performance. Especially in Philadelphia, where the School District of Philadelphia has been under state control for over a decade due to consistent under-achievement, the expected positive peer effects of a single-gender school have great sway with parents. Parents believe that single-gender charter schools in the city of Philadelphia have commonalities with prestigious private, independent schools in affluent suburbs. Parents, in wanting the best for their children, believe that attending a single-gender school regardless of its location or demographic, may result in outcomes that would be similar to those produced at a prestigious private, independent school in a suburban setting. That is, parents believe that schooling can increase future potential earnings and enroll their children in schools

that they believe will maximize future potential earnings, i.e. something *like* a private school. The perception of suburban private schools as superior to urban public schools may stem from personal experience or news media.

Closed-Ended Survey Findings

Parents overwhelmingly perceive single-gender schools to be better than coeducational schools; 87% of respondents said that single-gender schools are “better” or “considerably better” than coeducational schools while zero respondents said single-gender schools are “worse” or “considerably worse.” This was confirmed in focus groups as parents repeatedly stated that the opposite sex is a distraction, there are more opportunities for academic and personal growth in single-gender schools, and there are positive peer effects at single-gender schools. In short, parents believe that the desire to impress the opposite sex in a coeducational setting is so strong that it trumps all other aspects of schooling, including academic growth and participation in extracurricular activities. Therefore, by removing the opposite sex from the school setting, children are able to realize their full academic and personal potential. Parents do not perceive any loss in the ability to socialize with the opposite sex outside of school. Over 75% of respondents stated that they “disagree” or “strongly disagree” that students who attend single-gender schools do not know how to appropriately interact with the opposite sex. Several parents in focus groups even stated that students who attend single-gender schools have *more appropriate* interactions with the opposite sex because they are more comfortable with themselves. That is, the students at single-gender schools have been able to explore their interests, wants, and needs at school without having to impress the opposite sex.

Limitations

The largest limitation to this study is the inability to disentangle whether parents are motivated to send their children to a single-gender school or if they are motivated to send their children to BLPCS. The same holds true for perceived benefits; do parents believe *all* single-gender schools provide more opportunities for academic and personal growth than coeducational schools, or does BLPCS provide more opportunities for academic and personal growth than a traditional public school in the School District of Philadelphia? Survey data suggests that parents perceive all single-gender schools to be better than coeducational schools (over 75% agree or strongly agree), but parents answered the survey in the context of BLPCS. Additionally, because parents are members of the school community and I was a grade-level chair at the school, parents may have been reluctant to share too many negative opinions of single-gender schools and/or BLPCS to avoid informal social sanctions. Moreover, because all participants have a son enrolled in a single-gender school there is likely a preference among parents for single-gender schools. Because Philadelphia is a school choice setting, if parents are displeased with single-gender schooling, they can enroll their son in a different school. Finally, with the survey having been conducted electronically, some parents may not have been able participate in the study because they may not have had access to the Internet.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study may be replicated in other school choice settings where individuals, educators, and/or private firms are interested in opening a single-gender school. However, future research should be conducted during the school year and offered in a variety of formats (electronically and hard copy) to improve the participation rate. Future research should also include participation of parents with children in coeducational schools. This is particularly important for

the individual or firm trying to enter the marketplace in order to increase enrollment through understanding what parents desire in single-gender schools. Additionally, a non-school employee should conduct the research and ensure anonymity so that parents do not feel any threat of informal social sanctions for negative responses. The researcher should be prepared to steer focus group dialogue away from discussing particular characteristics of a school (e.g., personnel) and toward general statements about all single-gender schools. Finally, the study should also be conducted in a municipality where the traditional public school system is not perceived as a failure in order to disentangle motivations for fleeing bad schools and motivations for enrolling in a single-gender school.

Conclusion

Parents believe that the primary purpose of schooling is academic achievement. While other studies have attempted to measure academic achievement at public vs. charter schools or coeducational vs. single-gender schools, this study aims to identify what benefits parents perceive from sending their children to a single-gender charter school. In focus group discussions, parents unanimously stated that the opposite sex presents a major distraction in schools and thus decreases students' ability to realize their full academic potential. Removing the opposite sex from the classroom acted as a prerequisite for academic and personal growth. In addition to perceived higher levels of academic achievement, parents also believe that students are freer to explore activities not traditionally associated with their gender. For example, males in an all-boys school may feel more comfortable with joining theater, dance, or performing music. Finally, parents believe that students who attend a single-gender school experience positive peer effects; students are more likely to build more meaningful relationships with their peers and to compete for higher grades. Further research should be conducted that includes parents of

children at both single-gender schools and coeducational schools in order to develop more robust data.

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Appendices

Research Instruments

Introduction to the Survey

This survey consists of 18 questions and aims to understand parental perceptions of single-gender charter schools and why parents choose single-gender charter schools. The survey is entirely multiple choice and can be completed on either a computer or mobile device such as a phone or tablet. It is being conducted in order to fulfill graduation requirements as a part of my thesis from Drexel University for an M.S. in Global and International Education. Participation is voluntary and responses will be collected anonymously. You are not required to answer all questions.

At the end of the survey you will have the option to volunteer for participation in a focus group interview to further share your perceptions of single-gender education in a charter setting. If you choose to participate, please indicate the session in which you would like to participate and share your email address so that your participation can be confirmed. If you do not wish to participate, simply select, "NO, I would not like to participate in a focus group", skip the last two questions, and submit the form.

This survey should take 10-15 min. Responses will not be accepted after July 15th. Thank you for participation.

1.) When applying to high schools, to what type of schools did you submit applications?

Select all that apply.

- a. Independent school, not religiously affiliated
- b. Independent school, religiously affiliated
- c. Archdiocesan school

- d. School-to-work/vocational public school
 - e. Special admissions public school
 - f. Charter School
 - i. College preparatory
 - ii. Back to basics/remedial
 - iii. Science/Math/Technology
 - iv. Constructivist (Afrocentric, Freirian, Feminist, etc.)
 - v. Arts (Visual or Performance)
 - vi. GED/High school completion
 - vii. Montessori
 - viii. Bilingual
 - ix. Home/independent study
 - x. School-to-work/vocational
 - xi. Other
 - g. Other not listed above
 - h. I did not submit applications to any other schools
- 2.) Which three reasons listed below were the most important when you thought about sending your child to this school?
- a. Mission/charter/academic focus
 - b. Academic quality
 - c. Safety at school
 - d. Single-gender setting
 - e. Coeducational setting

- f. Discipline
- g. Location
- h. Cost
- i. Extra-curricular opportunities (athletics, clubs, etc.)
- j. Racial composition
- k. Services for special needs students
- l. Size
- m. Opportunities for parent involvement
- n. Other

3.) When ranking schools to which you applied, how did you rank the school in which your child is currently enrolled?

- a. 1st
- b. 2nd-3rd
- c. 4th-5th
- d. 6th or greater
- e. I did not submit applications to any other schools

Single-gender Questions

4.) I attended a _____ school.

- a. Coeducational
- b. Single-gender

5.) My spouse attended a _____ school.

- a. Coeducational
- b. Single-gender

- c. I do not have a spouse.
- 6.) Single-gender schools are
- a. Considerably worse than coeducational schools.
 - b. Worse than coeducational schools.
 - c. The same as coeducational schools.
 - d. Better than coeducational schools.
 - e. Considerably better than coeducational schools.
- 7.) The opposite sex is a distraction in schools.
- a. Strongly disagree
 - b. Disagree
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Agree
 - e. Strongly agree
- 8.) The opposite sex allows for richer learning opportunities in school.
- a. Strongly disagree
 - b. Disagree
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Agree
 - e. Strongly agree
- 9.) Children perform better academically in single-gender schools than in coeducational schools
- a. Strongly disagree
 - b. Disagree

- c. Neutral
 - d. Agree
 - e. Strongly agree
- 10.) Single-gender schools are more prestigious than coeducational schools.
- a. Strongly disagree
 - b. Disagree
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Agree
 - e. Strongly agree
- 11.) Children who attend single-gender schools do not know how to appropriately interact with the opposite sex in social settings.
- a. Strongly disagree
 - b. Disagree
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Agree
 - e. Strongly agree
- 12.) Single-gender schools reinforce gender stereotypes.
- a. Strongly disagree
 - b. Disagree
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Agree
 - e. Strongly agree

- 13.) Boys are more likely to participate in the performing arts (choir, theater, dance, etc.) at single-gender schools than coeducational schools.
- a. Strongly disagree
 - b. Disagree
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Agree
 - e. Strongly agree
- 14.) Girls are more likely to participate in math and science classes at single-gender schools than coeducational schools.
- a. Strongly disagree
 - b. Disagree
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Agree
 - e. Strongly agree
- 15.) Single-gender schools are safer than coeducational schools.
- a. Strongly disagree
 - b. Disagree
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Agree
 - e. Strongly agree
- 16.) Single-gender schools have stricter discipline than coeducational schools.
- a. Strongly disagree

- b. Disagree
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Agree
 - e. Strongly agree
- 17.) Children who attend single-gender schools are more likely to fulfill personal goals than children who attend coeducational schools.
- a. Strongly disagree
 - b. Disagree
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Agree
 - e. Strongly agree
- 18.) Would you like to participate in a focus group in order to further elaborate on why you chose to send your son to a single-gender charter school? Focus groups are voluntary and will consist of six to ten parents. They will be held at Boys' Latin at 5501 Cedar Ave. Four sessions will be offered over the next two weeks. Light refreshments will be provided for participants. If you choose to participate, please include your email address so that if you choose to participate, I can confirm the date and time of your participation. If more than ten parents choose to participate in a session participants will be selected on a first come, first serve basis. Focus groups will be audio recorded but the names of participants will not be disclosed.
- a. YES, I would like to participate in a focus group.
 - b. NO, I would not like to participate in a focus group.

- 19.) If you selected "YES" above, please indicate the date and time that you would like to participate. If you selected "NO" to participate in a focus group, please skip this question and submit form.
- a. Tuesday, July 8th, 12pm
 - b. Wednesday, July 9th, 6pm
 - c. Monday, July 14th, 12pm
 - d. Thursday, July 17th, 9am
- 20.) If you have chosen "YES" to participate in a focus group, please include your email address for confirmation of the date and time of your participation. If you have chosen "NO" to participate in a focus group, please skip this question and submit form.

The survey is complete. Thank you for taking the time to share your valuable insights regarding why you chose to send your son to a single-gender charter school. Your responses are greatly valued by both Boys' Latin and me.

If you have chosen to participate in a focus group, you will receive a confirmation email from me with the date and time you have signed up for within 1-2 days of survey submission.

Focus Group Questions Introduction

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this study to uncover parental motivations and perceived benefits of sending your son to a single-gender school, Boys' Latin. Your participation in this focus group is voluntary and you are not required to answer any questions. This session will be audio-recorded and transcribed by me later. All responses will remain confidential.

My name is Joseph Strzempka and I am currently pursuing a Master's in Global and International Education at Drexel University. I was a Latin teacher at Boys' Latin for four years and the Freshman Grade Level Chair for the last three years. This study will help Boys' Latin better understand why you chose a single-gender setting and to magnify the positive aspects. The goal is not to come to a consensus; disagreements are okay and expected. My role is as a moderator. I will intervene from time to time to ask for clarification or for you to expand on an idea, but if I am doing my job well I will not change topics or stop someone in the middle of a response. If I do, please tell me and we will continue to discuss the issue.

Please take a moment to introduce yourself, the name of your son, his grade level in the Fall, and any activities in which he participates. [Participants share above information.] We will now begin with questions about how you chose a school, what was important to you when choosing, and how important the single-gender aspect was in that choice.

1. Why did you choose to send your son to Boys' Latin?
2. What were the most important factors when selecting a school for your son?
3. How important was the single-gender setting in selecting Boys' Latin?
4. If important, why was it important?
5. How pleased are you with the single-gender aspect of Boys' Latin?

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this focus group.