



# **NOW Isn't Pro-Choice On Education**

By **CHRISTINE B. WHELAN**

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As the Virginia Military Institute welcomes its first female rats, we can say this about feminists: At least they're consistent. Having won a U.S. Supreme Court ruling against the formerly all-male VMI, they now turn their guns on a program designed to benefit girls: an all-female school in New York's East Harlem. Sometime in the next few weeks, the U.S. Department of Education is expected to decide whether the school will survive.

Last fall the Young Woman's Leadership School opened its doors to 56 seventh-graders from a variety of socioeconomic and educational backgrounds. The school plans to expand this year to include the eighth and ninth grades, and in subsequent years up to the 12th grade. During its first year the school boasted the best attendance record in the district and, most importantly, academic success, especially in math and science.

The Leadership School is the brainchild of Ann Rubenstein Tisch, a public school activist who envisioned an all-girls public school in Manhattan's Fourth District. With help from local school officials and the Manhattan Institute's Center for Educational Innovation, Ms. Tisch set up the Leadership School. Among her ideas for the future are a summer partnership with Smith College, class trips to Washington, D.C., and even a trip to Europe for the girls who earn the highest marks.

Ms. Tisch attributes the middle-schoolers' success to increased confidence and the academic can-do attitude that the school engenders. And this is not a school only for the gifted: Admission requirements were limited to a C average and a desire to escape ponytail-tugging boys. "I am a lover of public education, and I believe it is savable as long as we offer parents a choice. We can no longer have a one-size-fits-all system," Ms. Tisch says.

The National Organization for Women and the New York Civil Liberties Union disagree. They believe coeducation must be mandatory in all publicly funded institutions. Last September the two groups filed a complaint with the New York City Board of Education alleging that the school's existence violates Title IX, a provision of a 1972 federal law that bars sex discrimination in education. Because San Francisco and other cities have similar schools in the works, the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights stepped in to settle the complaint.

Anne Conners, president of NOW New York, describes her campaign against the school in the lofty language of *Brown v. Board of Education*. "Separate but equal is not OK," she declares. As for defenders of the Young Woman's Leadership School, she is dismissive: "They don't give a damn about equity for girls. They just want to push the voucher system."

Feminists stress the importance of respecting women's choices. But NOW is evidently more concerned with abstractions than with the lives of actual young women like Cydnee Couch, who just finished seventh grade at the school. Cydnee could be a poster child for women's achievement: Science is her favorite subject, and she says she wants to play basketball and pursue a career in medicine or research. "I wanted to go to Harvard," she says, "but I might change my mind." Why is NOW so determined to deny Cydnee--or

any 12-year-old fed up with boys throwing spitballs in math class-- the right to attend a voluntary all-girls school?

Granted, most women are educated in coed environments. Many are successful, self-assured and achievement oriented. But there is no one best way to learn; just as some students benefit from a specialized magnet school in the arts or sciences, some young women flourish within an all-female environment.

Not all feminists agree with NOW. The San Francisco-based Women's Foundation, for example, supports the option of single-sex education. So does the American Association of University Women, albeit tentatively, calling for proof of "documented need" for all-girls programs in individual districts. The Leadership School "needs to be seen as a pilot and it needs to be evaluated," says AAUW executive director Janice Weinman.

But many studies have already been done that point to the benefits of single-sex schools, which seem to foster greater seriousness about academics. In 1986 Valerie Lee of the University of Michigan and Anthony Bryk of the University of Chicago analyzed a random sample of more than 1,800 girls in both single-sex and coed Catholic schools. They found that given similar course work, girls at single-sex schools were 32% more likely to say they were interested in English and 28% more likely to say they were interested in math than their counterparts in coed schools. Girls in single-sex schools were more than four times as likely as girls in coed schools to say they admired peers who excelled in their studies. At all-girls schools, "it's cool to be good at math and science," says Meg Moulton, executive director of the National Coalition of Girls' Schools.

As Department of Education officials in Washington deliberate the fate of the Young Woman's Leadership School, they should keep in mind a 1992 finding of their own department: "We conclude that

there is empirical support for the view that single-sex schools may accrue positive outcomes, particularly for young women."

Women who have attended private single-sex institutions are pleased with the results. According to a 1990 Yankelovich poll, 91% of alumnae from all-girls' high schools said single-sex education helped them focus on academics and 77% said their years at such schools made them more confident.

The choice of single-sex schools can be made within each community--by each student and her parents. For well over a century affluent families have chosen to send their daughters to private schools like Spence, 15 blocks from the Leadership School on Manhattan's tony Upper East Side. Why should girls of more modest means be denied the option?

In his dissenting opinion to the VMI decision, Justice Antonin Scalia lamented that single-sex education was now "functionally dead." I hope he proves to have been wrong. I am the product of 13 years of single-sex education. Choosing an all-girls school was one of the best decisions my parents and I ever made.

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