Some Change Is a Big Improvement

by Phyllis Schlafly December 5, 2008

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December first was a special day for the elementary students at Newark, New Jersey's public schools. All children are now required to wear uniforms.

"The implementation of school uniforms came from the belief that if we can eliminate things that distract our young people such as name-brand clothing, they will perform better, have high expectations, and develop a vision toward academic achievement," explained Newark Superintendent Dr. Clifford Janey.

What a progressive idea! School uniforms were commonplace a century ago.

But the '60s radicals and the liberal educrats decided to use public schools for social experimentation and behavior modification instead of for learning. Multiplication tables were replaced by rainforest math, and phonics was replaced by books filled with pictures.

The liberals are crowing that the election of Barack Obama has launched a new era of change. But it could be like Woodstock in 1969: the end of an era, not the beginning.

Newark public schools are 85 percent black and 80 percent low-income, and only 2 percent later graduate from college. Failed liberal approaches have long held Newark kids in an environment of failure, but sometimes even liberals tire of their own mistakes and turn to answers from the past.

Competition from charter schools may be the real motivation. North Star Academy Middle School, a charter school in Newark drawing on the same demographics, requires uniforms and other discipline and achieves far better results than ordinary public schools.

North Star Academy has a waiting list of 2,000. North Star's principal, James Verrilli, points out that providing a good education is "the new civil rights movement of our era."

The Newark public schools also plan to require uniforms for their high school students next year. Finally, someone is implementing a kind of change that might actually do some good (in contrast to Obama's vague talk of meaningless change).

The Newark public schools brag about their new uniforms on bus posters, fliers, public service announcements, publications, and even a prominent billboard. Newark issued a press release declaring that "research has proven that when students see themselves as members of a group that is disciplined and positively engaged, it helps build their self-esteem and their performance improves."

We didn't need expensive "research" to confirm the positive effects of uniforms in schools. But a fig leaf may help protect against radical colleagues who resist the new policy.

Meanwhile, another dramatic change has quietly been taking place in public schools, and the '60s radicals, the ACLU and the feminists are in fits about it, too.

Hundreds of public schools are embracing single-sex classrooms, programs, and even entire buildings.

As recently as five years ago, only about a dozen public schools offered even one program or class that was all-boy or all-girl. Today, over 360 public schools do, at least 80 of which are entirely all-boy or all-girl schools.

This growth in single-sex programs and schools exploded only during the past two years. Title IX regulations were modified in 2006 to allow voluntary single-sex programs.

This rapid movement toward single-sex education is not coming from Republican or conservative areas. The demand for separating boys and girls is coming from inner cities like New Orleans.

The Louisiana state board of education this year approved two new single-sex public schools in New Orleans: the Miller-McCoy Academy for Mathematics and Business and the American Scholars Academy. The founder of the latter, Natasha Baker, was frustrated at the unusually high percentage of boys who were suspended for misconduct or put in special education classes.

Feminists are howling in protest against this growing trend toward single-sex public education. Ever since the 1960s, they've been demanding that boys and girls, and men and women, be treated exactly the same based on feminist theory that there are no gender differences.

"Without anyone batting an eye, we are re-segregating schools based on gender," complained Rosalind Barnett of Brandeis University. "If for a minute people talked about re-segregating on race, people would be up in arms."

But gender is not like race, and the huge demand for single-sex programs shows that parents know they are effective. Don't expect Hillary Clinton to protest something so popular, particularly among blacks, and it is doubtful that the Obama Administration will dare to stop this trend.

Even the liberal Boston Globe recently endorsed legislation to remove state laws that prevent Massachusetts from joining the rush to single-sex programs and schools.

Kerry Brennan, headmaster at the all-boys Roxbury Latin School (founded in 1645) observed that "it is well known that boys and girls develop differently and at different rates." It's a good thing he doesn't work at Harvard where the feminists ousted President Larry Summers for a similar type of comment.