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SINGLE-SEX SCHOOLS

It is doubtful that the recent U.S. Supreme Court decision upholding the right of the Philadelphia public school system to maintain one all-girls school and one all-boys school will end the controversy about the legality, the propriety, or the desirability of single-sex schools and colleges.

There are more than a hundred all-female colleges, a few all-male colleges, and no one really knows how many all-girls and all-boys elementary and secondary schools. Most are private schools or colleges; a handful are tax-supported.

It is obvious that the majority of Americans prefer coed schools and colleges. The question is, should we permit the majority to stamp out the rights of the minority who freely choose to attend single-sex schools? Should we brand the single-sex school and college as an anachronism not relevant to modern needs? Or as an embarrassing evidence of a sexist society?

Since Brown v. Board of Education proclaimed in 1954 that "separate but equal [is] inherently unequal" in regard to race, segregation by race has been prohibited in all educational institutions. Must this same rule be applied to sex? Should segregation by sex come within the definition of the offense labeled sex discrimination?

Those who are trying to build what they call a "gender-free society," and who look upon a revamping of our educational system as the principal vehicle of achieving that goal, would answer yes.

Congress answered no when it passed Title IX of the Education Amendments in 1972. After a hot debate on this issue, Congress opted for diversity in education rather than conformity.

The ardent advocates of a total mandate against all sex discrimination or segregation fought hard against this decision. The sponsor of Title IX, Senator

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Birch Bayh, made it clear in Senate debate that he considered the exemption of single-sex schools and colleges only a practical and temporary expedient to secure passage of Title IX. Bayh's Senate speech included such grudging remarks as "admissions policies are temporarily exempted until further study can be made as to the feasibility of requiring that all admissions policies be sex neutral," and "these exemptions will not be supportable after further study and discussion."

Actually, when Congress and the Supreme Court separately concluded that the law should not interfere with the freedom of choice to attend single-sex schools or colleges, they showed a proper respect for the national consensus already becoming evident.

A decade ago, the elimination of single-sex schools and colleges appeared to be the wave of the future. Many of the most prestigious colleges succumbed to the coed movement, including Yale, Princeton, Dartmouth, and Vassar.

But the reports of the death of the single-sex college were, to borrow Mark Twain's famous phrase, "greatly exaggerated." Many single-sex colleges not only have resisted the trend, but have rediscovered their own identity.

The president of Mount Holyoke College, for example, states: "Coeducation is neither an inevitable nor better status. It would be a disaster for this country if every institution were coeducational, because it would be one more step toward destroying the diversity which is essential to educational strength and therefore toward reducing the entire enterprise to a dead mediocrity."

The president of Smith College argues that women's colleges "tend to take women's intellectual abilities and aspirations more seriously than other institutions." Women's colleges enthusiastically circulate what is known as the Tidball Study which provides evidence that high achievers among females tend to be graduates of women's colleges. The distinguished achievement record of single-sex schools and colleges clearly proves that sex-segregatiots not the same offense as race-segregation.

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