Clemson researchers study single-gender classes at Starr-Iva

By Sarah Freishtat

Friday, December 6, 2013

A classroom full of seventh-grade boys at Starr-Iva Middle School sat silently at attention while their teacher reviewed math problems on the board.

Their attentiveness is the reason for a Clemson University study on single-gender classrooms, in which Starr-Iva is participating. Researchers are investigating the effects of single-gender math and science classrooms on students in five school districts across the state, in one of the first studies of single-gender education nationwide, according to researcher Megan Che.

“The middle school age is sort of really crucial in terms of student identities,” Che said.

That was what administrators at Starr-Iva thought when they first separated genders in all sixth- and seventh-grade classes last year. They wanted to improve academics at the school, and thought taking away the distraction of the opposite gender might help, said instructional assistant Christy Dodd.

“I think what we’re doing is we are able to nurture our students through a difficult time in their life,” Dodd said.

The school is one of five in the region that offer some single-gender classrooms, according to the state Department of Education. Nevitt Forest Elementary in Anderson District 5 also separates classes, as do Seneca Middle School, Liberty Middle School and Getty Middle School in Pickens County.

Che could not identify any schools participating in the National Science Foundation-funded study, including Starr-Iva, but said she is looking at the atmosphere of single-gender classes and student test scores.

“Maybe it's the case that girls in all-girl classes have different relationships to math than girls in coed classes,” Che said.

Researchers have been videotaping classrooms at Starr-Iva for about one month, Dodd said, though the study is in its third and final year. They will also conduct surveys and examine test scores, Dodd added.
Seventh-grade Starr-Iva student Brooklyn Belton-Boseman, who was also in separated classes last year, said she likes taking classes with only girls. She and her classmates often sit outside their separated rooms in the morning reading, she said.

Although Brooklyn used to miss having classes with boys, she came to enjoy being able to focus on her studies and her friends, she said.

“It’s easier to concentrate, and it’s not as distracting,” she said, before returning to her SuccessMaker lesson, an online curriculum tailored to help her in areas where she struggled.

Carson Shea, on his way to his seventh-grade robotics class, said he did not mind having separated classes, because he could sit with anyone he wanted at lunch and in gifted and talented pullout sessions.

“In our guys group, we all kind of think the same, so it’s easier,” he said.

Dodd said the gender separation was one reason the school’s scores on the standardized PASS exam improved in all four subjects tested, along with programs for gifted and talented students or those who need remediation.

The number of students who met or exceeded expectations rose 10 to 15 percent on all portions of the exam last year, when classrooms were first separated.

Eighth-grader Haley Binninger said that although she only took single-gender classes for one year, it was a big jump to go back to mixed classes.

She had mixed classes in sixth grade, separated in seventh, and is now back in mixed classes in time for high school.

“There was no drama or anything,” she said, but having boys in her classes was “irritating and obnoxious.”

However, she said she was glad to be in mixed classes again before high school.

Dodd said she was not worried about sending students to mixed-class high school after separated classes in middle school. They are more mature by the time they reach high school, she said.

“We did it to address academic concerns in our building,” Dodd said. “And we met with success.”