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Single-sex classes get a boost

Government's final rules allow latitude while adhering to Title IX

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WASHINGTON — The Bush administration is giving public schools wider latitude to teach boys and girls separately in what is considered the biggest change to coed classrooms in more than three decades.

After a two-year wait, the Education Department issued final rules Tuesday detailing how it will enforce the landmark Title IX anti-discrimination law.

Under the change taking effect Nov. 24, local school leaders will have discretion to create same-sex classes for subjects, such as math, a grade level or even an entire school.

"Some students may learn better in single-sex education environments," said Education Secretary Margaret Spellings.

"These final regulations permit communities to establish single-sex schools and classes as another means of meeting the needs of students.

"Every child should receive a high quality education in America, and every school and district deserves the tools to provide it," she said.

Single-sex classrooms have become more common in recent years. In 1998, only four public schools had them, compared to at least 228 this year, according to the National Association for Single Sex Public Education.

Education officials first proposed the rules in early 2004, pointing in part to research suggesting better student achievement and fewer discipline problems in single-sex classes including math and foreign languages.

Critics cite discrimination risks

After receiving 5,600 public comments, education officials said they were moving forward with the plan with some wording tweaks and assurances from Attorney General Alberto Gonzales that it was legally sound.

Critics who compare the plan to "separate but equal" segregation-era classrooms haven't been so sure.

The National Organization for Women says it creates the risk of creating second-class citizens. The American Association of University Women has said it would "throw out the most basic legal standards prohibiting sex discrimination in education."

A school board in southeastern Louisiana dropped plans last month to segregate two middle schools by sex after meeting with a federal judge and attorneys for the American Civil Liberties Union about the plan.

Since current rules began in 1975, single-sex classes have been allowed only in limited cases, such as sex education courses or gym classes involving contact sports.

Under the new rules, schools could separate genders for a variety of subjects if they believed it offered educational

Local angle

- For the last three years, Sahuarita Middle School has been offering all-girls and all-boys math and pre-algebra classes for students struggling with AIMS tests. Vail School District's Cienega High School began offering single-sex math and science classes this year.

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benefits, such as promoting greater student comfort or higher attendance. Enrollment in a single-sex class would be voluntary.

If a school creates a single-sex class, it would not be required to offer the other gender its own similar class, but it would have to offer a coed version of it.

On the Net: *Education Department*, www.ed.gov/index.jhtml

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