

“WE ARE THE PIONEERS”

Dallas ISD students among the state’s first to experience single-sex public education

By Kate Johanns

There’s a group of young women in Dallas who’ve been to tea with a potential First Lady. When they attend leadership conferences, they stride confidently up to fellow attendees and introduce themselves. They’re actively involved in projects that benefit their community, but they’re also focused on international issues. Last summer, a few of these young women traveled to Italy to take in art and culture; two years ago, one young woman had the chance to stretch her artistic muscles by studying studio art in Cambridge, England. In fact, her first painting was of the Thames River as seen from her school.

These young women don’t belong to the Junior League; they’re the students of Dallas ISD’s Irma L. Rangel Young Women’s Leadership School, one of Texas’ growing number of single-sex public schools.



PHOTO BY ERICA FRIOUX



Irma L. Rangel Young Women's Leadership School
principal Vivian Taylor and students Stephanie
Aguilera, Constance Dolph and Bianca Williams

Enriching the curriculum

The school, named for the first Hispanic woman elected to the Texas Legislature, is one of at least 363 public schools across the country that are either entirely single-sex or offer single-sex classes in a coeducational environment, according to the National Association for Single Sex Public Education (NASSPE), the most prominent advocacy group in the single-sex education movement. That number has grown from 140 in fall 2004. The DISD magnet school is also one of two public schools in the state receiving financial support from the Foundation for the Education of Young Women, which was established by Dallas-area philanthropists Lee and Sally Posey. Lee Posey is the founder and chairman emeritus of Palm Harbor Homes, a company that produces manufactured and modular homes.

Inspired by a visit to the Young Women's Leadership School in East Harlem, N.Y., the Poseys created their foundation with the goal of opening a network of six all-female college prep schools in Texas cities. In addition to Irma Rangel, the foundation is also supporting Austin ISD's Ann Richards School for Young Women Leaders, which opened in fall 2007. (Governor Ann Richards was heavily involved with the development of her namesake school until her death in September 2006.)

The Poseys approached Dallas ISD with their idea for a young women's leadership academy in 2002, and district administrators surveyed parents and community members to see if there was support for such an initiative, according to Irma Rangel principal Vivian Taylor.

"Overwhelmingly, parents were very supportive," Taylor says. "It inspired the district to move forward."

The school opened in 2004 with 100 seventh-graders and 24 eighth-graders.

Today, 408 sixth- through 11th-grade students attend Irma Rangel and are taught using the same curriculum DISD uses in all of its schools, but in a way that Taylor describes as "enriched" and

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"extended" for female students. The difference is in teaching style, she says.

"One of the key features of teaching in a single-gender environment with young ladies is giving them a little bit more time to respond," says Taylor, whose educational experience includes time as the principal of a DISD Montessori school. Taylor remembers observing a teacher at the Montessori school interact with students in a coeducational environment. The teacher was sitting at a table with a group of students and asked one of the girls a question. While the girl was pondering her answer, one of her male classmates raised his hand and got the teacher's attention. As the teacher called on the boy, Taylor heard the young girl say quietly, "That's what I was going to say." In a single-sex environment, Taylor says, teachers are encouraged to create environments where girls are given ample time to formulate their answers and work together to reach conclusions. This gives students an advantage over their peers in coeducational settings, according to Taylor.

"The young ladies in a single-gender environment are, by far, more focused on their academics," Taylor says.

Facts and opinions

The question many people ask when they first hear about single-sex *public* schools: Is that even legal?

In 1972, Congress passed Title IX, which outlaws sex discrimination in schools receiving federal assistance. Title IX prohibited single-sex courses or schools except under limited circumstances,

such as sex education or physical education courses involving contact sports. However, when the No Child Left Behind Act was passed, it included a provision by Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison (R-Texas) that directed the Education Department to create new regulations within Title IX that would allow school districts to pursue single-sex educational opportunities. Hutchison's proposal received great bipartisan support; one of its strongest advocates was Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-New York).

In October 2006, U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings announced the release of final regulations amending Title IX to allow for single-sex classes and schools. Before the new regulations were released, public schools could provide single-sex opportunities to students of one gender if a comparable *single-sex* setting was provided for students of the other. Now, a school district can create single-sex environments for just one gender so long as it offers a substantially equal *coeducational* opportunity for the other gender and enrollment in the single-sex school or class is voluntary.

In the press release announcing the regulations, Spellings said: "Research shows that some students may learn better in single-sex education environments." However, available research on the outcomes of single-sex education is limited. A 2005 U.S. Department of

Education review of single-sex education studies concluded that the results were equivocal: "There is some support for the premise that single-sex schooling can be helpful, especially for certain outcomes related to academic achievement and more positive academic aspirations. For many outcomes, there is no evidence of either benefit or harm. There is limited support for the view that single-sex schooling may be harmful or that coeducational schooling is more beneficial for students." The Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development, which conducted the review for the Education Department, examined more than 2,200 quantitative studies on single-sex education. Of those, only 40 were judged "methodologically adequate," according to Arizona State University researcher Gerald W. Bracey.

Given the limited research, support for and opposition to single-sex education is largely a matter of opinion. Groups skeptical of single-sex education include the National Organization for

who is also executive director of the NASSPE. Sax is the author of *Why Gender Matters: What Parents and Teachers Need to Know About the Emerging Science of Sex Differences*. In *Why Gender Matters*, Sax cites studies and offers anecdotal examples supporting his argument that males and females are biologically wired to respond better to different types of teaching. Boys, Sax suggests, do well in pressure-filled, competitive situations, while Sax says girls respond better to more nurturing, discussion-based environments.

It "just felt right"

Whether their success is due to the single-sex environment or other factors, the students of Irma Rangel have done great things. The school received an exemplary rating for its 2006 TAKS scores. Taylor told the *Austin American-Statesman* in August that though she knows her academically motivated students would be successful in a coeducational school, she feels they have increased confidence because of their environment.

"I was very shy before I came here," junior Stephanie Aguilera says. "Now I'm more outspoken."

Women and the American Association of University Women (AAUW); these organizations suggest that single-sex education has the potential to reinforce gender stereotypes. In a policy statement on the topic, AAUW raises concerns that the 2006 regulations lack accountability requirements and do not adequately define "substantially equal." Others who question the movement say that the success of single-sex schools could be attributed to factors such as small class sizes, additional resources, etc.

One of the leading proponents of single-sex education is Leonard Sax, a family physician and psychologist

Applicants to the school must have an average GPA of 80 in core subject areas and score in at least the 40th percentile on norm-referenced tests. They must also submit portfolios of their science and social studies work. Girls and their parents are also interviewed about their interest in the school.

"It was just one of those choices that just felt right," says junior Constance Dolph, one of 21 girls who will be Irma Rangel's first graduates in 2009.

Junior Bianca Williams first learned of the school from a friend, who convinced her to apply.

"I don't regret it," Williams says. "It's been a good experience. You meet so many people, and you get to see what's outside in the world." As a ninth-grader, Williams was the student who spent time in Cambridge, England, exploring her interest in art.

Single-sex education in Texas

At least 363 public schools in the U.S. are entirely single-sex or offer single-sex classes, according to the National Association for Single Sex Public Education (NASSPE). Single-sex campuses in Texas include:

-  Austin ISD's Ann Richards School for Young Women Leaders.
-  Dallas ISD's Irma L. Rangel Young Women's Leadership School.
-  Houston ISD's Pro-Vision Charter School and William A. Lawson Institute for Peace and Prosperity (WALIPP) Academy. (Both charter schools serve males.)
-  Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) Polaris Academy for Boys, located in Houston.

San Antonio ISD plans to open an all-girls school in fall 2008. Austin ISD has formed a task force to begin developing a young men's leadership academy in fall 2009.

Texas districts that have offered or currently offer single-sex classes within coed schools include: Beaumont, Caney Creek, Carrollton-Farmers Branch, DeSoto, Judson and San Antonio ISDs.

Source: NASSPE,
www.singlesexschools.org

During summer 2007, several Irma Rangel students spent 11 days in Italy to, in the words of junior Stephanie Aguilera, "experience another culture without textbooks." The girls stayed with host families, attended classes and visited cultural sites.

"The best part was staying with another family because it forced us to get out of our comfort zone," Aguilera says. "The key word of the whole trip was 'surprise.' We didn't find out what we were doing until about five minutes before we did it because they [their teachers] wanted us to be able to adjust to change."

Aguilera credits Irma Rangel's single-sex environment for her increased self-confidence. "I was very shy before I came here," she says. "Here, we get pushed to do presentations in front of the class. Now, I'm more outspoken. Even though it's just girls here, I know that I can also speak more freely in a regular environment."

Taylor says that she, too, has changed as a result of her time as principal of a single-sex school. "I'm finding myself to be a much better listener," she says. "If a young lady comes to talk with me for whatever reason, I really take time to try and find out what's going on. I am not so quick to give a consequence for an action."

The students in Irma Rangel's first graduating class are conscious that many people are watching their progress to determine if the experiment has been a success. They're also aware that some of the keenest observers are Irma Rangel's younger students. Although they don't often have opportunities to interact with the school's younger students, they strive to be positive role models for them. "They're constantly watching us," Aguilera says. "We have to set the standards."

Dolph agrees. "What they see is how well we perform academically and our decorum inside the classroom. We are the pioneers." 🌀