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Single-sex classes on a forward course

More schools in L.A. and across the nation separate boys and girls. New federal guidelines extend the leeway.

By Carla Rivera, Times Staff Writer
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The problem posed in Mrs. Pfeiffer's seventh-grade prealgebra class at Campbell Hall is seasonal: How much turkey is needed to serve 30 people if each person gets $\frac{2}{5}$ of a pound? Hands shoot up, with an "ooh, ooh!" here and a quizzical look there.

It appears to be a typical math class on the tree-lined campus of the private North Hollywood coed school, except for one thing: There are only boys in the room. The all-girls math class will meet a few hours later. For more than eight years, Campbell Hall has separated the 250 boys and girls in seventh- and eighth-grade math; this fall, for the first time, the school is doing the same with science class. Students benefit because they are less distracted by the opposite sex, said math teacher Michelle Pfeiffer, and instruction can be tailored to the different learning styles of boys and girls.

"We can express ourselves better," said Brett Landsberger, 12, a Campbell Hall seventh-grader. "It's like boys are a different species. You walk by the girls classes and they're sitting there all perfect, and you go into the boys class and they're all over the floor."

Single-sex classes and schools — both public and private — are gaining favor across the nation as educators search for ways to boost test scores and students' self-esteem. In 1995, only three public schools in the nation offered a single-sex

option, compared with more than 253 today, according to the National Assn. for Single Sex Public Education. Five percent of private schools are single-sex.

In Los Angeles, a new girls-only public charter school opened this fall. Another newly opened charter school in Lincoln Heights has launched one of the first formal experiments in single-sex education, creating separate boys and girls classes with plans to study their test scores, classroom behavior and other achievement yardsticks.

Research has long suggested that girls in coed settings defer to boys and receive less attention from teachers. Other educators cite more recent evidence that boys, especially low-income minority youths, might benefit as well. The gap between girls' and boys' test scores has decreased, and girls are applying in higher numbers to college and now obtain more bachelor's degrees than boys.

A recent ruling by the U.S. Department of Education giving public schools more leeway to offer single-sex curricula will probably accelerate the move toward single-sex classrooms, experts said. Previous rules generally banned single-sex classes, with some exceptions.

The new guidelines, scheduled to take effect Friday, permit single-sex education in public schools but must be geared toward improving achievement, providing diverse experiences or meeting the particular needs of students. Programs must treat male and female students evenhandedly and offer substantially equal coeducational classes in the same subject. Enrollment must be voluntary.

"We're already seeing schools respond to the amended regulations," said Elena Silva, a senior policy analyst with the

Education Sector, a nonprofit Washington, D.C.-based think tank. "There's a lot of public support for at least the notion of single-sex schooling."

That support reflects a wave of enthusiasm for greater school choice overall as policymakers, parents and educators struggle to reform an education system that has left American students frequently lagging behind their international peers. The federal No Child Left Behind Act endorsed same-sex programs as an "innovative" practice.

But gender separation is controversial. Critics contend the practice is a slide backward, one that could reinforce stereotypes and lead to different and unequal classroom experiences.

The American Assn. of University Women argues that there is little evidence that girls and boys do better apart. Better-funded schools with more focused academic instruction, smaller class sizes and qualified teachers are far more likely to influence learning, said research director Catherine Hill.

The American Civil Liberties Union sued a Louisiana junior high school last summer over its plan to separate girls and boys, arguing that it violated Title IX regulations that require gender equity in educational programs that receive federal funding. The complaint against the Livingston Parish School Board cited statements that girls would be taught "good character" while boys would be taught about "heroic" behavior. The school board dropped the plan.

But such arguments have failed to sway those educators who believe there is much to gain and little to lose in experimenting with same-gender education. They point to a growing body of find-

ings — albeit disputed — that boys' and girls' brains function and develop in different ways. Boys, the theory goes, do better in competitive, action-based, team-oriented tasks, while girls thrive in a more relaxed environment, working in pairs or alone.

Since Campbell Hall began the single-gender classes, girls are taking more advanced math courses in high school and are participating more in class, said junior high Principal Eileen Wasserman.

In Regina Choi's eighth-grade math class one recent morning, about 16 girls worked quietly in pairs solving algebra problems. Choi said girls feel more comfortable asking questions in class, while boys prefer to wait to avoid looking less smart in front of classmates. Though the course's content is the same for both sexes, Choi said it is sometimes more effective posing problems for girls using shopping examples and for boys using sports.

Another math teacher, Arlene Myles, said she focuses on trying to get the girls to be more competitive and the boys more cooperative.

Because teachers and administrators believed the single-sex approach to math was successful, they decided to apply it to science this year. Courses at Campbell Hall's high school are coed.

Students had mixed views.

"I like math now a lot more than I used to," said Ally Piddock, 12. "Boys are a distraction because they goof around a lot and it's easier for me to concentrate when they're not there." "It's easier to pay attention in math when girls are not there," agreed Reese Wexler, 13. "But science would be better coed. It's a different environment. In lab, the people you might work better with could be girls or boys."

In the Los Angeles Unified School District, the nation's second-largest, Jordan High School and King/Drew

Medical Magnet are experimenting with single-sex curricula, establishing small academies for at-risk boys.

George McKenna, assistant superintendent of the Pasadena Unified School District, said he has tried and failed to interest his staff in trying single-sex classes but is encouraged that the new federal guidelines may ease resistance.

Many public schools, including charters, have skirted federal law and used same-gender curricula for years on the "down-low," said Caprice Young, executive director of the California Charter Schools Assn., who predicted that more charter schools will open single-sex programs.

New Village Charter High School opened in September on the grounds of St. Anne's, a residential treatment center for teen mothers. The ninth- through 12th-grade college prep all-girls school will focus on the particular needs of low-income girls.

The school opened after receiving a waiver from the state and had fretted at the possible federal response.

"I've been a coed advocate all of my educational career, but when you look at the specific needs of these girls it seems absolutely essential that it be single-sex," said Paul Cummins of the New Visions Foundation, which helped develop the school. "This is one very small single-sex school in an ocean of coed schools."

But data from a major California project suggest that single-sex programs are problematic and at the least must be carefully planned. In 1997, as an experiment in public school choice, the state opened 12 single-gender academies — one middle or high school for boys and another identical one for girls — in six school districts.

A 2001 study by researchers at the University of Toronto, UC San Diego and UC Berkeley found that the program was poorly implemented and

underfunded. Separating girls from boys reduced classroom distractions, said the authors — although students still experienced harassment and teasing. But traditional gender stereotypes often were reinforced, and students received mixed messages from their teachers. Only one of the schools, the San Francisco 49ers Academy in East Palo Alto, is still open.

At the Excel Charter Academy, a middle school northeast of downtown Los Angeles, Principal Patricia Mora and other administrators launched a project to evaluate girls-only and boys-only programs and a coed group for comparison, with students randomly assigned to each group. In its first year, the school is offering only sixth grade, with 25 students in each group.

Early observations find the coed group having a few more behavioral problems, said Mora. But the all-boys group seems to be doing especially well academically. One recent morning, the boys' humanities class was reading "Boy of the Painted Cave," about a boy in ancient times who wants to be a cave painter. Both boys and girls were assigned to read the book, and stories with female protagonists will be introduced later.

As teacher Cecily Feltham described the hero grabbing a wolf by the neck and fighting a bull, the boys were attentive, offering vivid descriptions of the action.

In another room, the girls science class was learning about thermal energy, having built a solar oven. The coed group, meanwhile, took physical education during recess.

The first test scores are due in January, and Mora is hoping to attract a top research group to evaluate the program.

"If at the end of the year we find that one group is working out better than the other, then I don't think we'd continue to subject one cohort to being coed," she said. "But I honestly don't know what we'll find."