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JENNIFER YOUNG: PANEL ONE - EAST HARLEM GIRLS SCHOOL

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Jennifer Young *

JENNIFER YOUNG: I bring with me today the voices of some of the girls from my program. Last week, after the first time skiing, Darlene announced to the group during the van ride home, "I can now say I have done something no one else in my family has done, even my brother." And two days ago, in a self-defense program, Athea wrote, "today I have proven to myself how much power my body actually has, and it feels good."

My position on single sex education is practical. It comes from working directly with adolescent girls in a coeducational school in East Harlem, in a program designed for girls only.¹ I have watched girls become stronger, smarter, and bolder, as a direct result of the programs designed solely for them.² Each of the girls I just mentioned credit their school environments for helping them make these realizations and experiences. They all expressed feeling more free when boys were not around which in turn allowed them to nurture these parts of themselves.³

In my experience, an all-female education builds skills and

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¹ The school is the Central Park East Secondary School in East Harlem servicing grades 7-12. Girls Incorporated is conducting a five year program in the school. The program is unique in that it is integrated into the school curriculum and allows girls to get school credit if they participate in the program. Telephone Interview with Sally Baker, Girls Incorporated (Nov. 19, 1997).

² See Jacques Steinberg, *Just Girls, and That's Fine With Them*, N.Y. TIMES, Feb. 1, 1997, at B1 [hereinafter *Just Girls*]. The founders of the school hope the single-sex environment will help the girls "build self-esteem, become more assertive and take on new leadership roles." *Id.* Girls who keep quiet in class have letters sent home to their parents urging them to speak up in class. *Id.*

³ See Jacques Steinberg, *Crew Says No to Compromise on All-Girls Middle School*, N.Y. TIMES, Sept. 25, 1997, at B3 (stating that teenage girls perform better when boys are not in the classroom).

confidences in girls that stay with them for the rest of their lives.⁴ All girl classes create an environment where girls feel more safe taking risks.⁵ They feel safer making mistakes and are more confident as leaders.⁶ When boys are not around, girls play more freely, and that is very important.⁷ Traditionally, the support that exists in a group of adolescent girls is not the same support you often find in a male group of friends.⁸ With boys out of the immediate picture, girls are less socially critical of each other.⁹ They support and love one another with an energy, maturity, and depth that continues to amaze me. It is this kind of developed support and accountability to each other that is unique. Just last week, a student told me she feels this support has kept her from becoming pregnant at seventeen.

I certainly do not feel that every girl should attend an all-female school, nor do I believe that single-sex education removes all educational and developmental obstacles that girls face.¹⁰ There are bad single sex schools the same way there are bad co-ed schools, and there are some

⁴ See Jacques Steinberg, *Harlem Girls School deserves NOW's Blessing*, N.Y. TIMES, Mar. 8, 1997, at 22 (likening the East Harlem school to womens' colleges such as Smith and Spelman which "produce wonders").

⁵ See *Just Girls*, *supra* note 2, at 25. A student of the school stated, "Last year, if I would have brought up a question about masturbation, the boys would have laughed. This year, I brought it up in class and the girls were like 'Thanks, Abby.'" *Id.*

⁶ See *generally id.* A student from the school said that the school "feels like home. You can be more open." *Id.*

⁷ See *generally id.* (stating that tryouts will be held for the school's first basketball team, created at the girls' insistence).

⁸ See Kristin S. Caplice, *The Case for Public Single-Sex Education*, 18 HARV. J.L. & PUB. POL'Y 227, at 259 (Fall 1994) (stating that females tend to exhibit more cooperative behavior such as sharing and coalition-forming and males are more likely to assist other males and refrain from assisting females).

⁹ *Id.* at 248 (stating that single-sex schools provide females with "warm and supportive" role models).

¹⁰ See William Henry Hurd, *Gone with the Wind? VMI's Loss and the Future of Single-Sex Public Education*, 4 DUKE J. GENDER L. & POL'Y 27, 83 (stating that some people think that single-sex education is not a panacea or a long-term solution). See also Kristin S. Caplice, *supra* note 8, at 281 (stating that one of the compelling criticisms of single-sex education is the failure to prepare students for the co-ed world).

specific things to look at there.¹¹ I have observed a substantial difference between public and private studies.¹² Separating boys and girls in classrooms is not the same as creating a pro-girl environment, and the public schools, in my experience, are less apologetic for addressing the needs of girls.¹³ I simply feel that the option of single-sex education should not be mandated, but always exist for those who want it, and who believe that for them it is their best choice.¹⁴

¹¹ Heather Johnston Nicholson, *Gender Issues in Youth Development Programs*, A Paper Commissioned by Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development for its Task Force on Youth Development and Community Programs (Feb. 1992) (concluding that whether a separate, or single-sex setting for girls is especially positive or promotes gender equity depends very much on the environment, values and relationships established there).

¹² See Tamar Lewin, *Single-Sex Education on the Rise: Pupils More Likely to Thrive, Achieve in Same-Sex Classrooms*, PITTSBURGH POST-GAZETTE, OCT. 12, 1997, at A18 (noting that little research has been done on single-sex public schools).

¹³ See Kristin S. Caplice, *supra* note 8, at 279 (listing the four major criticisms offered in opposition to publicly-supported single-sex schooling: it constitutes state-supported gender separation, single-sex schooling does not prepare students for a coeducational world, the market does not provide for this form of schooling, therefore there is no demand for it, and single-sex education is beneficial and justifiable for women only).

¹⁴ See Daniel Gardenswartz, *Public Education, An Inner-City Crisis! Single-Sex Schools: an Inner-City Answer?* 42 EMORY L.J. 591 (1993) (arguing that parents should be given a choice to address the different needs of boys and girls based on the different situations in their own communities and single-sex education should be an option).

