**Boys will be boys, but not with the girls**

By  [JEFF SCHMUCKER](mailto:jschmucker@hernandotoday.com) | Hernando Today

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SPRING HILL - Marvin [Wethington](http://www2.hernandotoday.com/topic/k/wethington/) knows a thing or two about commanding large groups, having served in the U.S. Army. It taught him [group tactics](http://www2.hernandotoday.com/topic/k/group-tactics/) that serves him well while teaching first-grade boys.

The classroom is broken up into two groups, both with [team leaders](http://www2.hernandotoday.com/topic/k/team-leaders/) to compete against the other. They move through the [hallways](http://www2.hernandotoday.com/topic/k/hallways/) using hand signals and even raise their hand and with a single gesture, letting [Wethington](http://www2.hernandotoday.com/topic/k/wethington/) know whether they want to answer a question or use the [restroom](http://www2.hernandotoday.com/topic/k/restroom/) — allowing him to signal back an answer without breaking his teaching stride.

Through a door in his classroom, a much different scenario plays out. The room's lighting is less bright — more like sunlight — with the girls talking in groups. They're teacher, Jillian Strat, stands in the center watching and listening to them. Her commands are gentler — as is her teaching style. Her girls work together in groups rather than compete and the lessons involve more discussion.  
Welcome to single-gender classrooms, where for the past three years at Westside Elementary School, [both genders](http://www2.hernandotoday.com/topic/k/both-genders/) in kindergarten through [fifth grade](http://www2.hernandotoday.com/topic/k/fifth-grade/) are taught, communicated with and placed in classrooms with different levels of lighting — all in efforts to reach out to them in ways they learn best.

[Wethington](http://www2.hernandotoday.com/topic/k/wethington/) said boys work better when competing in groups and moving around a room doing something rather than being at their desks. Being given leadership titles, such as group leader, working toward actual rewards and learning the [military hand signals](http://www2.hernandotoday.com/topic/k/military-hand-signals/) keep them focused — since he said they think they're cool.

"Making them accountable to their team and keeping them busy is the best way to maintain class discipline," [Wethington](http://www2.hernandotoday.com/topic/k/wethington/) said. "It helps them stay focused and when one falls behind, they jump in without being asked to and pull him up."

When teaching boys, he added that teachers have to be immediate with them when either disciplining or rewarding them, which is a large difference compared to how the girls are taught.  
Next door, Strat said her girls are learning things at a much slower pace, and definitely not in a competitive way. Instead, they spend much time talking about how and why things are along with their feelings.

"We learn in a more relaxed environment," Strat said. "Girls are definitely more worried about what each other are doing — and so our focus is definitely more on socialization, character education and building up confidence along with working on not forming cliques."

Combating stereotypes

Although for years it has been a belief that boys are good at math and girls at English, Tammy Wethington, Marvin's wife who also teaches third-grade girls, said separating the genders helps eliminate those typecasts.

For girls, she said removing boys from the classroom helps them become more extroverted, whereas before they might've been more likely to stay quiet among loud boys in their classroom. In subjects such as math, she said they can call out answers and not have to worry what boys might think of them when they speak up.

Helen Shepard, who teaches third-grade boys opposite of Tammy, said boys are much the same in reading and other similar subjects. Compared to when she taught combined gender classrooms, she said boys are more likely to band together and help one another rather than compete among themselves as they do when girls are present. She said reading is also looked at as less of a "girl thing" because they see only each other doing it in class.

But even more than that, Shepard said she now understands that she and other teachers used to misunderstand some boys' behavior in the classroom and now realizes that allowing them to "fidget" and move around the room more is good for them.

"I used to hear myself telling them, 'sit still,' thinking they weren't paying attention," Shepard said. "But I now know that letting them do that doesn't mean they're not paying attention. You can tell just by asking them a quick question and they'll show you whether they have or haven't been. It's OK to let them move around a little."

Single gender coming to an end?

Although a fan of offering single-gender classes to parents, Principal Dominick Ferello admits they aren't for everyone, which is why parents have to agree for their children to be in them.  
With the third and final year of offering single-gender classrooms approaching, and with support from parents and teachers, he'll be asking school board members for an extension of the program in April.  
Under the current study, he said administrators haven't taken the time to fully study to what extent students benefit from learning in single-gender classrooms.

"There are still a lot of variables that need to be looked at," Ferello said. "What I'd like to see is another three years to really study this and put some hard numbers together to see how students in single-gender classes perform on standardized tests compared to those in mixed-gender classrooms. We need to see whether or not this really works."

According to surveys from parents and teachers, he has a wide range of support. In most cases, teachers and parents surveyed agreed children benefited from the classes and wrote they'd like to see the program continued.

For boys' fifth-grade teacher Scott Urban, he said it would help extend the program to parents willing to sign up for it and give teachers time to learn the best teaching methods for each gender. Although he's been teaching single genders since it began, he said it took him a while to learn what methods worked better than others.

However, Ferello said another challenge looms — the voter requirement that schools reduce classroom sizes.

If the school is forced to reduce classroom sizes further, he said it's likely some of the single-gender classes will be eliminated, and there will likely be fewer opportunities for parents to have their children put in one.

"I'm not even sure what the impact will be for us," Ferello said. "It's one of the reasons we need to talk to the school board members and see about extending this program."

Reporter Jeff Schmucker can be reached at 352-544-5271 or [jschmucker@hernandotoday.com](mailto:jschmucker@hernandotoday.com)