

Sunday, 20 August, 2000, 16:57 GMT 17:57 UK

Blunkett tackles gender divide

Plans to tackle boys' underachievement in the classroom have been announced by the Education Secretary, David Blunkett.

The government says it is determined to stamp out the myth among boys that it "cool" to fail at school.

Concerns over the declining performance of boys in exams came back into the spotlight after last week's A-level results.

Girls out-performed boys for the first time in the exam's 49-year history.

Mr Blunkett is to order all local education authorities in England and Wales to provide progress reports outlining what they are doing to tackle boys' under-achievement.

He will also speak to the Office for Standards in Education about evaluating the effectiveness of single sex teaching of some subjects in co-educational schools.

"We will pin down what works well and ensure schools and education authorities have the ammunition to turn around boys' academic performance," Mr Blunkett said.



Male role models

The government is concerned that a macho, anti-authoritarian culture of "laddism" among teenage boys is affecting their studies.

Mr Blunkett said that to help counter this, better male role models were needed in schools, and in society generally.

He wanted to encourage more male teachers into the teaching profession.

Currently, 83% of primary and nursery teachers were women.

"The gap that has opened up between the sexes at school is a long-standing and international problem for which there is no quick fix, but I am determined that our boys should not miss out," he said.

Mr Blunkett said a gender and achievement website would be launched for the start of the school year, which would include advice on how best to raise the performance of underachieving boys.



Wanted: More male teachers

Schools and LEAs would also be able to hear experts' opinions at a series of regional conferences.

'World economic climate'

School Standards Minister Estelle Morris insisted on Sunday that the government was not about to force schools to become single sex.

But it did want to see whether single sex classes for some subjects had worked for the schools which had been experimenting with the idea.

She said: "If you look just 10,15 years ago, it was possible for boys to leave school with no qualifications and get a good job that gave them self-esteem and status and a decent wage, and often to keep that job for life. It's not like that any more.

"I think the problem is that boys' culture in terms of valuing learning and being proud to do well at school really has not really caught up with the changes in the world economic climate.

"It's got to be cool to learn. Doing well at school is OK."

The Tories accused Mr Blunkett of "clutching at straws" and said that the government was itself to blame for boys' poor performance compared with girls.

Shadow Education Secretary Theresa May said: "This is a problem that they are reaping as a result of their efforts to encourage girls to do well at school.



Estelle Morris: "Doing well at school is OK"

"The government are going to have to face up to the fact that, as a consequence of their heavy-handed interference, they have widened the academic gap between the sexes."

Campaign against single-sex schools



Some believe segregation improves results

Women's and civil rights groups are urging President Bush to drop plans for more single-sex schools in the United States.

The Bush administration favours relaxing the federal rules which currently limit single-sex schools, saying demand for places at the nation's 11 single-sex state schools is high.

But critics say these schools promote sexism and attract less financial backing than co-educational schools.

"We live in a real world, and that world has got men and women in it," said Eleanor Smeal, president of the Feminist Majority Foundation.

"They must compete," she said.

'A gimmick'

The Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, an umbrella group of 185 civil rights organizations, said there was no clear evidence as to the advantage of sex segregation.

"It's a gimmick, much like vouchers, where you don't know the impact on the other kids who are left behind," said deputy director Nancy Zirkin.

To improve performance, schools should focus more on academics, discipline, increased funds, smaller classes, more parental involvement and better teacher training, she added.

Teachers' unions in the States appear at odds over the proposal.

The National Education Association opposes single-sex schools and says any expansion of them is "bad educational policy".

The American Federation of Teachers though has no formal policy on single-sex schools.

President Sandra Feldman said single-sex education was not a "cure-all" but ought to be an option.

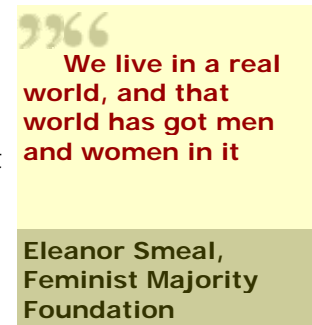
"There's no evidence that it creates higher achievement, but why not have it as an option? What harm is done?"

Single-sex schooling is more common in the UK, with many believing it holds the key to the underachievement of boys in the classroom.

But Professor Jannette Elwood, co-author of a research report on the achievement of girls in single-sex schools, said more research was needed to establish the benefits of segregation.

Professor Elwood, of Queen's University, Belfast, said the research found girls' schools got good exam results because they had high-achieving pupils - not because they were single sex.

Single sex classes 'not the answer'





Girls on top: "Hype about nothing"?

A leading education expert has cast doubt on the view that single sex teaching could prove the solution to the underachievement of boys in the classroom.

Professor Jannette Elwood, of Queen's University, Belfast, says that while pilot single sex classes held in some schools have indicated that segregation boosts performance, not enough research has been done on the subject.

She points out that even if single sex teaching did improve results, it would raise the girls' achievement as well as that of boys - and the gap between the sexes would still remain.

"When are we going to be happy? When boys and girls achieve the same, and there is no gap?" she said.



Prof Elwood: "Why are boys turned off learning?"

Gender stereotypes

The aim should be to improve the performance of both sexes, not to concentrate on boys because of a perceived problem.

"There has been a lot of hype over nothing about the A-levels, all over 0.6%.

"The fact is there are some very good boys and some very good girls, and if you break it down by subject it is very gender stereotyped, and boys are still doing better than girls in certain subjects."

The Education Secretary, David Blunkett, said on Sunday that he would be speaking to the Office for Standards in Education about evaluating the effectiveness of single sex teaching of some subjects in co-educational schools.

He will also order all local education authorities in England and Wales to provide progress reports outlining what they are doing to tackle boys' underachievement.



Mixed classes work well for many students

The announcement followed the publication of this year's A-level exams on Thursday, which showed that for the first time, girls are performing better than boys.

A breakdown the results statistics showed that the number of girls awarded A grades was 18.1%, up from 17.4%. The figure for boys was 17.5%, unchanged from last year.

Girls overtook boys at GCSE level a few years ago, and this year's results, to be published late on Wednesday, are expected to show that they girls are now doing better in almost every subject.

Ability, class and tradition

Last year, Prof Elwood, formerly of London University's Institute of Education, was co-author of a research report on the achievement of girls in single sex schools.

It suggested that girls' schools got good exam results because they had high-achieving pupils - not because they are single sex.

Ability as well as social class and the history and traditions of schools had a greater impact on the results girls achieved.

It indicated that whether a school was independent, selective or comprehensive made much more difference than whether it was single sex or mixed.

Speaking on Wednesday, Prof Elwood said she agreed with the government that there was an anti-education culture among teenage boys which needed to be addressed in order to improve their performance - but stressed that single sex teaching was not the magic solution.

"We need to get to the root of disaffection, why boys are turned off learning. That is the \$64,000 question, to which I don't have the answer."

It was important to maintain equal opportunities for all in education, and not to focus on boys to the detriment of girls, she added.

Education

Why girls' schools do well



Girls' schools tend to achieve good exam results

Girls' schools get good exam results because they have high-achieving pupils, and not because they are single-sex, according to a new report.

Ability, as well as social class and the history and traditions of schools, have a greater impact on results girls achieve.

The findings are reported by researchers from London University's Institute of Education.

Their review of recent research on the achievement of girls in single-sex schools states there is "no conclusive evidence to suggest that single-sex schooling is better than co-educational schooling".

And it says the findings are supported by similar research in the US, Australia and Ireland.

Other goals

Supporters of single-sex education for girls have often argued their case by pointing to the success of girls' schools in performance tables.

But the report, published by Jannette Elwood and Caroline Gipps, says: "Girls' schools in both the independent and state sectors are well placed in the performance tables because girls do better than boys generally in examinations at the end of compulsory schooling."

It also states that whether a school is independent, selective or comprehensive makes much more difference than whether it is single-sex or mixed.

In their report, called "Review of Recent Research on the Achievement of Girls in Single-Sex Schools", the researchers point out that academic achievement is only one goal of education, and that there may be other reasons for choosing single-sex schools.

The report states: "Parents preferring single-sex education tend to believe that in the absence of boys, girls develop more self-confidence, are more likely to encounter female role models in leadership and traditionally male subject, and are less likely to choose stereotyped subjects."

Confidence and self-esteem

Girls at single-sex schools are more likely to opt to study maths and science, while boys at single-sex schools are more likely to continue studying music and languages, research findings show.

There is also evidence to suggest that single-sex schools and classes help promote girls' confidence and self-esteem.

However, girls at co-educational schools believed their experiences had made it easier for them to adjust to life in higher education, the report states.

The researchers say there is some evidence to suggest that the teaching of girls at co-educational schools in single-sex classes has a positive effect on their confidence and academic performance.

But they add that this strategy is often implemented as a "quick fix" to particular educational problems, such as the underachievement of boys, rather than as well thought-out programmes supported by evidence that the strategy itself actually improves performance