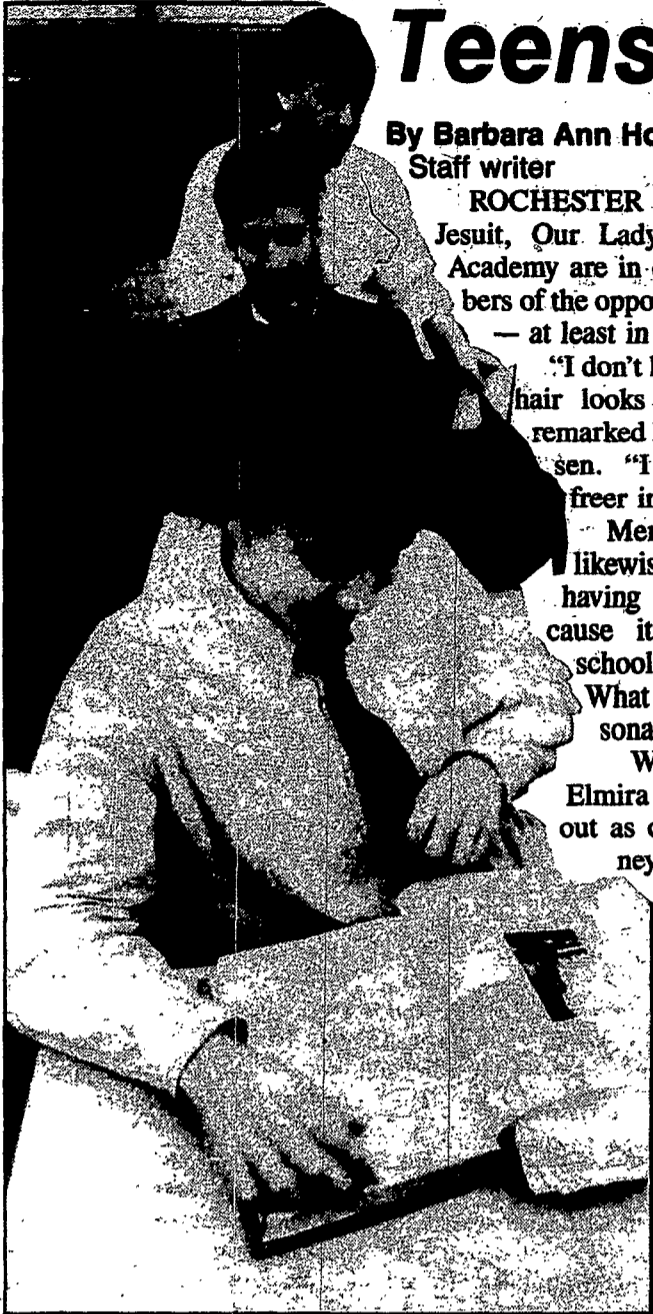


Teens debate single-sex education

By Barbara Ann Homick
Staff writer



Babette G. Augustin/Staff photographer
Some students at McQuaid Jesuit High School say they find it easier to concentrate in the classroom without the distraction of the opposite sex.

ROCHESTER — Students at McQuaid Jesuit, Our Lady of Mercy and Nazareth Academy are in complete agreement: Members of the opposite sex are just a distraction — at least in the classroom, that is.

"I don't have to worry about how my hair looks or if my clothes clash," remarked McQuaid junior Erik Pedersen. "I can concentrate and feel freer in classes."

Mercy junior Melissa Camardo likewise stressed the benefits of not having to worry about boys. "Because it (Mercy) is an all-girls' school, appearances don't matter. What is inside you and your personality are what counts."

While Geneva DeSales and Elmira Notre Dame both started out as coed schools, Bishop Kearney and Aquinas were originally single-sex learning institutions. Aquinas — which opened its doors at 1127 Dewey Ave. in 1925 — decided to go coed in 1982 on a trial basis.

For the first year, Aquinas enrolled female students only from the former St. Agnes School, which closed its doors that year. Not knowing how well the experiment would work, administrators chose not to enroll freshmen girls or girls wishing to transfer from other schools.

According to Vice Principal Dennis Sadler, the decision to try coeducational learning was partly based on economic factors. Aquinas' enrollment at that time was only 625 students, he said, whereas current enrollment is almost 900 — 50 percent of which is female.

The one-year test proved successful, and Aquinas has educated both sexes ever since.

Kearney, on the other hand, began in 1962 as a "co-institutional" high school. Although boys and girls attended classes in the same building and were mixed for certain social periods, the boys' classes took place in one wing of the building and the girls were taught in the other.

In 1984, Kearney administrators decided to combine the genders in the classroom. Again the motivator was at least partially economic; it had become too impractical to offer separate elective classes for males and females.

Rochester-area colleges also reflected the national trend in coed higher education in the early 1970s. St. John Fisher — which had been an all-male college — opened its doors to women in 1971, and Nazareth College — which had only allowed women to enroll — accepted men in 1972.

Today only three single-sex Catholic high schools still operate in the Rochester diocese.

According to the students and faculty of those schools, the benefits of attending a single-sex school far outweigh the disadvantages.

Sister Magdalena Kellner, SSJ, vice principal at Nazareth Academy, said single-sex education is important, especially for young women.

Not having to compete with young men in the classroom greatly improves a girl's self-esteem, said Sister Kellner.

"A young woman's self-esteem significantly declines faster than a male's in a coed situation, and it will continue to do so throughout college," said Sister Kellner, who has taught in both

coed and single-sex schools.

Although teachers may not be aware of sexism in coed classrooms, Sister Kellner said teachers in coed settings give more attention to boys. She added that she had unknowingly behaved in a sexist manner at times in the classroom.

The vice principal also said coeducational settings perpetuate sexist myths about girls' academic abilities — especially in math and science.

"In an all-girls school, we can break down the myths that say girls can't do as well as boys in math and science," she said.

At Nazareth Academy, 72 percent of the junior class is enrolled in physics classes, as compared to 2 percent of 11th-grade girls nationally and 6 percent in Monroe County, Sister Kellner noted.

Nazareth Academy physics teacher Dick Hendrick agreed that teachers in coed schools may unintentionally perpetuate stereotypes in the classroom, a fault of which Hendrick said he was guilty of when he taught at a coed school.

"We usually tell a male to solve a problem on his own, which teaches him independence. On the other hand, we usually offer to help a girl, which teaches her to be dependent and rely on others," he said.

Hendrick also said the lack of male competition in these classes helps the girls to build confidence. "They don't have to take a back seat," Hendrick said.

The physics teacher also said that in a coed situation, girls submerge themselves on a subconscious level. "They think that if they speak out in class, they are competing with the guys and the guys won't like them," he said.

The opinion of Aquinas student Amy Webber differs from Hendrick's theory.

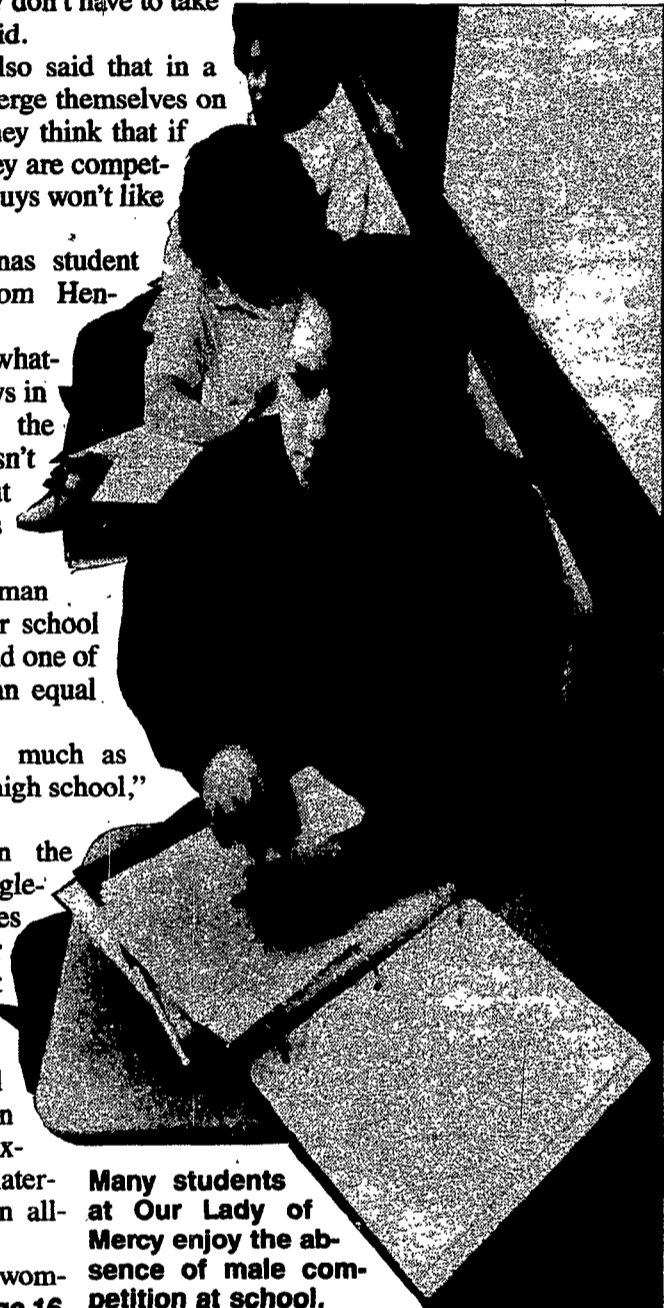
"I see no preference whatsoever between girls or boys in the classroom," stated the junior, who said she doesn't feel as if she is missing out on anything in Aquinas classes.

Bishop Kearney freshman Margaret Burkwit said her school offers many advantages, and one of them is being taught on an equal level with males.

"Girls are treated as much as equals as they can be in a high school," said Burkwit.

Although equality in the classroom is an issue in single-sex learning, other issues are involved, too. Sister Christine Wagner, SSJ, not only knows what it's like to attend a single-sex school — she graduated from Nazareth Academy in 1969 — but also has done extensive research on the later-life effects of attending an all-girls school.

A doctoral candidate in wom-
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Many students at Our Lady of Mercy enjoy the absence of male competition at school.

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