Chapter One

Women at School: The Feminization of American High Schools, 1870–1900

A metamorphosis of sorts occurred in women's education during the latter nineteenth century. Prior to the Civil War, female secondary education was a haphazard affair conducted in seminaries and academies which dotted the countryside irregularly, and women were almost totally excluded from higher education. But the three decades following 1870 were an era of expanding horizons for women in education. By 1900 girls outnumbered boys by nearly a third in public high schools, and women accounted for about one in five college students. For the first time in American history women actually may have been better educated than men.

The key institution in this set of changes appears to have been the public high school, which began its evolution from an elite to a mass institution during these years. From early on, most public high schools in the United States were coeducational. This meant that the growth of the high school offered many American women access to a level of education that their mothers generally had not enjoyed. Coeducation also meant that young women in the high school received an education substantially the same as that given young men. This was a critical development in the history of women's higher education in this country. It was from the growing ranks of female high school graduates, after all, that women college students were drawn in this period. But thousands of women attended high schools without continuing on to college, and used their education to take on a range of new social responsibilities then becoming available to women. All told, the rise of the public high school was a momentous occasion in the history of

women's education in the United States. The years extending from about 1870 to 1900 may have marked the first general period of gender equality in the history of American secondary education.[1]

The development of coeducational high schools and the growth of female secondary school enrollments in this period was also marked by considerable controversy. Leading male educators and medical doctors assailed the concept of equal secondary (and higher) education for women and men, arguing that women had little need of advanced literary and reasoning skills and that extended study could prove downright harmful to their health and happiness. Most educators rejected these views, however, even though many school systems did take measures to insure the health of female high school students. Supporters of women's education argued that the best test of women's ability to study was the actual experiences of girls in school, and that there was little evidence that secondary or higher education was harmful to female health. By and large, young men and women studied the same subjects, received similar grades, and had generally similar attendance records. In one important American institution, it appears, gender was *not* a critical factor during the nineteenth century. The high school was a vehicle of educational opportunity for women, and thousands of them made use of it.

Visions of Equality

Coeducation was a controversial issue in the nineteenth century because of its close association with the question of social equality for women. A chief objective of early reformers in female education, most of whom were women, was to raise women's education to a level comparable to that of young men. The rationale for doing this varied from one context (and reformer) to another, but most of these women sought to define a new, expanded set of roles for women to play in nineteenth-century society. A major obstacle to achieving that end, of course, was the deplorable state of women's education. So in the first half of the nineteenth century a generation of women educators devoted their lives to the cause of making women's education essentially equivalent (though not necessarily identical) to that of men. The eventual success of the coeducational high school was a tribute to their vision of gender equity in higher education, while at the same time it made their all-female schools (and for that matter, secondary schools run by women) anachronistic.

Women's historians have argued that early female educational reformers espoused a peculiar nineteenth-century variety of "domes-

tic feminism," which advocated new roles for women while upholding the traditional female domestic vocations of wifery and motherhood. These new roles revolved around the process of education and socialization, and the enhanced importance that child-rearing and education had assumed in the republican social and political order.[2] If popular education was essential to the survival of a society predicated on the principle of popular rule, women were seen as the natural candidates to guarantee each child's proper moral and intellectual development. This meant, of course, that women themselves had to be well educated. The problem, as most early women educators saw it, was that the education available to most women lacked intellectual and moral substance. It was ornamental, designed to teach girls to be charming, to dress well and dance, or to play music and embroider. This sort of schooling, female educational reformers felt, did not prepare women to take on the grave responsibilities of motherhood in the modern, republican social order. In order to properly raise their own families, young women needed an education every bit as good as that given to young men.

This view may have been expressed best in Emma Willard's treatise on the need for a female seminary, written in 1819 to persuade the New York state legislature to support such a school. This manifesto for improved women's schooling was later published and was an influential early vision of gender parity, if not outright equality, in education. At the heart of Willard's argument was an effort to contrast the existing form of education for young women with prevailing educational standards for "young gentlemen." Schools for the latter, Willard noted, "are founded by public authority, and are permanent; they are endowed with funds, and their instructors and overseers, are invested with authority to make such laws, as they shall deem most salutary." Schools for girls, she felt, were just the opposite; they were temporary, poorly endowed, subject to no public authority whatever, and without the power to require students to maintain proper standards of scholarship or behavior. Is it any wonder, Willard asked, that society regards women as "pampered wayward babies," when—unlike boys—they are given so few incentives to serious study? The solution she proposed for this problem, of course, was the establishment of a permanently endowed school for girls, with standards of scholarship and deportment substantially similar to those for the best schools for men.[3]

Willard did not advocate complete equality in education, and her rationale for women's education was decidedly different from that for men. Girls, she believed, needed education for motherhood, not a conventional career. Hence, Willard justified her plea to the state

legislature by appealing to their duty "to form the character of the next generation, by controlling that of the females who are to be their mothers."[4] In short, women needed education principally because it was their responsibility to train and socialize each succeeding generation. Like other women educators of her time, Willard was no revolutionary, and she recognized that any program of women's education that threatened to divert women from their traditional domestic responsibilities was likely to fail. But even if the rationale for women's education was different, theirs was a task that demanded an education substantially equivalent to that given to young men. Women's education was in need of improvement, and the most obvious model to follow was schooling for boys.

Emma Willard was only the first of several important woman educators to make this argument. Others voiced similar concerns throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. Of course, virtually all female educational reformers in this period felt that women's education should be decidedly different from men's. In particular, they believed it required a strong domestic orientation and that it should be supervised by women. Most of them were also champions of the idea that women were especially well suited (and therefore should be trained) to be teachers. Yet they also believed that women needed to value intellectual accomplishment, and intellectual effort, as much as their brothers.[5] Catharine Beecher, perhaps the best-known woman educator of the period, constantly championed the idea that men and women belonged in essentially separate spheres of life. But she also endorsed most of Willard's criticisms of existing practices in female education early in her career and, like Willard, opened an influential school for girls in the 1820s.[6]

Similarly, Mary Lyon was especially concerned with character formation and the moral (and religious) development of her students at Mount Holyoke, yet she also planned to make her school into a college, with a classical curriculum similar to men's colleges, as soon as it was practicable.[7] Women educators everywhere cheered the opening of Oberlin College, with its plan of limited coeducation, and supported other coeducational colleges when they opened later. Such institutions, they felt, were necessary to fit women for the demands of marriage to professional men and rearing cultured, well-educated children.[8] While they did not support the idea of social and political equality for women and men, they strongly believed that women's domestic roles demanded an intellectual preparation substantially equivalent to that provided in men's schools. Women, these reformers believed, were entitled to intellectual fulfillment as much as their brothers, and the new domestic ideology of the nineteenth century,

with its heavy emphasis on female duties of nurturing and socialization, gave them a rationale with broad appeal.

Historian Anne Firor Scott has argued that Emma Willard should be considered a feminist regardless of her formal opposition to the women's rights movement of her day, and the same can be said of most other early women educators. Whatever it origins, the commitment of these women to female intellectual equality helped raise standards and perhaps expectations for women's education. Scott has argued that Emma Willard was interested in creating new avenues of social influence for women like herself, despite her allegiance to the ideology of domestic virtue. Willard was an institution builder, who may have seen her role as an educator partly as a way of continuing her own intellectual and emotional development. Similarly, Katherine Kish Sklar has argued that Catharine Beecher spent the better part of her life seeking to define a role whereby women could exercise authority outside of the family and still remain within the boundaries established by Victorian notions of propriety. Much of Beecher's work in this connection may have sprung from her own desire for independence and intellectual growth, even as she publicly ridiculed the leaders of the women's rights movement.

By encouraging women to become teachers for a short time before marriage, however, it was possible to endorse female intellectual accomplishment and to identify a socially critical role for educated women without threatening the patriarchal structure of traditional domestic relations.[9] The combination of all such efforts to improve women's education in the early nineteenth century defined a general movement among educators to achieve educational parity and a general ethic of equity where gender was concerned. Even if it was undertaken within the terms of a conservative comprehension of women's duties, this early campaign to raise the standard of female education left an important legacy to subsequent generations of women. The achievement of higher education for women, whether in high schools or colleges, was living testimony to the vital and demanding role which they were supposed to play in the modern social order.

If Emma Willard and Catharine Beecher were pioneers in advocating higher education for women in the 1820s, by midcentury most educators, whether male or female, appear to have accepted the proposition that women deserved an education beyond the elementary studies offered in the common and grammar schools. In 1854 the Boston School Committee, after long resisting popular pressure to provide public secondary instruction for young women, finally agreed to establish a girls high school. The rationale was substantially

the same as Emma Willard's had been more than three decades earlier. "To females belong the most fearfully responsible duties which can be assigned to human beings," the Committee's report stated, and in particular, "to form and give direction to human character." Thus, the report continued, "every reasonable provision should be made" to render women "competent mothers and teachers." Besides which, "no pain should be spared" to see that "woman may become within her sphere, what she seems designed of Heaven to be, the fit companion of high minded and intelligent men."[10] Women's education, it appears, was acceptable as a form of preparation for the domestic "sphere" which women occupied, but women's duties now transcended the drudgery of menial housework. To be proper companions and good mothers, women needed to be intellectually fit. And that meant that they could go to high school (and, by implication, to college). With the ideology of domestic feminism firmly in place by the mid-nineteenth century, the stage was set for the growth of female participation in American secondary education.

Feminization of the High School

Between 1870 and 1900 the public high school became the most popular and prominent form of secondary education in the United States. Replacing the academies and seminaries of the antebellum period, these new institutions were distinctive by virtue of their rapid growth and their connection with the public schools. In the picturesque rhetoric of the day, the high school was the "crown jewel" of local school systems, offering an opportunity for the children from all classes to study the higher branches of learning together. In reality, most of the students in nineteenth-century high schools appear to have come from middle- and upper-class backgrounds. By and large, they were the sons and daughters of established farmers and clerks, merchants and ministers, doctors and lawyers, and other respected members of local communities.[11] But even if the development of the public high school did not afford an opportunity for many working-class children, it did open new doors for middle-class girls.

From the end of the Civil War forward, the overwhelming majority of public high schools in the United States were coeducational. This proved to be a source of controversy in itself (and is dealt with below), but it also meant that teenage girls could be instructed in the higher branches, alongside their brothers, at public expense. Whereas schooling beyond the common or grammar school levels generally had entailed a direct investment for families in earlier periods of American

history, one for which the education of daughters promised little hope of material return, in the latter nineteenth century growing numbers of teenagers could attend public high schools for little or nothing. The only real expense entailed in public secondary education, in that case, was the opportunity cost—earnings forgone because of time spent in school. Because relatively few employment opportunities existed for middle-class girls in this period, however, even the opportunity costs of secondary education for young women were low. The development of the coeducational public high school, in that case, undoubtedly made it easier for families to send their daughters to secondary school than before and probably made female secondary education less costly than it was for males. Given this, it is little wonder that the number of young women enrolled in American high schools outnumbered the boys throughout the latter nineteenth century.

What follows is a brief account of the growth of female enrollments in American high schools between 1870 and 1900, both in absolute terms and in relation to the number of male students, and how educators responded to it (a more detailed statistical analysis of enrollment patterns is undertaken in the next chapter). The feminization of the high school was an issue of great concern in the late nineteenth century, one that had important consequences for the history of American education.

As indicated earlier, the high school was a relatively elite institution throughout this period, but it also underwent a rapid process of expansion. And as secondary school enrollments grew, particularly in public high schools, they included larger proportions of young women. According to the federal census of 1870, some 129,404 students were enrolled in public and private secondary schools in the United States. Thirty years later, judging by figures provided by the U.S. Commissioner of Education, the number had climbed to about 650,000, a fivefold increase.[12] At the same time the overall rate of high school enrollment among teenagers in the United States grew from less than 2 percent to more than 5 percent, although there was a great deal of regional variation in overall enrollment rates and enrollment growth in these years. Not surprisingly, most of this growth is attributable to the development of the *public* high school; the proportion of all secondary students attending public schools increased from less than 50 percent to about 85 percent in the same period.

With the expansion of public secondary education came feminization. In 1872, the first year in which the U.S. Commissioner of Education provided comprehensive secondary enrollment data broken into male and female categories, girls numbered about 53 percent of all enrollments for which information on gender was available. In

1900 young women constituted slightly more than 57 percent of all high school enrollments. Although data on male-female differences in enrollment in private and public schools are not available for the 1870s, in 1900 the number of boys and girls enrolled in private high schools was about even, while nearly 59 percent of all the students in public high schools were female.[13] The feminization of secondary school enrollments in this period, it seems, was associated with the development of the public high school.

This process of feminization appears to have started soon after public high schools were opened (or soon after they were opened to girls), and affected schools in all parts of the country. Maris Vinovskis has found that girls were slightly more likely to be enrolled in high school than boys in Newburyport, Massachusetts, in 1860, and suggests that "females were quick to take advantage of these institutions once they were opened to them." Reed Ueda has observed a similar process in his study of Sommerville, a suburb of Boston.[14] In yet other parts of the country, feminization appears to have been linked to shifting employment opportunities for young men. In St. Louis, Superintendent William Torrey Harris suggested it was the Civil War which initially accounted for the preponderance of girls in the city's public high school. While boys had dominated enrollments through the previous decade, he reported in 1872, their numbers had dropped sharply in the early 1860s because of the "demands of productive industry."[15] In effect, the appearance of new employment opportunities had raised the opportunity costs of high school education for the boys. Although the number of boys rose again to a slight majority for a few years after the war, from 1870 onward the high schools in St. Louis enrolled more girls than boys.

Similar trends were evident elsewhere. In Chicago boys also dominated the first several classes of city's public high school, but in the 1860s male enrollments dropped dramatically there too. Girls outnumbered boys in Chicago's high schools for the next fifty years.[16] In these cases and others it is possible that the development of industrial employment was a factor in the feminization of secondary education, but the trend toward larger percentages of women enrolled in high school was evident elsewhere as well. In Baltimore girls outnumbered boys in the public high schools by almost a 2 to 1 margin in the early 1880s, despite the fact that the girls were required to attend separate schools.[17] After conducting his own survey of other city school systems around the country in 1879, Cleveland's school superintendent reported that the "great majority" of high school students were girls in "all or almost all our large cities." Expressing surprise, he wrote, "one cannot help remarking (about) the great change which has taken

place within a comparatively short period." Whereas previous generations of women had been denied advanced education altogether, it now appeared possible that the "balance of education" henceforth would favor the girls.[18]

Even if they were pleased with growing enrollments, however, not many schoolmen were happy with feminization of the student body. While few complained that too many girls were in attendance, it was commonplace for superintendents and other school officials to remark that there were far too few boys in city high schools. The observation that boys were leaving the high school, or not enrolling at all, in order to get jobs led to efforts to make the high school curriculum more relevant to the interests and disposition of young men. "There is an idea prevalent in some quarters," a high school principal from Springfield, Illinois, wrote in 1889, "that the higher education unfits a boy for business, and even for the professions."[19] The answer that many educators offered for this dilemma was to make the high school curriculum more practical in orientation. From early on, school administrators proposed that courses in manual arts and commerce (which ironically included typing and stenography) be added to the high school curriculum to help keep the boys in school. "If the schools furnished the young machinist, engineer and architect more thorough instruction in those sciences," the Cleveland superintendent wrote in 1877, "there can be no doubt that they would remain longer in school."[20] In 1875 the Chicago Board of Education established a two-year English course in the city's high schools to serve those "young men who wish early to engage in business or to enter the high professions." In 1883 the president of the board recommended that the city add "manual training" and "business methods" courses to the high schools in order to keep young men in school. In the same year the school superintendent in San Francisco reported that a special business course had been developed for the city's high school to help retain male students. School leaders elsewhere proposed similar curricular innovations.[21] By the 1890s manual training programs had been developed in urban high schools across the country.

Although there were a variety of reasons for the establishment of these courses, among the most prominent was the prospect of minimizing male defections from the high school. Noting that boys constituted only about 25 percent of the high school enrollments in the nation's ten largest cities in 1888, then U.S. Commissioner of Education William Torrey Harris declared the issue "a matter of grave concern." Despite his well-known reservations about manual training and other courses with vocational overtones, Harris suggested that instruction in manual arts may be the only way to redress the gender

imbalance in secondary education.[22] The thought of altering the traditionally classical orientation of the high school curriculum became attractive to many educators as the relative number of male students declined. An important element of curricular reform in this period, in that case, was the objective of keeping the boys in school.

As it turned out, the development of manual training programs and other courses designed to interest young men did little to reduce the preponderance of girls in urban high schools. But the appearance of these vocationally relevant courses of study did mark the beginning of an important change in American secondary education: the shift to a closer relationship between education and work. Given the popularity which this new practical orientation in education achieved after 1900, it is significant that the evolution of high school courses in vocational subjects was related to concerns about the gender composition of enrollments. In the 1890s, however, the vocational purpose of high schools was distinctly secondary to their cultural and intellectual objectives. The high school was still considered in many quarters to be a popular form of higher education, a "people's college," firmly associated with the classical orientation of the colleges and universities. And as a number of educational historians have noted, there was a great deal of resistance from educators to the proposition that secondary schools ought to serve vocational ends at this time.[23]

The other side of the coin, of course, was the question of whether these courses helped boys get jobs. By and large, young men did not go to high school to learn a trade; it was much easier and faster to acquire job-related skills from employers or craft unions or through specialized schools. Male students, for instance, dominated the private commercial training schools that flourished in American cities during this period. And the labor movement (the American Federation of Labor in particular) was a firm opponent of vocational training in schools until after the turn of the century.[24] Compared to existing alternatives the cost of high school—in terms of time and effort—was high, and the promise of tangible return rather distant.

Vocational education, consequently, does not appear to have altered the gender imbalance in American high schools at this time. Even the addition of the manual training course, of dubious vocational value to begin with, did little to change the considerable opportunity cost difference between female and male secondary education. In 1896 the superintendent of schools in Chicago noted that only 29 percent of the city's high school students were boys, even when enrollments for the Manual Training School were included, a fact which he described as "unfortunate and deplorable."[25] Whatever schoolmen may have thought about why the high schools were dominated by

women, there was little that they could do to alter the process that resulted in feminization. It was defined, after all, by social and economic forces related to the sexual division of labor in society at large, and there was little indeed that school administrators were prepared to say or do to change that.

There was more to the feminization process, of course, than factors that inhibited male attendance. At the same time that job prospects appeared to divert young men away from secondary education, the structure of female employment may have given some women a positive incentive to attend high schools. As indicated above, the nineteenth-century high school was remarkably detached from vocational purposes, but if it prepared students for any vocation at all, it was teaching. As a number of historians and other social scientists have demonstrated, the closing decades of nineteenth century also was a period of feminization in the nation's teaching force, particularly in urban areas. Between 1870 and 1900 the proportion of teachers in the United States who were women increased from about 66 to 73 percent, and the process of feminization was especially evident in cities. By the turn of the century, slightly more than four out of five teachers in cities with more than 25,000 people were women.

The reasons for this preponderance of female teachers were complex, and linked to prevailing Victorian ideas about the role of women as naturally endowed child-rearers. But the feminization of teaching was also associated with the availability of large numbers of relatively well-educated young women who were willing to teach—and who had few other employment opportunities. Because most middle-class women eschewed manual labor in this period and most professions strictly barred or limited female participation, teaching was virtually the only variety of work generally available to them until the 1890s, when women began to find employment in clerical and other service occupations. The rapid feminization of the teaching force in these years, on the other hand, suggests that many women, whether because of need or simply an interest in working with children, found teaching to be an attractive employment opportunity.[26]

For their part, most nineteenth-century educators appear to have believed that the high school was an excellent preparation for prospective teachers. Noting the beneficial effect of the public high school on the entire school system in 1871, the president of Detroit's Board of Education remarked that the school "affords us a supply of well trained teachers always ready and available to fill the vacancies constantly occurring." A survey of Detroit high school alumni between 1860 and 1882 later revealed that fully 95 percent of those graduates who became teachers were women. Similarly, the New

Haven, Connecticut, superintendent of schools reported in 1881 that some 125 past students in the city's high school presently taught in the public school system and that more than 200 teachers had come from the school in the space of a dozen years—the vast majority of them women. In 1882 the president of the St. Louis Board of Education wrote that "the advanced general education of the teachers of our schools is itself a work, which, in my opinion, justifies the existence of a high school as part of our public school system, irrespective of other questions." A survey of St. Louis high school alumni conducted in 1873 revealed the same pattern seen in Detroit; the overwhelming majority of graduates who became teachers were female (over 90 percent) *and* the biggest single occupation for women high school graduates, numbering over half of more than 700 women surveyed, was teaching in the public schools. Similar reports were issued in other cities.[27]

Of course, the bare fact that many high school girls eventually became teachers does not necessarily mean that most young women attended high schools so that they could teach. As will be seen in the next chapter, the feminization of high school enrollment appears to have been unrelated to the feminization of teaching in most parts of the country at this time. But the eagerness of local school authorities to hire former female high school students as teachers, coupled with the absence of acceptable employment alternatives for middle-class girls, must have served as a positive incentive for many young women to attend high school in some urban areas. There were undoubtedly other reasons for young women to attend high school, as female enrollments were comparatively high even in areas where the teaching force was not highly feminized. But while employment constituted a negative incentive to many young men considering the high school, it probably was an inducement for many girls in similar circumstances. If the high school was generally irrelevant to the jobs to which young men aspired, it was virtually a prerequisite for the one occupation that middle-class women were permitted to dominate numerically in this period.

The Victorian and early industrial sexual division of labor, in that case, dictated a feminized pattern of high school participation, simply because women's work required formal schooling while men's work did not—at least in many of the nation's cities at this time. Even if most women students attended the high school primarily to make themselves better wives and mothers in the future (most female teachers married and stopped teaching after just a few years in this period), the prevailing structure of employment offered them virtually no negative incentives and at least one important positive one.[28] In

short, the public high school cost women students little and offered them the prospect of both spiritual and material rewards.

The feminization of the high school was a consequence of social and economic forces that lay largely outside of the schools. However much educators (virtually all of them men) bemoaned the fact that boys were not enrolling in the high school, no policies could be devised to change the fact that young women outnumbered their male classmates in virtually all parts of the country. As William Torrey Harris observed in 1892, the boys were "obliged or prefer to go to work" instead of to high school in this period, while the girls were "left free to pursue the course of liberal culture that the public high school affords." He also noted that if the girls desired "to prepare themselves to become teachers, the high school is right in line to second their efforts."[29] In other words, there were more girls than boys in school because of gender-related differences in students' employment options and interests. But even if Harris and other contemporaries recognized that the cause of feminization in secondary education (and for that matter in teaching as well) was related to structural and ideological forces outside the purview of school policy, it did not forestall the development of genuine alarm about the effects of feminization in certain quarters of the educational establishment.

Male educators eventually worried that women were coming to dominate the schools culturally as well as numerically. In 1903 G. Stanley Hall, a prominent psychologist and president of Clark University, declared at a meeting of the National Education Association that the American high school had become "practically a girls' school." He lamented the preponderance of young women in high school, saying that it resulted in a "feminization of the school spirit, discipline, and personnel," which was "bad for the boys." As a solution Hall suggested developing separate schools and curricula for boys and girls, an issue explored in greater detail in chapter 4.[30] But the very fact of his concern about this matter, and the manner in which he and other men identified the problem, indicates the frustration and alarm some educators felt regarding the feminization of secondary education.

Girls were indeed dominating the high schools in many parts of the country, just as they were coming to dominate the teaching force numerically, and this made school leaders uncomfortable. The solution that Hall and others proposed, however, eliminating or reducing the extent of coeducation in the high school, was hardly original. The notion that boys' and girls' educations should be materially different, after all, was virtually as old as education itself and had inspired the manual training movement. It also had been voiced some thirty years earlier in one of the most controversial nineteenth-century books on

women's education. As will be seen below, the feminization of the high school occurred despite the strong opposition of several generations of prominent American men of science and letters. Of course, this too is evidence of the manner in which feminization was related to underlying differences in male and female work roles and not to explicit policy decisions or even debates about the issue. Male critics of the female-dominated high school too often overlooked the fact that the feminization they deplored was a direct consequence of the very sort of gender differentiation they advocated for society in general.

The Coeducation Question

The feminization of the high school, and the deleterious effect that some educators believed girls exerted on boys, was linked, of course, to the issue of coeducation. American secondary schools were unique among those of major Western countries in this period by virtue of the extent to which they enrolled young women and men together. According to several surveys of American high schools, academies, and other institutions of secondary education, coeducational schools outnumbered those designated for either boys or girls by more than a 2 to 1 margin throughout the latter nineteenth century. Moreover, coeducational schools dominated secondary education in all parts of the country and in a variety of different social and economic settings.

This did not mean, however, that coeducation was universally accepted. In certain communities there was considerable opposition to its development as a matter of policy for high schools and colleges. And educators, doctors, and social scientists debated the merits of educating boys and girls together on biological, moral, academic, and vocational grounds throughout this period. Even though most Americans seem to have accepted the idea of coeducation in principle, there was opposition to it as well.

The trouble with coeducation was that it was founded, to one degree or another, on a premise of male-female equality in intellectual and social terms. Some of its opponents feared that serious academic study would harm teenage girls physiologically; others worried that it would leave them ill-prepared to take up their duties as wives and mothers. Still others felt that coeducation represented a danger to the moral development of high school students, particularly the women. At bottom, all critics of coeducation wondered whether some different arrangement for women's education, one attentive to what they believed to be important female frailties and goals in life, was preferable to teaching boys and girls side by side. Men and women played

different roles in life, the argument generally went, so they ought to be educated differently as well.

Of course, most supporters of coeducation did not dispute the notion that women's education ought not disrupt the existing sexual division of labor. Many subscribed to the domestic feminist view that a sound liberal, academic education was necessary to fit young women for the duties of modern motherhood. Others, including many male educators, supported coeducation simply because it was an economical or otherwise expedient way of organizing public education. For most domestic feminists, however, the suggestion that women were incapable or otherwise ill-suited for academic study was tied to the idea that female roles were far inferior or subservient to those of men. Thus, the earliest suggestions that coeducational schools ought to be modified brought sharp reactions from educators across the country. In the minds of opponents and supporters alike, the issue of coeducation was intimately connected to the future roles that women would play in American life. This would help to make it a point of continuing controversy.

The principal catalyst in the coeducation debate was a prominent Boston physician named Edward Clarke. A onetime member of the Harvard University medical faculty, Clarke published a slim volume entitled *Sex in Education* in 1873 which argued that extended academic study was downright harmful for young women. As a number of historians have noted, Clarke's ideas were not new, but the fact of his scientific and medical background, along with the clinical orientation of his book, gave his views added force. The book circulated widely, and reportedly went through eleven editions in just six years. The thrust of its argument was aimed at collegiate study for women, and in the conclusion Clarke pointedly criticized colleges that encouraged women to follow a curriculum similar to that in men's schools. But the specific medical and biological arguments in Clarke's book had more relevance to high school–aged girls than it did to those in college. In particular, Clarke maintained that the years between fourteen and eighteen were especially critical for young women, as it was that stage of life in which a woman's reproductive organs took shape. In that time, he wrote, a woman "accomplishes an amount of physiological cell change and growth which nature does not require of a boy in less than twice that number of years." Hence, Clarke felt that young women should not be expected to study as much or work as hard as young men during this critical period of physiological development; and that they should be encouraged to rest and exercise regularly in order to guarantee proper physical development.

In his clinical chapter Clarke described cases of high school girls

who suffered from anemia as a consequence of too much recitation or nighttime study, as well as college women who had been the victims of overstrenuous high school and collegiate courses of study. All told, he considered the coeducational high school and college grave threats to the health of American women. And in particular, he warned that overexertion on the part of young women carried the danger of sterility in future life. To Edward Clarke, and those who accepted his medical premises, the issue of coeducation was bound up intimately with the most basic of sex roles. If American women were to be mothers at all, they needed to follow a course of study designed with their peculiar physiological needs in view.[31]

Clarke's book met with both positive and negative reviews, but few readers appear to have been unmoved by it. Opponents of coeducation seized upon his arguments as yet more evidence that the practice of giving girls fundamentally the same education as boys was misguided and perhaps even dangerous. Advocates of coeducation denounced Clarke's views energetically, and a flurry of rebuttals appeared in the years immediately following his book's publication.[32] To a large extent, however, Clarke's ideas merely represented the clearest expression of a persistent undercurrent of opposition to women's education which had existed throughout the nineteenth century.

Prior to the appearance of *Sex in Education*, most opponents of male-female equality in schooling based their arguments on the premise that women had little need of an advanced literary education. Hence, they maintained that high school (and college) training for girls was a waste of valuable resources. Mayor Josiah Quincy of Boston had cited this argument in 1828 when he decreed an end to the city's short-lived High School for Girls. In the eyes of Quincy and his supporters, women's education was less an investment than an item of consumption, a way for middle- and upper-class families to cultivate their daughters for marriage. Quincy and other opponents of the High School for Girls rejected the domestic feminist proposition that higher education was necessary for the new nurturing and socialization roles women played in the nineteenth century. To them a high school was supposed to be an investment in the future prospects of the city's brightest young men. To allow women a high school education was at best a waste of money and at worst a threat to the existing sexual division of labor.[33]

Given the extent of public support for the domestic feminist position at this time, Quincy's was not a popular viewpoint in Boston or elsewhere, and at least one historian has suggested that it may have contributed to his defeat in the following election.[34] But Quincy's views represented an understanding of women's education that was

typical of most opponents of coeducation. Women, they maintained, did not require an advanced education simply because their future roles were delimited to the domestic sphere. Even after the principle of female secondary education had been established in most parts of the country, the same argument was used after 1870 against male-female equality in the high school.

Once again, the most vigorous proponents of this position were found in Boston and were led by School Superintendent John Philbrick, although they existed elsewhere as well. Despite evidence of widespread public support for coeducation and the willingness of the city's School Committee to make male and female courses virtually identical, both Philbrick and his successor, Edwin Seaver, opposed the "principle of uniformity" in high school education. In Seaver's view, it was unreasonable to provide the same education to boys, "nine-tenths of [whom] are sure to enter mercantile pursuits", and girls, "one half of [whom] will enter the normal school and become teachers." In short, the sexual division of labor, or in Seaver's words, the "probable future occupations of boys and girls," precluded the possibility of curricular equality in Boston secondary schools.[35]

Philbrick and Seaver were in fact arguing in favor of vocational education for young men and women in high school, giving the boys "bookkeeping and science" and the girls "languages and literature." In this regard they were both stalwart defenders of the prevailing sexual division of labor. Philbrick, for his part, was among the nation's most enthusiastic champions of sewing instruction for girls, and Boston's public school system was often identified by contemporaries as a national leader in the area of sewing instruction in this period.[36] But Philbrick, Seaver and other educators in Boston also were opposed to the principle of girls receiving a rigorous classical education on the same order of difficulty and prestige as that given to young men. And in this connection, the ideas of Edward Clarke were particularly germane.

In 1885 Philbrick published a circular arguing that coeducational high schools were pedagogically unsound because they posed a danger to the health of young women and a threat to the academic vigor of the boys. To make the high school curriculum academically demanding in such circumstances, he maintained, would risk the problems that Clarke had associated with overexertion in teenage girls: anemia and the possibility of sterility. He also reasoned that limiting the requirements for study, recitations, and other dimensions of the school's academic life would seriously compromise the potential for achievement in the boys. This argument combined vocational and physiological objections to coeducational secondary schools, maintaining that the high school would cease to be an advantage for

young men if it were required to accommodate the girls.[37] By the mid-1880s, both utilitarian and biological arguments were used by opponents of coeducation to argue that young men and women ought to attend different schools.

Added to these arguments against coeducation, of course, was the question of morality. Although many educators and physicians do not appear to have given this issue much attention in the latter nineteenth century, it had been a point of particular interest for ante bellum educators and appears to have been a matter of continuing controversy among religious leaders.[38] The morality question had few implications for women's higher education in sex-segregated contexts, an issue with which Clarke, Philbrick, and others dealt, but rather focused on the moral effect of young men and women attending school together. Essentially, the matter turned on the question of propriety. Coeducation, it was feared, opened the door to potentially promiscuous relations between high school boys and girls, and it established a context where "vulgarity," and "foolish flirting and frivolity" could flourish. Given the important moral component of nineteenth-century schooling, these were serious charges. But the focal point of concern was clearly the future moral development of the young women. A teacher in the Girls' Latin School in Boston warned in 1890 that coeducation would cause girls to "lose their maidenly delicacy and reserve," and could affect the ability of future generations of mothers to properly rear and socialize their children. Opponents of coeducation elsewhere shared this sentiment, particularly in cities where sex-segregated high schools had existed for some time. If women were to insure the moral aptitude of future generations, it was imperative that the education of girls be morally pure.[39]

On the opposite side of the coeducation debate from Clarke, Philbrick, and other opponents of coeducation were the domestic feminists. Among them were women and men who believed strongly in the intellectual ability of women to perform almost any task a man could. And to many of the women who responded to attacks on coeducation, it may have seemed as though its defense was partly a matter of personal vindication. As indicated earlier, the domestic feminists were committed to a vision of separate but generally equal spheres of influence for men and women in American life. They objected to the implication in both the utilitarian and physiological arguments against coeducation that women were incapable of a high standard of intellectual accomplishment. This view suggested, after all, that women were naturally inferior in one critical respect to men, and it threatened to legitimize the subservient position most women occupied in the existing patriarchal social order.

As suggested above, the domestic feminists were not revolutionaries; they did not advocate a fundamental restructuring of the sexual division of labor. Rather, they sought to redefine women's roles in a manner that permitted them to measure their own lives in terms of peculiarly female contributions to social development. Coeducation, in that case, was a key element in the domestic feminist campaign to establish the importance of women's roles and the ability of women to perform them.

As Rosalind Rosenberg has argued, most domestic feminists probably agreed with Clarke's assertion that male and female physiology was quite different, and many even may have agreed that women were intellectually and physically weaker than men. But few were willing to concede that women were incapable of higher education. Accordingly, most of the responses to Clarke emphasized the good health of women who had attended colleges in earlier decades or argued that ill health in women was due to causes other than too much study. Testimonials from female graduates of Antioch, Oberlin, Michigan, Vassar, and other schools were offered as evidence that higher education did not necessarily prove debilitating to young women.[40] Echoing a charge which Catharine Beecher and others had made years earlier, domestic feminist critics of Clarke also argued that the chief cause of illness in American girls was their poor diets and sedentary life styles. In this regard their thinking overlapped with Clarke's considerably, for he also maintained that the regimen of school was too demanding precisely because it allowed too little time for healthy exercise. But rather than urge that coeducational schools be abolished, the domestic feminists argued that exercise simply should be made a more important element in the education of girls.

Writing in 1874, Caroline Day suggested that young women were too irregular in their habits, did not sleep enough, spent too much time indoors, and exercised far too infrequently to enjoy good health. Clarke, she reasoned, had simply assigned the blame for anemia and other ailments in young women to the wrong source. The domestic feminist critics of Clarke believed that higher education in general, and coeducation in particular, was a vital element in the effort of women to live happy, fulfilling lives in an era of widening female roles.[41]

At the same time they denounced Clarke's medical argument against coeducation, many domestic feminists also rejected the utilitarian view that women's education should differ from men's because of their different roles in life. Anna Brackett, a former normal school principal in St. Louis, probably expressed this view best in one of the few essays in this period to deal with women's education as a whole rather than simply with female higher education. Brackett maintained

that special instruction in sewing was a waste of time for girls in the latter nineteenth century, both because most clothing was produced commercially and because she felt sewing instruction was of little pedagogical value. Sewing may have been an appropriate course of study for women in other periods, she argued, but it simply diverted girls away from more important subjects in a modern, urban setting. She felt much the same about courses in domestic science. The most important task a woman has, she reasoned, was to train and educate her children. Learning the mechanical elements of housework was valuable, in that case, but should not displace the time and effort required to develop a sound comprehension of the world and the discipline to change it in some fashion.[42]

In direct contradiction to Clarke, Brackett suggested that it was the absence of a sound, rationally grounded and demanding education that resulted in "insanity and sickness" in some women. Like men, she believed that women required "real work" to make their lives fulfilling. And to play the myriad roles required of middle-class women in the modern age, a solid academic preparation was vital. Men and women, she asserted, were "wonderfully alike" in their quest for a fuller comprehension of the world. To deny girls the opportunity to learn as much as their brothers in a "systematic" fashion was to leave them "dwarfted and crippled," physically an adult but "mentally a child."

At bottom, of course, was the effect of all this on future generations. Brackett suggested that the current "unruly" character of American children was doubtless a consequence of the "narrow and unfinished education which we gave to our girls, now the mothers." Indeed, she argued that women without education "were better childless," for each one threatened to "give her country elements of weakness... future inmates for jails, penitentiaries, and prisons." Like other domestic feminists in this period, Brackett felt that the fullest possible development of women's intellectual powers were essential to the future development of American society.[43] And coeducation represented the best possible guarantee that girls would be systematically and rigorously educated.

As indicated earlier, the domestic feminist conception of women's role in the republican, urban-industrial society of the nineteenth century—and the corresponding importance of women's education—was endorsed by many male educators in this period. And most schoolmen also appear to have shared the domestic feminists' objections to the biological and utilitarian arguments against coeducation. While male educators generally did not react as earnestly to Clarke's book as many women, they nevertheless rejected his condemnation of coeducation as unwarranted and impractical.