

Single-Gender Choir — have you been thinking about taking the leap?

If you have ever talked to me about my job, you know that I teach single-gender choirs (primarily middle school men) and am a passionate advocate of teaching boys separate from girls. Perhaps *you* have considered making the switch to single-gender choir at your school and are curious about how other schools make it work.

For this article, I reached out to several directors that also teach single-gender choirs to gather their thoughts on why they choose to teach this way. All would be happy to talk with you if you wish to find out more about their programs.

[Your name and the grades you teach](#)

Kathy Gedler: 7th & 8th grade choir in West Des Moines

Paul Skyles: Elementary Chorus (4-6), 7th Chorus (SAB), 8th Choir (SATB), 9-12 Bass Clef Chorus (TTBB) at North Scott in Eldridge

Travis Gratteau-Zinnel: 6th-8th choir in Waterloo

[How are your single-gender choirs scheduled?](#)

Kathy: Each grade of each gender is split into 2 sections - 2 8th bass, 2 8th treble, 2 7th bass, 2 7th treble. Stilwell is on a 2 day schedule, so choir alternates with other classes that meet every other day, or a study hall. The choirs are scheduled opposite of each other (for example, a 7th bass clef meets opposite of a 7th treble clef during the same period, every other day)

Paul: We have an entry level male and female chorus at the high school. These groups are primarily fresh/soph with a few upper classman who like to sing, but don't have the commitment or skill for an advanced ensemble.

Travis: Our building is peculiar because we have a 10 period day, 2 periods for teacher prep/meetings, and 1 period for lunch. I see my single gendered courses 2 times per week and then as a mixed ensemble 1 day a week. The other gender is enrolled in a study hall, or has an in school leadership position.

[How do you present concerts? Songs alone or mixed \(or both\)?](#)

Kathy: I present grade level concerts. Most of the songs are performed gender specific, but each grade level learns a couple of selections that are mixed voiced, and the choruses will combine a day or two before the concert to practice the mixed choir songs. The combined rehearsals require a lot of planning. Combined rehearsals take place during the school day, and this means that students are pulled from other classes for the **combined** practice. I am considering having combined practices in the morning, before school, so there is less disruption to classes, and so kids don't have to stress out about making up classwork.

Paul: Concerts are primarily by ensemble, T(T)BB or SSA(A) music. We do present some combined music for concert or contest as time/skill level allows.

Travis: Our concerts are divided by grade level, Winter concert 7/8th perform together. Spring is 6-8th. Per some amazing suggestions, I have programmed 3 or more gendered pieces, and 3 mixed pieces.

Tell us some positives

Kathy: Working with gender specific voice issues is huge. Boys are more likely to simply sing without worrying about girls in the room. Boys are very supportive of each other, and but not afraid to tell it like it is ('the third note was supposed to stay on the same pitch', you guys kind of sound like you're talking instead of singing), but they'll give each other "atta-boys" for effort. The older boys that stay with it are happy to be in a group where most of the kids aren't required to be in the group.

For the girls- working through that breathy break from chest voice to head voice is a big one in 7th grade. Also, intellectually, girls often are ready to move along a little quicker -and don't have to wait for the more immature behavior tendencies of the 7th grade boys, some of whom literally bounce around the room.

For both groups --it's nice to be able to make literature choices that are vocally appropriate

Paul: The benefits are mostly the same for both:

- 1) No pressure from opposite gender to do well. Even with a cohesive group there are still some issues when you have boys and girls in the same room that will always cause inhibition.
- 2) Focus on literature that lends advantage to limited range/changing voice
- 3) Because of our situation, Mrs. Lori Potts and myself are able to demonstrate and model specific examples and issues for male/female voice.
- 4) Sometimes it's nice for girls to be girls and boys to be boys.

Travis: - for the boys: increased confidence, ability for relationship building on a smaller scale, camaraderie, differentiation,

- for the girls: Less distractions (silliness because there's a good looking guy in choir), ability to move through music faster

Any negatives?

Kathy: -If one has a collection of all mixed voice music, they will obviously have to build up their library, and in the meantime be creative about tweaking what music they have. Directors that have never split their groups are skeptical. Splitting the groups can require more planning and more instruction time, not to mention losing the safety in numbers of the larger mass mixed group.

Lost lesson time: At my school, I have 2 periods during the day where I don't have a choir ensemble, and I use those periods for working with students or for planning, since before/after school is extracurricular group time. Since I am the only vocal staff at my school, and I teach several different sections, regular lesson times are a thing of the past. Having taught very large mixed groups and somewhat smaller single gender choirs, I would take the single gender, hands down.

Paul: A few negatives to be considered:

- 1) Building the resources and literature to support a single sex ensemble will take an upfront investment.
- 2) Building a proper "identity" for the ensemble.....what the niche of the ensemble is in the overall development of your choral program
- 3) Being sensitive to students who identify differently than their gender. I'm truly not sure of how this would work, but there could be a "perceived" lack of sensitivity with single sex ensembles.

Travis: One has to become a decent arranger to successfully have students sing music that is accessible.

- for your boys: Insecurity still of their own voice, inability to sing too many multiple part pieces
- for your girls: concentrated drama can ensue if you're not prepared

[Any advice for someone thinking about seeking single-gender choir time?](#)

Kathy: Literature: Treble clef lit is readily available. Two part music can also be very doable for beginning bass clef groups, and when necessary, switch parts or change the key.

Boys: The boys groups can be quite overwhelming; there is a LOT of energy in the room, especially with 7th graders.

These are gender generalities you may or may not experience when you work with the gender split: It seems like the guys will do just about anything if it kind of feels like a game or competition. Boys are more likely to individually sing a short phrase or measure demonstration.

One has to be more careful with the girls, as they tend to be terribly self conscious and reactions can be more guarded. Girls tend to progress quickly and work hard, especially if they really like a song....

Paul: It is one of the best decisions you can make for a program. Make the leap. For NS, the benefit has been nothing short of fantastic. We used to have a "good" group and "bad" group that was not our intent, but was a student perception. Now we have a uniform system for all to start without the feeling of inadequacy.

Travis: Make it happen! I've always wanted to have single-gender ensembles and this year I'm in a situation that I have it. It will strengthen your program, allowing you to teach potentially smaller sections and cater to their learning styles. Guys are trying to find their voice, especially in the struggle that is 7th grade. Having only guys days, allows them to make mistakes and still feel safe and cool in their setting.

[What are your next steps?](#)

Kathy: My next steps are to try continue to find accessible, quality songs that the students connect with and leave the room singing.

Paul: To continue development of individual skill and choral technique while choosing literature that energizes and "pushes" the student/ensemble toward a higher standard of

performance.

Travis: Utilizing resources to choose repertoire that is appropriate. Arranging pieces appropriately, and working through warm ups/repertoire that help highlight the best qualities of a gender's voice.