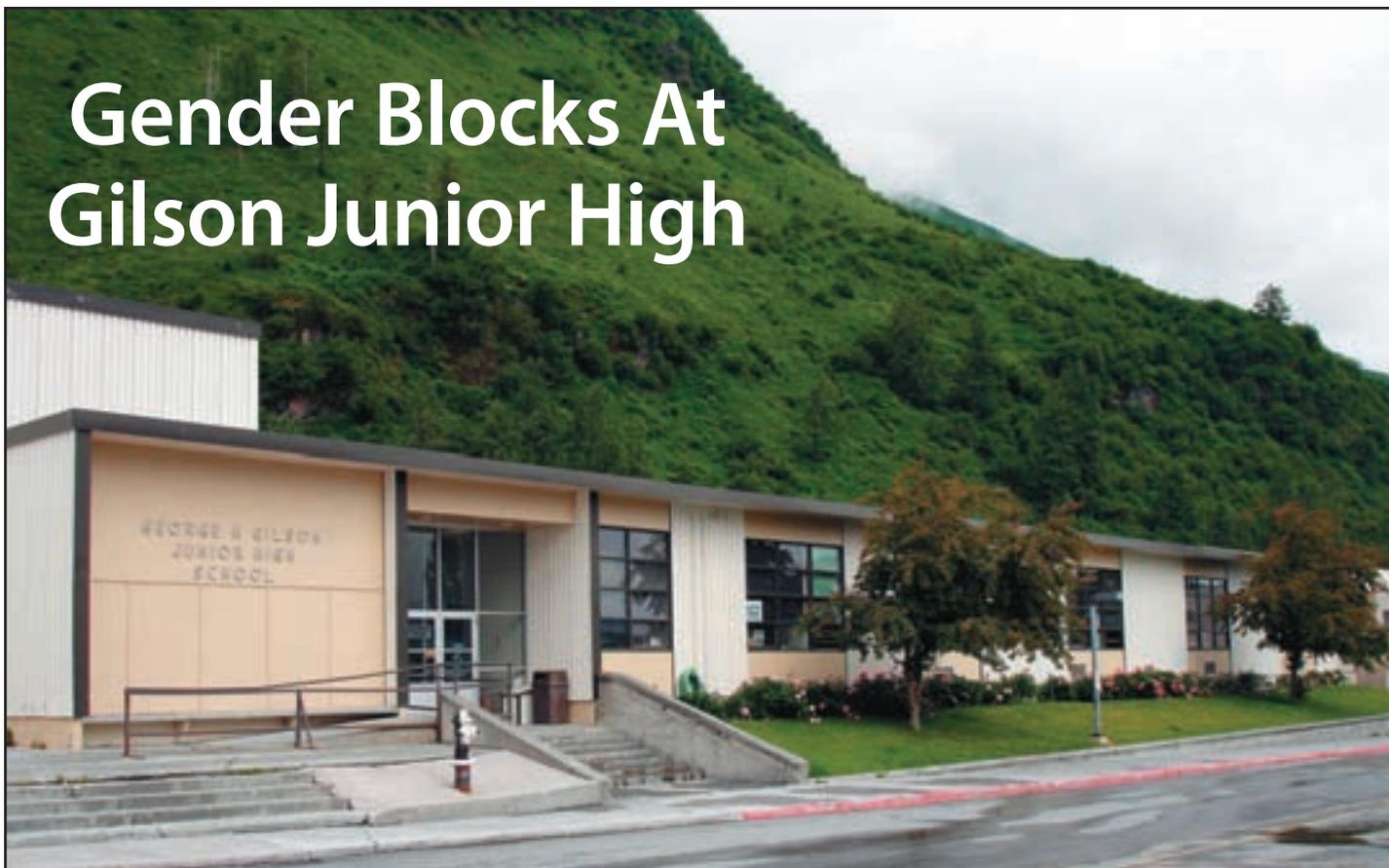


Gender Blocks At Gilson Junior High



Parents at George H. Gilson Junior High in Valdez can put their children in classes separated by gender. Photo by Sharon Crisp.

Gilson Junior High is located in the beautiful community of Valdez, with a great staff, great students and the support of the community.

While the school has met the federal requirements of No Child Left Behind every year, it became apparent after a data retreat in June 2005 that there was a problem. It was discovered the school had large “gender gaps,” especially in reading.

This prompted the administration to research options for helping the male students, without holding back the female students.

After additional research it was discovered boys are falling behind not only in Valdez, but nationally.

The 2005-2006 school year looked like any other year at Gilson Junior High. Students attended seven different classes daily, and often had seven different teachers.

After the first semester, many boys still struggled academically, and those same boys were having discipline problems.

Success is the only option at GJHS



An all-male block learn about GPS and cross town network interconnectivity. Photo by Rod Morrison.

During the spring of 2006, at an in-service meeting, the school administration presented the testing data and discipline data based on gender differences.

Teachers were frustrated about what to do for students who seem to cause trouble and demand most of their attention.

After an emotional conversation, veteran teacher Kipp Norris said, “If we keep doing what we are doing the same way, we will be giving up on those students. Are we OK with that?”

The tide began to shift, and numerous ideas were presented for the incoming seventh graders.

Initial research led them to a middle school in Colorado that had similar problems. This school had created three groups of students, all girls, all boys and a mixed group.

They gave parents the choice of which group to assign their child. At the end of the year, all three groups showed improvements. The all-girls block had the biggest improve-

ment, followed by the all-boys and then the mixed group.

Gilson Junior High decided to try this approach.

During the 2006-2007 school year, Gilson Junior High became the first school in the state of Alaska to implement seventh-grade gender block classes, which included reading, language arts and social studies.

The school offered an all-boys block, an all-girls block and a mixed gender block.

Things immediately changed. The boys jumped into more “hands-on” learning opportunities. For example, the school purchased global positioning devices (GPS) for use in the classroom. The students studied them and then put them to use.

The GPSs have been used for school activities, such as classroom geocaching, to real-life applications.

Norris teaches both the all-boys block and the mixed gender block.

“The boys ate up the GPS reading,” says Norris. “They really got into it, but the mixed group did not show the same enthusiasm.”

Because this program was a test, the administration has monitored the classes closely. The principal and school counselor frequently visited the rooms and talked with many of the students.

Here are a few examples of what students said:

Boys: “At first I thought it was stupid, but we get to do things that are a lot of fun.”

“I used to get in lots of trouble at school and this year I have not been to the office one time.”

“There are no girls in class to flirt with, so it is easier to do my work.”

Girls: “Can be yourself; don’t have to feel like you’re being judged by the boys.”



The “Wall of Fame” represents students who improved their Alaska Standards Based Assessment test score from the previous year. Photo by Rod Morrison.

Terra Nova Test Scores			
Girls	2005	2006	2007
Reading	91.43%	84.62%	86.21%
Writing	91.43%	92.31%	93.10%
Math	80.00%	73.08%	82.76%
Boys	2005	2006	2007
Reading	66.67%	57.69%	81.82%
Writing	59.52%	73.08%	81.82%
Math	57.14%	53.85%	78.79%

“There is no drama in class with the all girls; however, in my mixed classes we have a lot of drama.”

“It is easier to learn, and we can discuss girl stuff that guys do not understand.”

Junior high counselor Tracy Pressley confirms there is less drama among the girls in the seventh grade.

“Relational aggression, or girl-girl bullying, was very common in the hallways of the junior high prior to the implementation of the block classes,” she says. “The block classes have seemed to reduce this type of behavior.”

The block teachers got to know the group of students better. The

girls block was able to discuss issues that pertain to girls in a non-threatening environment and allowed the classroom teacher to teach to the moment when a particular issue presented itself.

The girls developed a strong relationship with the teacher and often shared personal feelings in their classroom journals.

All seventh-grade students are required to take a norm-referenced test called Terra Nova, which allows the students’ scores to be compared on a national level.

Test results have solidified the school’s confidence in the block

class trial. The 2007 test results at left reflect the first year of gender separation at Gilson Junior High.

In addition to an overall increase in test scores, here are a few other benefits the school believes it has seen as a result of single gender blocks:

- Discipline incidents decreased significantly, which means students are spending more time in class.
- There have been fewer “F” grades.
- Students are more engaged.
- Test scores are rising for both boys and girls.
- Vandalism is now almost non-existent at Gilson Junior High.
- The building climate is more positive.

According to Principal Rod Morrison, the bottom line is “This program has been good for our kids.”

The program will continue throughout the 2007-2008 school year. The junior high plans to add science and physical education to the list of single gender classes.

The gender-block classes will continue to be an option for parents and students, not a requirement. ■