

Title IX didn't erase stigma of girls taking shop classes

By Claudio Sanchez, NPR

Forty years ago, former President Richard Nixon signed Title IX, which said no person shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from any education program or activity. Vocational education courses that barred girls – such as auto mechanics, carpentry and plumbing – became available for everyone. But it's still hard to find girls in classes once viewed as “for boys only.”

Zoe Shipley, 15, has a passion for cars and tinkering with engines.

“It's just kind of cool to learn how to fix a car or learn about it,” she says.

Zoe is also the only girl in her automotive technology course, so she's been teased a lot.

“They would call me grease monkey,” she says. “I'm like, so what? At least I have the option to choose what I want to do, you know what I mean?”

That's what Title IX did. The law removed the policies and practices that kept female students from courses and programs once reserved for male students.

“All our electives here are totally open to all of our kids. We don't force any boys or girls to do anything,” says Tom Evans, the principal at Eastern Technical High, a magnet school in Essex, Md.

Students can choose from 12 career majors, including construction, information technology, engineering and Zoe's choice: automotive technology.

Evans unlocks the big double doors that open up to a cavernous garage. Six- and eight-cylinder car engines sit in the middle of the room next to several cars and a row of computers that have been stored for the summer.

If you think about it, Evans says, this school is proof that Title IX accomplished what it set out to do in education. And yet, he says, Zoe is the exception, not the rule.

“I’ve seen Zoe in action in her automotive class. She’s not going to let anybody push her around academically or intimidate her in any way,” he says.

The same is true of the four girls in the school’s construction management program that offers electrical and plumbing classes. That’s it. In a school that’s over half female, a total of five girls are in two traditionally male courses.

“I think in some of the fields, just the nature of the work that kids see going on in those fields, isn’t going to attract that many women. Automotive technology isn’t a field that you see women in,” Evans says.

That would quickly change if there was a demand for more female mechanics and plumbers, Evans says, like there is now for female engineers.

“We make a serious attempt at getting girls into engineering. We recruit girls from all over the county, and that’s paid off a little bit,” he says, “but engineering by itself is a field where I think women are starting to see female engineers.”

Zoe says that’s why her family tried and failed to get her to switch from automotive technology to the engineering program.

“But I think it would be cool if I owned my own shop, like a car shop,” Zoe says.

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