There's some merit in trustee Ken Mettler's suggestion that the Kern High School District explore the idea of separating boys from girls in physical education classes, at least on a limited and voluntary basis to start.

Although there's certainly no unanimity on the issue, the nationwide consensus -- as gleaned from a number of studies -- seems to be that students benefit when they are segregated by gender. Students are less distracted, girls participate more and boys are able to compete at a higher level, according to instructors who teach single-sex P.E. classes.

Girls are often intimidated when they compete against boys in sports that involve physical contact or the potential for it. Injury is always a possibility, given the fact that boys are physically bigger and stronger than girls from about the age of 15. As a result, participants of both sexes may scale back their intensity level, consciously or not, resulting in a less valuable workout experience for all.

Federal Title IX legislation, passed in 1972 to ensure that women have the same educational opportunities as men in public schools, requires that physical education instruction for girls and boys be equal and comparable. Schools have addressed that mandate by offering only combined-sex classes.

The law does provide for alternatives: If an activity involves physical contact or discussion of human sexuality, or if students are objectively separated based on their ability without regard to gender, the de facto "coed" requirement may be modified or waived.

Some school districts around the country that divide classes by gender try to achieve compliance with Title IX by offering an identical curriculum for both. Boys and girls learn about the same sports and exercise activities, but at the pace, intensity and gender mindset that best suits them.

Boys' and girls' classes can be occasionally combined when it makes sense to do so. Bowling, square dancing and roller skating classes, for example, are well suited to mixed-gender instruction.

But some sports, such as basketball, often devolve into male-dominated exercises. One boy passes to another boy, who passes to another boy, who makes a layup, and then the same sequence takes place in the other direction. Instructors are often compelled to add special rules -- a girl must handle the ball at least once before anyone can take a shot, for example.

Among the consequences of throwing girls into the middle of boy-dominated activities, according to researchers: Girls develop negative feelings about physical activity, leading to less participation in P.E. classes and less interest in exercise as adults.

Surveys have found that even students themselves tend to prefer single-sex P.E. classes.

All this said, many P.E. teachers can tell stories about girls who compete as well, or better, than the most skilled boys in their combined classes. Would single-sex classes deprive those girls of the opportunity to compete to their best potential?

In some cases, yes. But these are also the girls with the ability to lift the level of play in girls-only classes. More often than not, these girls will elicit improved performance from other girls -- including the girls from whom we might not otherwise have expected it.

We haven't heard much from Mettler since he was first seated on the school board -- that is, other than support for colleague Chad Vegas' assorted proposals -- so it was surprising to hear this and two other propositions from Mettler at the same Jan. 7 meeting. Has Mettler suddenly decided it's time to stand up and be recognized? Perhaps.

But the only question worth concerning ourselves about is this: Would single-sex P.E. classes better serve students in the Kern High School District? It's certainly an idea worth researching.