

What's the bottom line on single-sex education?

A recent article in SMH (Baker, 15 October 2019) posits that a lack of choice could force some families in Sydney to relocate to accommodate their preference for co-educational schooling for their children.

Firstly, let's consider for a minute that many families in Sydney are fortunate to *have* a choice between government funded co-educational and single-sex schools. In most states and territories families are not so lucky. In Queensland, Western Australia, Northern Territory and Australian Capital Territory, it is *only* independent and Catholic schools that provide single-sex options — there are no state single-sex schools.

Single-sex education is one of the fastest-growing trends in the educational landscape of 21st-century America. The number of single-sex public schools has increased by 30 per cent since 2015. Fuelled by research, such as a recent UCLA study that showed graduates from all-girls schools are better set up for the future and leave school feeling primed for success, parents looking for better outcomes for their children are honing in on single-sex schools.

A 2016 study by the South Australian Association of State School Organisations (SAASSO), demonstrated that demand for single-sex schools is strong with the majority (62% of parents and 83% of teachers) wanting *more* all-girls public schools. It is more often the case that co-ed schooling is thought to be better for boys, and an all-girls' environment better for girls — so why are our governments willing to shortchange our girls?

Co-education is the dominant school model in Australia. Only 5 per cent of our 9400-plus schools are single-sex and less than 2 per cent are girls' schools. Co-ed is what most of us have experienced. Yet those who have had a single-sex school experience are equally as passionate as co-ed advocates about the benefits and positive impact of their schooling on their lives. And yes, just like in co-ed schools some people will have had a negative experience.

But why not hear from the students themselves? Here's what girls are telling us:

"...there are no restrictions or pressure on your potential or confidence related to feeling intimidated by boys. And you are surrounded by like-minded role models."

"It's a positive, judgement free environment in which I can freely express my thoughts and feelings and feel unafraid about being myself."

"I love how the girls all encourage one another and support each other... They are also able to share what they have to say, without any judgement. The atmosphere that is created makes learning and contributing to class discussions very easy."

"I love the supportive and caring environment of attending an all-girls school. At my school, I feel happy, excited to learn and supported by the teachers and girls."

"It gives you more courage to speak up and go for leadership roles."

Numerous research findings confirm the benefits that students and their teachers in single-sex schools talk about.

A 2018 study from The University of Queensland unequivocally found girls in single-sex schools had equal levels of confidence as boys, unlike their co-ed counterparts. It is this confidence that empowers young women to step into leadership positions and careers in male dominated fields — they feel confident in the workplace to lead and work alongside males as equals.

Importantly, it should be noted that within the plethora of research related to single-sex education, there is absolutely no evidence that supports the claim that girls or boys educated in single-sex schools are unable to socialise with the opposite sex.

After all, as one girl succinctly put it, ‘there are plenty of opportunities to socialise with boys outside of school but at school my focus is on learning’.

Academically too it is well documented that single-sex schools out perform co-ed, with NAPLAN results showing that, even when socio-economic status is taken into account, Year 7 girls were more than 12 months ahead of co-ed students in reading and almost nine months ahead in mathematics. And the results are also positive for boys in single-sex schools.

These are just a few examples of current research findings, and there are many many more demonstrating the very real benefits of an all-girls education and the advantageous way it prepares students for life success in a world where gender parity is still a long way off.

What’s the bottom line on single-sex education? The best educational environment may just be one without the opposite sex. Single-sex learning environments increase student confidence, provide a safe place for students to develop their identities and could be the answer to the gender gap in academic performance.

Anyone claiming that single-sex schools are archaic is simply out of touch with both the reality of today’s schools and the research in this area.

So for your child’s sake, make an informed decision on single-sex education — take a look at the research, visit a school, talk to the students — you may be surprised.

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