

OPINION

Best educational environment may be one without the opposite sex

By Loren Bridge

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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.

In Australia, co-education is the dominant model. 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.

A 2016 study by the South Australian Association of State School Organisations, demonstrated that demand for single-sex schools is strong: most (62 per cent of parents and 83 per cent of teachers) want more all-girls public schools.

Yet, [a recent article in the Herald](#) quoted some parents as saying a lack of choice could force them to move, to accommodate their preference for co-educational schooling.

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, the Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory, only independent and Catholic schools provide single-sex options and there are no state single-sex schools.

But why not hear from the students themselves? Girls are telling us they "love the supportive and caring environment of attending an all-girls school" and "there are no restrictions or pressure on your potential or confidence related to feeling intimidated by boys".

Numerous research confirms 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, leading the researchers to conclude that women's self-confidence is eroded by factors such as sexism and gender stereotyping. It is self-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.

Backing this view, a 2016 study from Bristol University found girls in co-educational schools have lower self-esteem and feel more pressure to be thin than girls in single-sex schools. The study concluded that single-sex schools encourage “improved self-esteem, psychological and social wellbeing in adolescent girls”.

Academically, too, it is well documented that single-sex schools outperform co-ed. NAPLAN results show, 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.

Importantly, it should be noted that within the plethora of research related to single-sex education, there is 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".

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.

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