

## All girls – better grades

**A new study says your daughter will become smarter, more confident and career-minded at an all-girls school. Will critics of single-sex learning be won over? Marina Jiménez reports**

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Graduates of all-girls schools have higher SAT test scores and greater confidence in math and computer skills, concludes a new, large-scale study on single-sex learning.

The 100-page paper, by the University of California, Los Angeles, Graduate School of Education, validates other research showing how single-sex education can dramatically broaden the educational horizons of graduates.

However, it won't resolve the heated debate over single-sex education, and whether it addresses inequities in education - or re-enforces gender stereotypes.

This is partly because of the difficulty in disentangling the effects of other influences on educational outcomes, including students' socioeconomic background, school enrolment and course offerings.



Cecil B. Stirling elementary school in Hamilton launched all-boys and all-girls Grade 7 and 8 classes six years ago. (*Peter Power/The Globe and Mail*)

While much of the recent polemic has focused on the "feminization" of the school curriculum and the generation of "lost boys," the report concludes that girls do benefit from being educated without boys.

"There are significant differences between single-sex and co-educational alumnae, extending across multiple categories, including self-confidence, political and social activism, life goals and career orientation," says the report, commissioned by the National Coalition of Girls' Schools. "Future research will need to tell us whether such differences are sustained throughout college and beyond."

The study, released last month, compared 6,522 women graduates from 225 private single-sex high schools in the United States with 14,684 students from 1,169 co-educational private high schools.

Even when researchers controlled for the socioeconomic background of students and school characteristics, they still found that girls from single-sex private schools were more likely to desire engineering careers, have confidence in math and computing skills, and be more politically and academically engaged than their co-ed counterparts. The advantages were even more pronounced at Catholic schools, where many "Latinas" study.

While the study didn't examine all-boys schools, an expert in this area believes they too can profit from single-gender education.

Leonard Sax, a U.S. physician and author of the just released *Boys Adrift*, says girls and boys learn differently, and behave differently when they're in the same classroom. "Social construction of gender stereotypes can be broken down in single-sex classrooms," says Dr. Sax, who has a PhD in psychology. "The jocks and the geeks can become one and the same."

There is great interest in understanding the outcomes of single-sex education, as more schools in North America struggle to deal with the gender learning gap and boys' poor performance.

However, experts say it is notoriously difficult to evaluate, because graduates of single-sex schools often come from economically privileged families who place a premium on education. As well, there are no longitudinal studies tracking the graduates, notes Paula Bourne with the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. "The verdict is still out," she said. "My concern is that as we look at ways to improve education for boys, we look at single-sex education, instead of at improving co-education. We're getting sidetracked."

In the U.S., there are now 540 single-sex public schools, compared with just 11 in 2002. In Canada, single-sex education is still largely the purview of private schools; however, there are a handful of pioneers in the public sector in Montreal, Calgary, Salmon Arm, B.C., and Prescott, Ont.

Public-school curriculum development over the last two decades has focused on the need to provide equity for girls, especially in learning materials and resources. However, research on literacy development shows boys will not read literature with main female characters, says Trevor Gambell, a University of Saskatchewan professor.

So when Cecil B. Stirling elementary school in Hamilton launched all-girls and all-boys Grade 7 and 8 classes six years ago, it addressed this discrepancy. Today, male students follow the experiences of a 13-year-old boy in the Canadian wilderness in the book *Brian's Winter* by Gary Paulsen. In a Grade 7 writing class, the boys document the results of their intramural ball hockey league. Male students are allowed to move around while they study. And yes, it's noisier.

"We've had boys practise on each other how to ask a girl to dance, and then how to accept rejection," says Doug Trimble, Stirling's principal. He introduced single-sex classes because he noticed how poorly boys were doing - although he believes they are of benefit to girls as well.

Boys have more behavioural issues, higher suicide and dropout rates, he says, and are less likely to attend university. Girls consistently outscore boys on Grade 3 and 6 assessments in Ontario.

"I got beaten up the first few years, especially by women, a lot of whom thought we were taking away resources from the girls in an attempt to put boys back on top," Mr. Trimble says. "But that's not the case at all. Girls are also doing really well."

In the all-girls classes, there is a greater focus on group learning and class presentations. They are reading *Stargirl*, a book by Jerry Spinelli about a non-conformist high-school student. Teachers also impart the importance of manners and conflict resolution - topics that wouldn't be taken as seriously in co-ed classes, where students vie to impress members of the opposite sex.

The "phenomenal" benefits of single-gender learning can be transferred to the public sector, says Jane Wightman, head of St. Mildred's-Lightbourn, a private, non-profit all-girls school in Oakville, Ont.

"Girls' learning styles are very collaborative," she says. "They compete in different ways than boys, and an all-girls' school allows for that ... and gives female students endless opportunities to participate."