

SPECIAL INTEREST FEATURE

Private Schools

St. Margaret's School, Victoria, B.C.

All-Boys and All-Girls: Being Yourself

The literature about gender-specific education tells us that the differences within genders are typically greater than the differences between them. So why have separate schools for boys and girls?

The answer from the educators is that kids feel more freedom to show those differences when they're without the peer pressure of a boy-girl environment. In other words, gender-specific schools let kids develop to their full potential as themselves.

With 640 boys, 260 of whom are boarders from 25 countries, St. Andrew's College in Aurora, Ont., is one of Canada's largest all-boys schools. SAC fields 77 teams in 24 sports – what you'd expect. But it also runs 50 clubs and a robust arts program whose festival this year featured 25 plays – with help from area girls' schools playing the female roles. This year's senior football quarterback was the lead in the fall play.

"Boys can do so much more when they feel safe enough to take risks that they wouldn't in a co-ed school," says headmaster Kevin McHenry. "Boys here are completely fine to



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“At a girls’ school, young women have role models all around them... it never crosses their mind not to pursue it if they’re interested.”

explore when they’re confident. When girls are around, they’re not as willing to take the risk.” Classes cater to the ways boys learn – three to five activities per class, for example – but also address their typical weaknesses. “We try to develop empathy,” says McHenry. “Boys are not always naturally empathetic.”

In the classroom, teachers strive to make the lessons relevant and goal-

oriented. “There has to be a sense of meaning for boys,” says McHenry. “They like to solve problems and they like to be competitive – in a friendly way.”

Many of the same observations about feeling safe come from the all-girls educators. “It allows them to be there for the learning and not worry about the social aspects,” says Martha Perry, principal of St. Clement’s School in Toronto. “They get more opportunities to speak up, particularly in STEM subjects. You really notice their confidence in STEM subjects, even though we don’t channel them solely in that direction. By the time they leave, they show a strong sense of who they are; they know their voice and they’re not afraid to use it.”

“At a girls’ school, young women have role models all around them,” says Megan Murphy, executive director for the National Coalition

of Girls’ Schools, headquartered near Washington, D.C. “Everyone on the robotics team, on the Science Olympics team, in the math contest – they’re all girls. It never crosses their mind not to pursue it if they’re interested.”

Girls are social beings, notes Perry, so classes directed at girls focus on collaboration, engagement and a close connection to their teachers. “Girls value connections,” says Perry. “They don’t want to disappoint and they like assurance they’re doing the best they possibly can.”

For those who say real-life is co-ed and girls need to be prepared, Perry has a strong answer: “Knowing themselves sets them up for real life. They don’t know anything different from speaking up, being themselves, being a leader in corporate or academic or athletic life. The transition is a non-issue.”

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