

What's behind the trend for co-eds?

Is it pressure to improve exam results, financial motivation or pushy parents? **Helena Pozniak** charts the rise of mixed independent schools

Minda Duberley wanted something different for her daughter. Her two sons had gone to mixed schools, but she picked a girls-only school for her youngest child. "We've had hundreds of years living in a male-dominated society," she says. "I don't think it does any harm to balance that in a limited time frame."

While teachers and parents grow hot under the collar, arguing whether girls and boys learn better together or apart, single-sex education is less in vogue than it was some 60 years ago, when many schools preferred to separate the sexes. Today in the UK, only 18 per

Girls at single-sex independent schools are four times more likely to study A-level physics than girls at co-ed state schools

cent of private schools are single-sex establishments (down from 21.4 per cent in 2010), according to the Independent Schools Council, which represents private schools – and more of these are all-girls schools.

While some leading schools are still single-sex, such as the likes of Wycombe Abbey and Cheltenham Ladies for girls, Eton and Harrow for boys, many other top-performing schools, from Wellington to Rugby to Stowe, are mixed.

Some boys' schools that welcomed girls in the sixth form (arguably to improve A-level results) have been emboldened to welcome girls throughout. Charterhouse in

Surrey, with a mixed sixth form since 1971, is one of the more recent converts, and is moving to full co-education from the age of 13 for the first time in its 407-year history, although not until 2021.

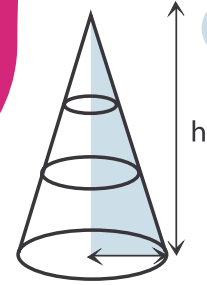
Others are following suit. Eltham College in London, which has also welcomed sixth-form girls since the 1970s, will start taking girls from Years 3 and 6, as well as sixth form, from 2020.

Much of this trend is motivated by the balance sheet and the need for bums on seats, says Stephen Spriggs, head of education at William Clarence Education. "If you are a single-sex school, you are ruling out half of your target market," he says. "While top schools won't struggle, below them there are hundreds competing with each other. A lot of schools are putting a positive spin on the decision."

But it's not just schools doing the pushing. He says co-ed schools are convenient for working parents, who can drop all their offspring off at one location, as well as benefit from reduced fees for siblings.

Single-sex schools are rare outside the UK, so families from abroad tend to seek mixed schools, says Mr Spriggs. "But many Gulf state and Chinese families prefer single-sex

THERE ARE TWICE AS MANY SINGLE-SEX GIRLS' SCHOOLS AS BOYS' FOR PUPILS AGE 13 UPWARDS



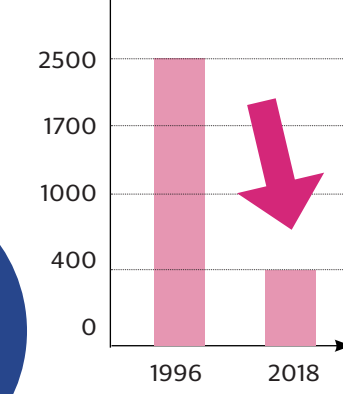
PUPILS AT INDEPENDENT GIRLS' SCHOOLS ARE MORE LIKELY TO STUDY SCIENCES, MATHS AND LANGUAGES



18% OF INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS ARE SINGLE-SEX, EDUCATING 129,000 PUPILS IN TOTAL

LONDON HAS THE HIGHEST CONCENTRATION OF SINGLE-SEX SCHOOLS IN ENGLAND

THE DROP IN SINGLE-SEX SCHOOLS



education," he says, while parents from India and Hong Kong are happy with a mixed school.

Basing a decision for or against single-sex simply on academic performance is questionable, says Mr Spriggs. "There are 101 factors that affect a school's results, like where they choose to focus, or how selective they are at 11 or 13, for instance. If you look at top schools, whether boys, girls or mixed, there's not much to choose between them in terms of results."

While girls may perform slightly better at single-sex schools, research isn't definitive. And you won't solve the puzzle by looking for statistics, argue the educationalists.

For Ms Duberley, the choice was more complex. "Girls need really strong role models. My daughter's headmistress was truly inspirational." At Burgess Hill Girls in Sussex, most teachers are women, though the head of sixth form is male.

The school says that it has no trouble recruiting staff. "We want to provide girls with a learning environment in which they are free to develop and excel at all subjects, including STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths), without the social pressures you can find in a

There are 101 factors that affect a school's results

Stephen Spriggs, William Clarence Education

co-educational environment," says headmistress Liz Laybourn.

Girls' schools have been criticised for building a hothouse academic environment, while boys' schools, say critics, have an unhealthy aggressive culture. "They can be toxic for the wrong personality," says Mr Spriggs. But with the right leadership, none of this is inevitable, says Ms Duberley, whose daughter thrived in an all-girls setting.

To many, a co-education just feels more "modern", Mr Spriggs says, and parents are no longer seeking to replicate their own school experiences. Some might want to positively avoid them.

But nobody expects single-sex schools to disappear completely – and arguments for girls-only education remain strong. Women are still hugely under-represented in sciences and maths subjects at university and beyond, and also learn differently.

"Parents want to see their children educated in a setting that best prepares them for real life," says Graeme Owton, deputy head at the mixed Brighton College. At his school, boys can dance and girls can play cricket and football. When they learn together, he says, it leads to an environment "in which pupils can work, socialise and develop in preparation for their lives beyond school".