

Girls do better without boys, study finds

Single-sex schools improve GCSE results and help struggling pupils

- [Polly Curtis](#), education editor
- [The Guardian](#), Wednesday 18 March 2009

Girls are far more likely to thrive, get [GCSEs](#) and stay in education if they go to a single-sex school, according to new research, which reveals pupils who are struggling academically when they start secondary school reap the biggest rewards of girls-only schooling.

The analysis of the GCSE scores of more than 700,000 girls taught in the state sector concludes that those at girls' [schools](#) consistently made more progress than those in co-ed secondaries.

The fact that pupils with the lowest test scores when they started secondary made the biggest leap in girls' school will reopen the debate about whether more children should have access to a single-sex education in order to drive up results.

The number of girls schools has dwindled in the state sector since the 1970s and has been dropping more recently among private schools, as more and more parents demand co-ed schools. Only 221,000 girls and 160,000 boys are now taught in state single sex secondaries out of a total school population of more than 3.5 million.

The research, conducted on behalf of the Good Schools Guide, looked at the "contextually value added" scores for every girl who took GCSEs in the state sector between 2005 and 2007. Grammar schools were excluded. The government introduced value added scores to rate the progress pupils make between the end of primary school and GCSEs taking into account their socio-economic backgrounds.

Of the 71,286 girls who sat GCSEs in single-sex schools over the three-year period, on average all did better than predicted on the basis of their end of primary Sats results. By comparison, of the 647,942 who took [exams](#) in mixed-sex schools, 20% did worse than expected.

In the value added score, in which a zero score indicates a child achieving the GCSE results expected on the basis of their Sats results at 11, the lowest 10% achievers who went to girls' schools scored on average 17. Among the lowest 10% achievers in mixed schools that score was -10. It means girls who start secondary struggling with their work are more likely to get GCSEs and stay on at school to do A-levels.

Janette Wallis, editor of the Good Schools Guide, said: "A lot of parents will look at the benefits of co-ed schools, like the fact that girls and boys are educated side-by-side preparing them for the world of work and life. But to disregard this evidence would be a mistake. We never expected to see such a difference."

She said the effect could be down to girls working better without boys "distracting" them but acknowledged the fact that educationally aspirant parents could seek out girls-only schools, which could also make a difference.

Alice Sullivan, a researcher at the Institute of Education, University of London, and a specialist in single-sex schooling, said: "It is very interesting that girls seem to be making more progress at single-sex schools. It does support a body of research evidence that girls do better in single-sex environments."

However, other leading academics said the research was more conflicting. Alan Smithers, director of education at Buckingham University, said: "We know across the piece that the main variables relating to exam success are pupil characteristics, social background and quality of teacher. There is very little space for [gender](#) in the classroom to make a difference. Where it apparently has an effect it relates to other factors, such as the aspirations of the parents who want their daughter educated in a single-sex school. But if this is true it will change our understanding."

Sue Dunford, headteacher of Southfield School for Girls in Kettering, said: "It's a question of confidence in the way girls develop. It's cool to be very good at anything in a girls school - maths, sciences or physics. No one will ask why you're doing a boys' subject. Girls who lack confidence can thrive more in girls-only schools. We don't have boys competing and distracting, so girls can really go for it."