

# All Girl Schools

Interview with Loren Bridge - by David Knuckey

The debate over single sex schooling has reignited with new research showing the benefits for girls enrolled in all-girl schools. South Australia has only two public, all-girl schools - with no plans for their development.

SAASSO asked Loren Bridge, Executive Officer for the 'Alliance of Girls' Schools Australasia' why we need more all-girl education.

**SAASSO:** Why are all-girl schools better for girls?

**Loren:** It is the social and emotional support, confidence and approach to challenges, risks and leadership opportunities that girls' schools provide for girls both during and after their schooling that set them apart.

The reality is that girls are often disadvantaged in co-ed schools. Research shows that girls are more confident and assertive in a learning environment that is free from gender discrimination. Without the competition and social pressure from boys, girls engage in more healthy competition and risk taking – skills that are advantageous for leadership and life success.

Research also shows that girls educated in all-girls schools are also more likely to study science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) subjects and pursue careers in these fields.

**SAASSO:** Is an all-girl school best for all girls? Should all schools be single-sex?

**Loren:** There will be parents and students who prefer a single-sex learning environment and those who prefer co-ed. It is unlikely there will ever be consensus on which model is better. What is important is giving parents the facts and the option to choose which is best for their child rather than a one-size-fits-all system.

**SAASSO:** Are all-girl schools more important for primary or secondary education?

**Loren:** Studies show that gender stereotyping begins at a very early age, even before children begin school. In fact, a study out this week shows that children aged between two and four are already aware of body image concerns.

Parents play a very important role in ensuring that girls are not exposed to harmful gender stereotypes ('girls can't do maths') and body image pressures ('she shouldn't wear that outfit, she's too fat'). However, girls' schools provide a safe environment free of gender stereotyping and the need to appear in a certain way.

A 2015 UK study shows that girls in co-educational schools are pressured by boys into feeling that they need to be skinny, whereas girls' schools act as a protective factor. And multiple studies show that girls are far more likely to take part in physical education lessons and play team sports at a girls' school where there are no boys to intimidate or embarrass girls.

**SAASSO:** What about preschool and tertiary?

**Loren:** There are developmental differences between girls and boys. Girls develop verbal and audio processing skills much more quickly than boys. These differences are much greater in the early years. Hence there are advantages to single sex preschools.

Research by economist Professor Alison Booth of the Australian National University found benefits of single-sex classes at school and university for girls and young women. Her experiments, which randomly assigned girls and young women to single-sex groups, found that they were more likely to take risks and behave competitively in the absence of males.

**SAASSO:** Is there Australian research showing benefits of all-girl schools?

**Loren:** There is a growing body of research supporting the case for girls' schools.

A 2016 report by Dr Chris Ryan of the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research confirmed that girls in single-sex schools are more likely to enjoy and be confident in mathematics than girls in co-educational schools.

Differences between boys' and girls' attitudes towards mathematics begin to be apparent by Year 4 in Australian co-educational schools, but by Year 8 these differences have increased substantially. In contrast, girls in single-sex schools are equally as confident and more likely to enjoy mathematics than boys in single-sex schools. These gender gaps are a "widespread phenomenon" across the socioeconomic distribution and in all sectors (government, Catholic and independent).

Kester Lee and Judy Anderson from the University of Sydney have found that girls in single-sex schools have the most positive attitudes to mathematics and girls in co-educational schools have the least positive attitudes. In fact, girls in single-sex schools were the most positive of all students, followed by boys in single-sex schools, then co-educational boys and finally co-educational girls.



---

**SAASSO:** Are there any social or development negatives to all-girl schools?

**Loren:** None at all. Usually advocates of co-ed schooling argue that the workplace is not single-sex and so single-sex schools do not prepare students for the real world. This is simply not true. Girls who attend single-sex schools are well prepared to function successfully in a coed world. We know in fact that many of them are better prepared in terms of self-confidence and broader intellectual interests.

---

**SAASSO:** The SA Education Minister, Susan Close, has said she would 'seek advice on the issue' - has your organisation's advice been sought?

**Loren:** We'd welcome the opportunity to contribute, but to date have not been contacted.

**SAASSO:** The SA education department says, there is no data indicating demand for more all-girl schools - is this the appropriate way to look at the issue?

**Loren:** Equally there's no data indicating there isn't demand. Parents and students need to be offered options and the opportunity to select what's best for them.

---

**SAASSO:** With two public all-girl schools, is SA in line with other states, or ahead or behind in providing single-sex options?

**Loren:** New South Wales and Victoria both have a significant number of single-sex government high schools. There are 21 boys' and 23 girls' state high schools in New South Wales. These include the selective girls' high schools which are ranked 2nd, 3rd and 7th in Australia based on 2015 NAPLAN.

In addition, analysis of the 2015 NAPLAN results show that 8 out of Australia's top 50 non-selective government high schools are girls' schools. This is impressive given that only 7% of Australian schools offering secondary education are girls' schools and the majority of these are Catholic or independent schools.

# All Girl Schools *continued*

Interview with Loren Bridge - by David Knuckey

**SAASSO:** What are the international trends in all-girl schools?

**Loren:** Single-sex schools are opening regularly in the United States and single-sex classes within co-educational schools are becoming more common, including in many public schools.

Single-sex schools are common in many countries around the world including New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Spain, Hong Kong, Singapore, Korea, Malaysia, the Philippines, Japan, South Africa, Chile and Trinidad. Academic studies examining single-sex education in these countries consistently points to the benefits, academic and non-academic, of single-sex education.

**SAASSO:** Why do parents want all-girl schools?

**Loren:** At a time when real and resounding inequities remain between women and men in the workforce - from pay disparity to significant leadership gaps in nearly every industry - there is a compelling argument that girls' schools offer a solution. In a single-sex school, no subject is dominated by boys, all leadership positions are taken by girls, and girls can learn in an environment free from sexual harassment from boys.

The reasons for choosing a girls' school are not socioeconomic, as evidenced by the popularity of girls' government high schools in NSW and Victoria, as well as many smaller Catholic and independent girls' schools in lower socio-economic areas. Parents value the fact that girls are encouraged to aim high and pursue any career they desire in a safe environment free from gender stereotyping.

Girls' schools, regardless of whether they are government or private schools, are boy-free zones where girls are free (at least within the school grounds) from sexual harassment, body image concerns and bullying by boys. Girls' schools have strong pastoral care programs that boost girls' confidence and resilience. These benefits are valued by parents regardless of whether their daughter attends a government or private girls' school.

**SAASSO:** Should teachers be taught different methodologies for teaching the genders at university?

**Loren:** There are general differences in learning styles between boys and girls. Boys tend to be more kinaesthetic and enjoy competition. Girls tend to be more auditory, and like narrative. Of course there are girls that are kinaesthetic and boys that are auditory and teachers need to cater for all individuals, single sex schooling means that teachers can be focused on girls' education or boys' education.

**SAASSO:** Should teachers be specialist in gender-teachers?

**Loren:** There is no need for teachers to be specialist teachers for one gender or another. All teachers, however, should receive information about gender stereotyping and implicit bias, and be aware of the many studies of academic outcomes that show that girls achieve the same academic results as boys in STEM subjects but are not as confident in these subjects and are less likely to pursue them in the senior years of high school and at university.

Teachers should leave university with the knowledge that girls and boys are equally capable of doing any subject and any career that they choose. They should be aware that they play an important role in not discouraging girls from doing STEM subjects and, equally, not discouraging boys from doing creative subjects such as art, drama and music.

Once working as teachers, there is no need to specialise in a certain type of school. Many teachers have a varied career teaching in girls' schools, boys' schools and co-educational schools and this allows them to bring wide experience to each position. What is required, however, to teach in a girls' schools is a commitment to teaching free of gender stereotyping and in a way that allows girls to achieve their best, regardless of what subject or activity they are participating in. ■