

6 reasons to choose a school for boys

For the past four years I have been privileged to sit on the Board of Trustees of the International Boys' Schools Coalition. I meet regularly with Heads of other boys' schools all over the world and as such have an opportunity to reflect and discuss many of today's educational issues with other leading schools in the world. Naturally, the concept of single-gender schools is often debated.

People often ask: Life is co-educational, so why shouldn't schools be as well? Do boys (or girls) really perform better on their own? Is this just the perpetuation of tradition against the rising tide of inclusivity? Is there any real evidence for the benefits of single-gender education?

The issues in this debate are complex and can seem more reflective of larger social questions of class and gender rather than an honest appraisal of what is best for each student. Recent educational data in New Zealand shows very clearly that boys in single-gender schools perform better academically than in coeducational schools.

As a Trustee I have been very much involved in studying recent research into the proven benefits of boys learning in a single-sex environment. The Board recently published a brochure entitled "*Why a Boys' School?*" that looks at six benefits of a boys' school, summarized below.

While boys can and do excel in many types of educational institutions, schools for boys, such as King's School, focus on learning that addresses not only how to excel in academics but also how to grow into young men of integrity and empathy.

In engaging and supportive single-sex environments, students explore their values and establish a foundation for making responsible decisions; they explore their own definitions of self, who they are and who they want to become; they learn to forge healthy relationships; they step out of their comfort zone to explore their full potential.

Why a Boys' School?

1. Schools for boys understand and celebrate boys.

Schools that make the intentional choice to focus on the intellectual, physical, social and emotional lives of boys and young men share an appreciation for the intensity and complexity of boyhood. Educators at boys' schools celebrate and value all that it means to be a boy.

With years of experience, and in collaboration with their peers, teachers at boys' schools encourage their students to grow and mature at their own developmental pace, using teaching strategies that address learning styles specific to boys. They understand the different and complex worlds of the primary school boy through to adolescence. And they strive to support each individual's needs and aspirations.

These schools recognize that boys most often are physically active, competitive, and apt to take risks, characteristics that are channeled into their learning experience. Many schools use flexible schedules and class times that permit students to move around throughout the day. Educators stimulate a boy's interests with a mix of academics, arts, music, or athletics to continuously engage his mind and body.

2. Schools for boys seek first to build good men.

In addition to pursuing high academic achievement, schools for boys share many broad goals: to promote well-being, to develop resilience and empathy, and to see that each student achieves his potential. But none is more important than the essential goal of building good character and, by extension, of helping each boy and young man make responsible choices.

A commitment to integrity and a strong ethical foundation are a school's first priorities, and educating students about how to become a good man informs every aspect of the day. Some schools do this teaching with an official code of conduct; others have developed a formal character education curriculum; a great many teach critical values through their faith-based affiliations. Often it is the experience of performing with the orchestra or playing on the soccer team that affords a lesson in courage, perseverance, or teamwork.

Each initiative is strengthened by outstanding teachers who model ethical behaviour daily, and also by student leaders, peer counselors, and other mentors. Boys learn that there are clear expectations to do what is right. They also learn that there are many routes to becoming a good man.

Most schools have a program of service learning that encourages students to work within the greater community to help others.

3. Schools for boys know that boys develop and learn in different ways.

It's a simple fact that boys and girls grow at a different pace. Boys' strengths are different from those of girls. While girls generally develop earlier physically and socially, refining their reading and writing skills sooner, boys are more spatial and visual by nature, and they demonstrate a natural affinity for areas like abstract mathematics. They are also hard-wired to learn more easily through action than words.

Using fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging), researchers have observed differences between the developing male and female brain that demonstrate why boys and girls learn in different ways. Boys' brains are wired to require movement, space, action, and rest. They also learn better when material is presented in small portions. Thus, a typical coed classroom that favours verbal and auditory learning can put an active boy at a disadvantage.

One of the important advantages of a single-sex education is the opportunity it presents to create a learning environment, literally and figuratively, that accommodates what boys and young men need. In a school that is boy-centered, teachers introduce more kinesthetic and sensory experiences into their curriculum, engaging boys more fully in their learning.

4. Schools for boys teach in ways that boys learn best.

Every teacher in an all-boys school has made a conscious choice to teach boys. They enjoy boys' irreverent humour and draw energy from their natural exuberance. Their passion to teach boys requires a commitment to build relationships, craft a curriculum, and lead a classroom that engages each student in the way he learns best.

As specialists in boys' education, teachers take into consideration the interests and talents unique to boys when they prepare each lesson. Because they know boys often prefer to work cooperatively, teachers can use teams effectively in project-based assignments. And because they understand the rhythm of a boys' classroom, they can plan physical activity into class time and extended breaks like recess into the school day.

5. Schools for boys help students discover and explore their full potential.

Without the social pressures of a coed environment, students in an all-boys school can explore the full range of their personalities and potential. Eschewing stereotypes, they discover they have many roles to play as a scholar, athlete, artist, musician, and friend.

By stressing the importance of subjects like literature, languages, music, dance, drama, and the visual arts within the curriculum, a boys-centered school assists students in finding their innate creativity and imagination, while developing their communication skills and pursuing other strengths and interests.

Risk takers by nature, boys find a new comfort level with nontraditional subjects and activities when they are encouraged to do so by trusted mentors within the safety of a close-knit community. Young men, who may not step up in the presence of girls, take on leadership roles at all-boys schools, often heading community service programs or serving as mentors to younger students.

6. Schools for boys foster brotherhood and lifelong friendships.

Working together in the classroom, on the playing field, or in the performance hall, students are united by a special bond of brotherhood. Many boys' school graduates say the friendships they developed with their peers and with faculty are among the most important benefits they carry with them from their schools.

Relationships are critical to a boy's learning according to researchers Reichert and Hawley. They report that boys thrive in an educational environment where they first establish positive, trusting relationships with teachers whose high standards and subject mastery students value. They write, "Relationship is the very medium through which successful teaching and learning is performed."

In this reciprocity of relationships, where teachers are forthright and caring, boys also develop the confidence to drop their guard and give of themselves. This relationship-based education model not only enhances the learning process, it also contributes to a boy's growing sense of belonging to his class, his team, and his school. In the outstanding teachers, coaches and counsellors who are by their sides each day, boys find important role models.

This connection of brotherhood extends to a broader community of what many schools call Old Boys — alumni who stand ready to positively support these young men now and in the future.