



Julia Morgan School for Girls seventh graders enjoy a lunch break between classes.

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All-Girl Schools — Is It Better Without Boys?

—By Noelle Robbins

"We love your girls. They ask the best questions." Ann Clarke, Director of the Julia Morgan School for Girls, beams as she relates that comment a staff teacher made to her at a recent academic conference. But she's not surprised. Julia Morgan middle school graduates have elicited these comments from their new high school teachers before.

For Clarke, girls speaking up and confidently seeking answers is the academic philosophy that drives the learning process at Julia Morgan, an Oakland middle school. It's a philosophy that stresses the asking, as much as the answers.

At Julia Morgan and other Bay Area schools dedicated exclusively to educating girls, primary goals are to get them to use their authentic voices, assertively engage in problem solving, and develop both their intellectual and emotional lives. Confidence, collaboration, and community are concepts these schools embrace, as are class-room settings described as quiet, focused, harmonious, and calm.

As recently reported in Newsweek magazine, the issue of single-sex education is the subject of hot debate. Though learning in a serene, empowering environment seems like the ideal, some education experts are publicly asking whether girls miss out when boys are missing in action; others ask whether girls are emerging from single-gender schools equipped to survive and succeed in a 50/50 world. According to local directors, teachers, and the girls themselves, the emphatic responses are no, and yes, respectively.

School principals, board members, and instructors at girls' schools have reams of research at their fingertips that document the different learning styles of girls and boys.

According to Joyce Ahern, Director of the K-5 East Bay School for Girls, from the earliest ages it is evident that boys engage in "linear learning while girls are more big-picture and holistic." Because girls arrive in kindergarten with verbal and relationship skills that are developmentally different than boys, they start off receiving positive attention from teachers seeking well-behaved, attentive learners. But, she says, "By the second grade, girls have moved to the edge of teacher awareness as boys become more demanding of a teacher's energy."

Clarke recalls when, as the Lower School Director of Hamlin a K-8 girls' school in San Francisco, a fourth grader offered this observation of her preschool experience. In the corner of the classroom stocked with wooden building blocks, "the girls would build a world that could last for days, [but] boys would knock the blocks down." Clarke was impressed that at such an early age, students picked up on the differences in behavior between boys and girls in the classroom.

Jo Ann Shane, Director of Communications at Schools of the Sacred Heart in San Francisco, can readily comment on the differences between girls and boys in the classroom. Sacred Heart is a K-12 school that offers separate boys' and girls' elementary and high school campuses. Shane reports that K- 8 teachers who rotate between the two single-sex schools describe the boys' classroom environment as rambunctious and competitive, "full of puppies."

Does that mean that, without boys, the halls of girls' schools are silent and somber, lacking action and noise? Not at all, says Clarke. She knows it is not uncommon for middle-school girls to pull back from the learning experience in a co-ed environment, "becoming observers rather than participants." Julia Morgan and other Bay Area girls' schools stress teamwork, assertive communication, leadership, and risk taking, maintaining that such academic approaches create energetic and lively exchanges, and dynamic classroom experiences.

And while girls attending single-gender schools pursue what may be viewed as "female" strengths in oral and written communication, educators in these Bay Area programs say they put significant emphasis on math and science

The Director of Admissions at San Domenico High School in San Anselmo, Wendy Feltham, enthusiastically described the Inaugural Conference for Women in Sciences and Mathematics recently hosted by the school. The event was devoted to examining the successful science and math careers of 24 women, some of whom are San Domenico alumnae, in such fields as environmental science, marine biology, cancer research and forensics.

Feltham says "Our motto is inspiration and innovation. We want to motivate and challenge our girls to become excited about exploring and pursuing science and mathematics as possible career choices."

Speaking of innovation, Teri Putman, a teacher at Julia Morgan, created a hands-on

approach to financial literacy, BizWiz, which is receiving national attention. BizWiz was developed as a follow-up to the BizWorld curriculum [see Girls Financial Literacy story, in this issue] in which students direct the start-up and operation of a business. Girls acquire skills in money management, leadership, entrepreneurship, manufacturing, and marketing their products in the BizWorld marketplace. Students raise capital, pay salaries, and purchase materials in a competitive commercial world that becomes immediate and real.

And, as often happens in the global marketplace, the profitable business is sold. BizWiz takes girls to the next step of investing earnings, setting financial goals, analyzing market forecasts, creating diversified portfolios and tracking assets.

What The Girls Say

Marisa Osari, a sixth grader at Julia Morgan, says the all girls environment is "different in a good way. I don't really notice that there are no boys." She adds that she is "less concerned about being embarrassed" when offering her answers and opinions in the classroom. Alex Strandberg, a seventh grader, feels "boys are loud, and it is easier to get to know the kids and teachers" in the girls only classroom. Kate Emberley, a Julia Morgan graduate, found unexpected classroom chaos in her new co-ed public high school, but feels supremely confident interacting with her teachers and fellow students. Samantha Zulch, an eighth grader, feels encouraged by her teachers at Julia Morgan to "speak up and take risks." The girls concur that the "girls-only" atmosphere builds respect and trust while allowing them to relish competitive learning exercises.

The girls also note the lack of gossip, rumors, and cliques that can make middle school, particularly, such a miserable experience for many girls. They appreciate the supportive, intimate relationships among the girls, and between girls and teachers. They enjoy devoting their energies to reaching academic goals in a comfortable atmosphere that acknowledges the emotional needs of girls to connect as part of the learning process.

Many moms approach sending their daughters to girls' schools with excitement. Lorre Zuppan, mother of Chesna Foord, a Julia Morgan eighth grader, values the grading process emphasizing intelligent risk taking and speaking up. Zuppan notes that in co-ed educational environments teachers sometimes respond to girls differently than boys by telling boys "their answers are right, while girls are told their answers are nice." Dads often go from "Whoa" to "Wow!" when they realize that girls' schools nurture personal growth, not anti-boy attitudes.

As the debate over single-sex education continues, and as concern about a backlash against boys created by focus on girls' education grows, more research will doubtless both provide some answers and create more questions. But because business and government continue to be dominated by men, directors, parents, teachers and students feel girls' schools fill a crucial need. Most agree, as well, that in schools with small class size (many girls' schools cap class size at 20) and teachers knowledgeable about the different ways children learn, both girls and boys can succeed, together and apart.

Liz Gibbs Campbell, a Julia Morgan math teacher, knows that girls' schools go a long way to dispel the myth that girls need to sit down and listen to learn. "Girls go from being observers to participants," says Campbell, "building confidence that carries them forward

into their co-ed schools, and the world beyond."

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