

School gender prejudice reflected in subject choices

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Almost one half (49%) of co-ed state-funded schools across England are strengthening gender imbalances in terms of subject choice while fewer than one in five (19%) are countering them.

The results demonstrate that many girls and boys are being denied opportunities and suggest schools are paying insufficient attention to countering [gender](#) stereotypes.

A new report from the Institute of Physics (IOP), *Closing Doors: Exploring gender and subject choice in schools*, uses the National Pupil Database to track and analyse students' progression to A-level in six gender-skewed subjects and unearths a range of worrying findings.

Professor Peter Main, Director of Education and Science at IOP, said, "For the first time, the full picture of the effect that [gender stereotypes](#) have on students' subject choices is becoming clear and the results are very worrying.

"We are highlighting these findings to encourage schools to think seriously about gender balance. Leaving these stereotypes unchallenged creates unfair and unnecessary barriers and stops students achieving their full potential."

The report investigates six subjects – physics, maths and economics, as three that show a male bias; and biology, English and psychology, three that show a female bias.

Although individual teachers are clearly important, the evidence strongly suggests that it is the [school](#) culture that determines whether the damaging effects of gender imbalances are overcome or at least reduced.

Professor Main continues, "It's going to take whole-school initiatives to overcome these biases.

"We found that where a school is good at overcoming an imbalance in one subject, they are usually good at doing so in all the other 5 subjects. And, although the national picture is dismal, there is a silver lining in that some schools have demonstrated that they have been able to overcome these barriers. Other schools need to learn from these examples."

Earlier research, undertaken for IOP's *It's Different for Girls* report, showed that single-sex schools are significantly better than co-educational ones at countering gender imbalances. This report corroborates that finding and shows that both co-ed schools with sixth forms and independent co-ed schools also fare better at overcoming gender stereotyping.

The research compared the gender balance for progression to each subject in each co-educational state-funded school in England against the national average and the school was given +1 in that subject if they improved the [gender balance](#) and a -1 if they made it worse.

49% of state co-educational schools scored -2 or less, which means that they were failing to address gender stereotyped choices in at least four out of the six subjects, while only 19% scored more than +2.

Professor Main adds, "Even against the woeful national averages, which for physics, for example, sees four boys for every one girl progressing to A-level, the majority of co-ed schools are failing. Progress is being made by single sex schools, independents and a handful of beacon co-eds. The majority of state co-ed schools need to catch up with the better practice of others to avoid failing their students."

Education Minister, Elizabeth Truss, has commented, "It is vital that we get the message across – high value subjects like physics and maths are increasingly important for a wide range of careers from business to culture.

"Schools should not allow girls – or any pupils - to close off their options and their future earnings potential by dropping these important subjects. It is worrying that we perform worse than international competitors and this waste of talent is holding our country back.

"This Government is determined to build on recent success. Our EBacc has led to science GCSE entries hitting record levels this year - with almost as many girls now taking physics GCSE as boys. The proportion of girls entering A level sciences is at the highest level for at least 10 years and more girls than ever before entered maths this year.

"We are putting huge focus on raising standards in maths, physics and computer science to make sure these important skills are universal – and not just for boys."

More information: Read the full report:
[www.iop.org/education/teacher/ ... oors/page 62076.html](http://www.iop.org/education/teacher/...oors/page_62076.html)

Provided by Institute of Physics

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