

New research suggests girls in single-sex schools do slightly better in exams than girls in co-ed environments

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Students at all-girls' schools do slightly better in their exams than girls at co-educational schools, according to [new research](#) from the United Kingdom.

This goes against [previous studies](#) that suggest it does not matter if students attend single-sex or co-ed schools.

What is the study?

This research was done by [FFT Education Datalab](#). This is an independent research team specializing in [education policy](#) and statistics.

Using the United Kingdom's [National Pupil Database](#), the study looked at more than 580,000 students who attended more than 3,200 schools. All schools were government-funded (so were "[public schools](#)" in Australian terminology) and were either single sex or co-ed.

Students [exam results](#) were examined at the end of Year 11 and the study controlled for differences in schools and pupil characteristics, such as socioeconomic disadvantage or high levels of students who learned English as a second language.

What did the research find?

The research found girls who went to all-girls' schools recorded a small improvement in their exam results compared to their peers in co-educational schools.

This is after adjusting their results to account for factors such as disadvantage.

The gap is small—around one month's progress for each of the students. But it is noticeable.

Yet for boys' schools, there wasn't any difference in results between single sex and co-ed schools.

Why is this important?

While the UK study was not peer-reviewed, this finding is important because it contradicts other recent large-scale research, which has found no statistically significant academic advantage to single-sex schooling.

For example, a [2022 analysis](#) of Irish students found no significant performance gaps between co-educational and single-sex schools.

A 2014 [meta-analysis](#) (an overview of many studies) across 21 countries also found no high-quality evidence of benefits to single-sex schooling.

What about Australia?

This new research plays into the renewed debate over single sex schooling in Australia in recent months.

This follows some prestigious all boys' schools announcing [moves to co-education](#) (and some former students [crying](#) about the change). It also follows multiple examples of sexism and misogyny by [male students](#) at both [all-boys](#) and co-ed schools.

There is also a growing body of Australian research examining toxic behavior of boys towards their female teachers and peers.

So the UK research could further entrench a [perception](#) girls are better off in single-sex schools.

This perception has a long history. Many girls schools were set up in the

1800s by pioneering headmistresses such as English educator [Frances Buss](#), who believed in girls' equal rights to education and girls' schools were the best places to provide this.

Girls' schools today retain an [image of feminist progressivism](#), promoting the idea that "girls can achieve anything." The perception is supported by some [research evidence](#) that girls in single-sex schools are more likely to feel confident in traditionally male-dominated subjects such as STEM.

What needs to be done?

This UK study raises many questions. Are girls indeed better off on their own? Are there aspects of single-sex education that could be applied in co-ed environments? How do we ensure that all schools are schools of choice for girls, including coeducational schools?

We can investigate these questions further by doing research with families to better understand their perceptions and experiences of single-sex schools today. We can also do more research into the impact of programs such as [Respectful Relationships](#), which have been introduced to build positive gender cultures in schools.

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