

**What  
difference  
does a**

**Single-Sex  
School** **make to**





## a girl later in life?

by John Sedgwick photo: Jock Sturges

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Three male internists were reviewing the case of a patient with a couple of female social workers at New York Hospital not long ago, when one of the social workers, 32-year-old Holly Dando, noticed that the men weren't paying any attention to her female colleague. Given the hospital pecking order, it was probably not prudent for Dando to complain, but she couldn't help herself. "Aren't you listening to her at all?" she demanded of the three male doctors. "Can't you at least pretend to be listening?" The doctors were startled, but they quickly apologized and began to listen for real. The other woman was amazed that Dando had dared to speak up on her behalf. Where did Dando learn to be, as she jokingly puts it, "such a loudmouth"? Certainly her upbringing played a role, but she gives the greatest credit to an unlikely factor: her girls-only high school. "I learned to express myself freely, without having to worry about being humiliated by guys," Dando says.

The high school years are the period when individuals form critical ideas about themselves in relation to the opposite sex that may well govern gender expectations for years to come. That was one reason Congress passed Title IX in 1972, guaranteeing that, among other things, girls would not be restricted to cheerleading while boys got to star on the sports teams: Such early stereotypes can linger. But not all schools have boys in them, and, curiously, the graduates of all-girls schools may end up being best prepared to win the gender wars.

Coeducation became the national standard more than a century ago largely because it was more economical to run "mixed" schools than separate ones. It be-



came an article of faith that coeducation provided the best environment for both sexes. In recent years, however, educators have begun to question this assumption. Many worry that boys learn to stifle girls, and girls learn to accept it. A pathbreaking 1992 report by the American Association of University Women noted that teachers tend to call on boys far more often than girls, allow boys to be more disruptive and continue to predominantly use male pronouns and male examples in class. Perhaps as a result, girls' self-esteem drops sharply in the high school years, girls turn away from math and science (skills increasingly necessary in the business world) and their academic capabilities as measured on SAT tests suffer compared with boys'.

For all these reasons, the idea of single-sex schools for girls is becoming ever more popular. In New York City, the Young Women's Leadership School in East Harlem made national headlines last fall when it became the third girls-only public school in the country. (The others are in Baltimore and Philadelphia.) California Governor Pete Wilson has proposed spending \$5 million to start 20 single-sex schools in his state. Congress is considering legislation that would overturn the language of Title IX to allow other single-sex educational programs. And countless coed public schools across the U.S. are experimenting with the idea of teaching girls math and science in single-sex classes. "The coed schools hate the research literature," says JoAnn Deak, Ph.D., an educational researcher and director of the lower school at the Laurel School in Shaker Heights, Ohio, "because it does nothing but support all-girls schools."

**M**ost of the research attention, however, has focused on the academic process, with precious little on the more important matter of the ultimate result. What difference does a coeducational or a girls-only school make to a girl later in life? Do the single-sex graduates find, for example, that they are better able to cope with the rigors of the business world? Do the coed graduates think they emerge with a better understanding of men? Would either group of graduates send a daughter to the same kind of school that they themselves attended? On such key points, the researchers are silent.

Thinking that the graduates themselves were in the best position to evaluate the benefits of whichever academic system they experienced, I decided to interview some of them to gain an insight into the true consequences of a decision that was significant not only for them but, ultimately, for society as a whole. Since girls-only public schools are still so scarce, I turned to the independent private schools—where all-girls schools now make up 9 percent of the total—to speak to female graduates from one girls school and from one coed school.

To keep what social scientists call the confounding variables to a minimum, I selected two schools of equivalent size and from the same geographical area. On the single-sex side, I chose the Winsor School, located in Boston, and on the coed side, Noble and Greenough (better known as Nobles), a few miles away in the Boston suburb of Dedham. Both are old-line

private schools, with a tradition of academic excellence. I focused on the graduates of the class of 1982 from each institution on the assumption that, at age 32 or so, they were old enough to have been out in the world awhile but still young enough for their school memories to be fresh. Winsor graduated 53 girls that year, while Nobles gave degrees to 44 girls, along with 54 boys. I spoke to 14 of these women at length, seven from each school. The women run the gamut from homemakers to business executives—one woman works as a child-care provider, while another runs two of the country's largest mutual funds. Mine was admittedly a small sample—a focus group rather than a survey. But, as the interviews went on, it proved enough for a clear pattern to emerge.

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## **The most striking** thing about the recollections of the Winsor women is how happy they felt to have been removed from the world of boys while they were at school.

from the world of boys while they were at school. It is often said that coeducation is more "natural" than single-sex, a statement that would be echoed by the Nobles graduates. But if the Winsor grads' experience is any guide, single-sex education can still be quite comfortable for girls. No doubt the Winsor students came to school fully prepared for boylessness, but I still expected at least some of the graduates to consider it a deprivation. None of the women I spoke to did. At school, they were glad to be on their own.

Indeed, it came as a shock to find a boy intruding on what they regarded as a private sphere. Dando, for example, was distressed to find a boy in the Winsor library one afternoon. "It was right after crew, and I was still in my sweats, and there he was," she recalls. All I could think was: 'So this is what it's like to have boys around. It is so distracting!' It was a moment of clarity for me, and I was so grateful that I didn't have to deal with this every day. I'd always be wondering, 'Am I just schlumping up the stairs, or am I trying to look cute?'"

Curiously, even the girls who were most date-conscious were relieved that their classes were for girls only. Christine Swenson Lawrence, now the manager of new-product development at the food conglomerate Gorton's, was convinced that it was "important" at Winsor to have a boyfriend, and she was glad to have succeeded. "But," she adds, "it just wasn't important during the day." The school's boy-free zone gave her some respite. "If it wasn't for Winsor, I'd probably have been the boy-crazy prom queen or something," she jokes. "This way, I limited the typical high school behavior to nights and weekends."

Susan Bailey, Ph.D., the executive director of the Wellesley Centers for Women at Wellesley College in Massachusetts, points out that one of the difficulties of having boys in the classroom is that it may set up certain gender expectations, as if masculinity and femininity can only be defined in contrast to each other. "We simply saw ourselves as strong and capable," says Ruth Finn, now the global brand leader for Calvin Klein's Obsession. "At Winsor, it never occurred to me that there was anything I couldn't do because I was a girl." Educators find it significant that girls necessarily assume all the



leadership positions at all-girls schools, and it did make a difference at Winsor. "We weren't electing a female class president," says Rachel Lefkowitz, a privately employed full-time child-care provider. "We were electing a class president, which may be a positive message in itself."

According to Myra and David Sadker's *Failing at Fairness: How Our Schools Cheat Girls*, one reason boys are so disruptive in the classroom is that they feel free to jump into a discussion after a student has made his or her point, whereas girls tend to wait until the student is finished speaking. Boys are also more likely to respond to a teacher by firing their hands into the air right away, whereas girls tend to wait a few seconds before hazarding an answer. At a single-sex school like Winsor, the students all had a similar style, and most of the graduates came away with the feeling that they had been fully heard. Dando remembers long, earnest philosophical discussions with classmate Louisa Burnham, now off in France on a Fulbright scholarship, which she has no doubt boys would have torpedoed. These were the conversations she was thinking of that led her to take on the doctors at the hospital.

**H**aving spent a portion of their formative years free from the influence of boys, single-sex graduates themselves can often tell which women have had the same experience. Jennifer Dalsimer Archer, now the director of corporate relations for the National Park Foundation in Washington, DC, says that when she went on

from Winsor to Yale, she was somewhat surprised to discover that six of the eight women in her circle of friends had gone to single-sex schools. "I think I was drawn to them because they all felt comfortable speaking their minds," she says. "They seemed strong in their independent ways."

None of the Noble and Greenough graduates wished that the boys hadn't been there. Most of them, in fact, had gone to Nobles expressly because it was coed, and would rather have died than gone to a single-sex school like Winsor, which they imagined to be completely unfun. All of them said they were happy at Nobles, but as the interviews progressed, many of them admitted to having been under greater stress than their Winsor counterparts owned up to.

While there were the usual cliques (artsy, brain, jock) at Winsor, they seemed relatively subdued and permeable. As Angela Rose Heffernan, now an elementary and high school French teacher in Holliston, Massachusetts, puts it: "Everybody seemed to be pretty accepting of each other. Without the boys, there seemed to be less at stake." At Noble and Greenough, by contrast, the female graduates recall what seemed to me like a sometimes oppressive social hierarchy that may have stemmed from the competition for boys, especially the godlike ones everyone termed "the studs." Holly Kay (Smith) Rosen, now director of talent relations at HBO, arrived at Nobles halfway through her junior year and promptly walked off with a stud—and was cut dead by virtually all her female classmates for her accomplishment. Almost none of them would sit next to her at lunch, invite her to slumber parties or

even talk to her. "It was really hard," she says. "It created a lot of waves, and a lot of women were pissed off." The preoccupation with boyfriends was also reflected in the campus gossip, which was all about school romances. "It was like *Melrose Place*," says Rosen, "only more incestuous." Breakups were always a topic of particular interest. "It put another guy back on the market," Rosen explains.

At least from the girls' perspective, the boys ruled. The school was not so backward as to expect the girls to be nothing but cheerleaders for the football team, but it was clear that, as at many schools, the football team was the focal point of the entire campus. When the girls' teams started to be more successful than the boys' in the years after the graduation of the class of '82, "that was a shock to the culture," says Elizabeth Kopelman, a former attorney who is now a graduate student at Stanford. This is a common dilemma for coed schools, where, as David Sadker points out, the boys' sports are the school sports and the girls' sports are...the girls' sports.

At Nobles, the boys held most of what Kopelman calls "the big-ticket" leadership positions as well—editor-in-chief of the newspaper and class president. "I was aware that guys were the heads of the class," says Peg Stimpson Gaillard, now an at-home mom in Tucson. "I didn't consciously step back and let them have those prizes, but I suppose I did subconsciously. It was just the way our minds were at that time."

The girls had the added disadvantage of having to accommodate themselves to a masculine culture that stemmed from Nobles' origins as a boys school. The newspaper, for example, was still called *The Nobleman*. "I thought they should change it to *The Nobility*," Kopelman jokes. "That's how ludicrous it was as a title for anything." But few other girls even noticed. Feminism was not a topic of conversation at Nobles, nor was it a course of action. Feminism was hardly more present at Winsor, but Winsor had plenty of active professional women to serve as role models for a more pertinent kind of feminism, by which women could be just as much figures of authority as men could. There were only three female high-level administrators at Nobles. Kopelman recalls a conversation with one faculty wife, who regretted that the school had taken any girls at all, since they were just going to get married and never accomplish anything. "I found that an astonishing perspective," Kopelman says.

In class, the Nobles girls sometimes discouraged them-

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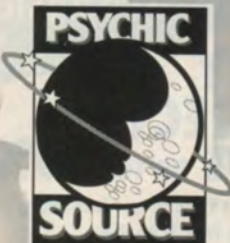
selves from participating too actively. Kopelman, widely described as the class genius, always had her hand in the air—and was stunned to see the girls as well as the boys giving her dirty looks. "They were the ones to police the feminine identity, more than the boys," she says. Other girls didn't always notice the inequities. Wendi Daniels, director of marketing and sales for United Media, says she didn't mind that she was one of only two girls among the 18 students taking advanced chemistry: "I didn't think about it." Similarly, Bettina Doulton, the manager of Fidelity Invest- *Continued on page 170*



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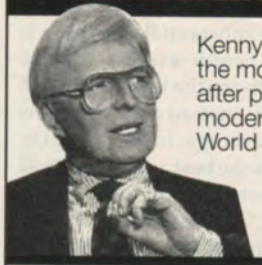
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ments' \$17.5 billion Puritan Fund and its \$15.5 billion Equity Income II Fund, doesn't remember how many girls there were in her physics class and had no idea that girls had been outnumbered by the boys two to one. "I was challenged by the atmosphere," she says. "It was very competitive, and for me that was a positive." Does she at least remember all the talk about guys? "Oh sure!" she says cheerfully. "I'm not a completely abnormal human being."

Nobles graduates like Daniels and Doulton have gone on to considerable public success. But, far more than the Winsor graduates, they seem to have been surprised by the inequities of the working world and stymied by them. While one might think that the experience of working with boys at Nobles would have amounted to practice for later life, it seems more to have set up false expectations. The boys at Nobles were "safe" in ways that men in business have proved not to be.

"At Nobles, I occasionally heard about women's liberation, and I wondered what these people were complaining about," says Daniels. "I couldn't really understand it. I figured they were just unhappy or unfulfilled. But then I graduated, and was I ever in for a rude awakening. I really wasn't prepared for the glass ceiling, for being a second-class citizen in the working world." Rosen was outraged to find the entertainment industry such a "boys club" when she first applied for a job with HBO. Even though she had already obtained business experience at Reebok, she had to start as a secretary. "You come out of a school like Nobles all idealistic and confident and believing in yourself, and guess what?" she says. "You get squashed."

As it happens, Daniels is friends with Winsor graduate Finn and admires her for being, as she says, "so sure of herself in the big bad business world." Finn herself acknowledges that the inequities of business were "shocking," but she quickly decided that she simply had to "deal with it" without further complaint. In her position at Calvin Klein, she now manages the worldwide product development of a multi-million-dollar business.

While Winsor has its share of graduates who are heavy-duty professionals,



it also has a number of women who consider success on their own terms. Dando's brother Evan, for example, has achieved international stardom as the lead singer for the Lemonheads, but she herself feels no obligation to measure her own accomplishments on his scale. She says she's entirely satisfied as a social worker. Lefkowitz now works as a privately employed child-care provider. "I've always felt that I should be able to do what I want to do. My being female in no way limits me. Right now this is what I want to do."

Would these women make the same school choices for their daughters? All the Winsor women say yes, categorical-

ly. Even Catherine Szabo Bishop, a specialist in Victorian clothing, who expresses the least enthusiasm for her Winsor years, at the time believed so deeply in the principle of single-sex education for women that she went on to single-sex Wheaton College and felt personally betrayed when the college announced that it was going coed. "That was terrible," Bishop says.

**The single-sex experience can lift girls up, make them feel stronger and braver than they did before. They feel, for a time, what many women too rarely or never feel: that the world really was created for them.**

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Most of the Nobles women, likewise, said that they would send their daughters to a coed school, but not all of them. Virginia Childs, an education coordinator for a reproductive health clinic, says that her husband "fantasized" about sending their kids to Nobles. "But I go, 'Oh my God!'" As an adult, she sees the value of an all-girls school, although she believes that it might be hard to convince a teenager of its merits.

It may take 15 years for a woman to fully appreciate the lessons learned in a single-sex school. Obviously, all the Nobles girls survived the coeducational experience and, like most women across the nation, still look back fondly on their school days. But are they a dying breed? As researchers are increasingly finding, it seems it is the rare student—the one who comes into a coed setting highly motivated and self-confident—who truly breezes through. For

are not likely to disappear in favor of all-boys and all-girls schools any time soon, nor should they. Bailey, for one, is leery of the development of too many clones of the Young Women's Leadership School in East Harlem. "Separate has never been equal in our society," she points out, and given the current power structure, it is clear which schools would likely get shortchanged. She recommends that coed schools adopt more of the all-girls ethos—providing more female administrators, making sure that girls can be leaders, cutting down on boys' tendencies to dominate and disrupt classroom behavior.

In short, the more a school acts like an all-girls school, the happier its female graduates will be. I'd go further: It would be best for women if their school could actually be for girls only. Curiously, the literature suggests that it doesn't particularly matter when the same-sex experience comes—in middle school, high school or college—so long as it does. To judge by the Winsor graduates' experience, the single-sex school is like a retreat—a peaceful time from which to draw strength for years to come. A woman's life can be richer for it. ♡

JOHN SEDGWICK is SELF's national correspondent and the father of two daughters, ages six and 13, who attend coeducational public schools.



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