

GENDER AGENDA

Laura Sutherland speaks to some of the capital's top preps' heads about the benefits of a single-sex education



BOYS' ZONE
EATON HOUSE SCHOOL
BELGRAVIA EMPLOYS AN
INNOVATIVE APPROACH
TO TEACHING ITS PUPILS

“The fact that it used to be a library just adds to the magic,” Suzy Dixon smiles, exuding excitement about Francis Holland Junior School’s new base. “That means it’s always been a place of learning.”

And the headteacher has good reason to be delighted, as this September, the all-girls’ prep will reopen in a spectacular Victorian Grade II-listed building just off the King’s Road. Currently the Hampshire School and a spacious public library once upon a time, the 20,000sq ft Manresa Road site is ideal for the next phase in the school’s vision: not only will there be extra space to accommodate two-form entry, there’s also a wealth of new facilities, from more external space for outdoor learning, a vast library (naturally) and a science laboratory to dedicated art and music rooms, as well as a much larger, L-shaped hall, offering adaptable space for special events and school productions.

“It just needs a touch of prep-school fun,” Dixon adds, explaining that artists with children’s interiors’ experience are working to bring out the wonder of the building’s period features with playful decorative flourishes, such as colourful staircase spindles, clouds

on ceilings and gold-trimmed fan lights to bring sunlit sparkle to the halls.

While Francis Holland Sloane Square’s junior and senior schools have

shared values, resources and staff, they run separately, albeit currently on the same site (prep pupils go through the same process as external candidates if applying to the senior school), and parents have told Dixon that they view the prep school as “their little secret” hidden on the senior school’s patch.

It’s hard to imagine that Francis Holland Prep will remain such a hidden gem in its new space. “This move will allow us to distinguish ourselves and grow into our own skin,” says Dixon, “the school and its building will have a symbiotic relationship – this is a dynamic, beautiful, fun space for girls to learn, play and grow.”

When I ask her if she believes that the school’s small, single-sex intake is part of what makes Francis Holland Junior School so special, she answers: “There are excellent co-ed and single-sex options in London, but girls do thrive here with our strong focus on pastoral care and emotional intelligence. There’s a tendency, when boys are around, for girls to hang back a bit. What’s more, I believe girls are more relaxed and able to have more fun when they’re together.”

Queen’s Gate’s principal Amy Wallace believes the benefits of a single-sex education for girls are huge, saying, “You only need to go into a toy shop to see how early youngsters are told ‘what’s for girls and what’s for boys’, and these messages are so pervasive. There’s a reason why girls are more likely to take STEM A-levels or play football or enjoy debating club in an all-girls’ school than in a co-ed.” With regards to the benefits of starting a child’s schooling in a single-sex environment, she believes that the lack of limitations from the

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WHAT STEREOTYPES?

GIRLS PLAY FOOTBALL AT FRANCIS HOLLAND; BOYS ENJOY BONDING AT ST PHILIP'S SCHOOL; QUEEN'S GATE PUPILS EMBRACE STEM LESSONS



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outset is an unbeatable foundation: “From the start of a girl’s educational journey here, there are no barriers to what they can do or be – that’s so inspiring.”

She also notes that boys and girls learn in different ways, with girls learning best through discussion and exploration, because more areas of their brain are dedicated to verbal functions, while a greater part of boys’ cerebral cortex are concerned with spatial and mechanical functioning, meaning their concentration spans are usually shorter than girls. Without boys, Wallace believes girls can flourish and take intellectual risks unhindered: “At Queen’s Gate, we have confident, articulate public speakers, high volumes of STEM students and an enthusiastic uptake of football, cricket and fencing among our sports options.”

Offering a male perspective, all-boys’ school St Philip’s head Alexander Thomas agrees with Dixon that “Single-sex education isn’t for everyone, but for some it’s ideal,” adding “children generally feel freer to take risks than they would in a co-ed space at a crucial point in their personal development.” He also concurs with Wallace on the point of gender stereotyping, pointing out that a single-sex prep environment allows them to grow beyond these expectations, and simply focus on becoming the best version of themselves.

Thomas explains: “Boys, broadly speaking, tend to develop slightly later than girls, so an all-boys’ space protects their self-esteem until they find their feet without feeling like they’ve fallen behind,” adding that at St Philip’s: “We set up each day to suit the needs of boys who require lots of exercise and fresh air, while gearing lessons to how they learn most effectively. Boys thrive on shorter, punchier tasks and lots of variety.”

Ross Montague, head of fellow all-boys’ school Eaton



House Prep Belgravia agrees that boys benefit from a tailored learning structure: “Boys respond well to our programme, which combines traditional academic excellence with an innovative and entrepreneurial spirit,” adding, “Our boys learn that confidence, teamwork, personal motivation and an ability to hold and form your own opinions are vital for success.”

He also identifies, that just as girls feel freer in a single-sex space, “Boys are also able to be more competitive and more comfortably show emotions when together. They work and play naturally, guided by a curriculum designed to appeal to their interests.”

Back at Francis Holland, Dixon has some final words about the new building. “What’s been interesting about this move,” she muses, “is that I’ve realised that it’s less about bricks and mortar and more about our community of girls and what they need.” Strong pastoral care, a nurturing community and expanding facilities? There’s plenty of magic here already. **L** fhs-sw1.org.uk/junior; queensgate.org.uk/junior-school; stpschool.co.uk; eatonhouseschools.com/belgravia