



Gender matters

Facing the challenge in girls' schools

GIRLS ARE EMERGING FROM GIRLS' SCHOOLS WITH A LARGE MEASURE OF SUCCESS, BUT GIRLS AND GIRLS' SCHOOLS STILL FACE DIFFICULTIES, AS MEG HANSEN EXPLAINS.

SPEAKING LATE LAST YEAR AT A FORUM conducted by the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency, John McFarlane, Chief Executive Officer of the ANZ Bank at the time, made the blunt – but by no means surprising – point that the reason why so few women were getting to senior positions was because men did not promote them.

For anyone involved in the business of teaching girls, and especially those working in a girls' school, the implications of such a statement are profound and constitute one in a range of complex challenges that currently face girls, as individuals,

and girls' schools as educational institutions.

The first and perhaps the most disquieting of these challenges is the contradiction between what we as school teachers and administrators tell our girls they can do and what they actually face in terms of gender politics, social structures and economic realities once they leave school.

On the one hand, it's increasingly the case that girls are emerging from girls' schools in particular as highly successful. Not only has there been a significant increase in retention rates and numbers entering tertiary studies, but girls have become very success-

ful academically. Typically, they are high achievers equipped with a range of skills that will enable them to function effectively in adulthood.

At girls' schools in particular we teach them in an environment where we assume they will take gender equality as a given. We teach them to be responsible global citizens and to speak up for themselves and others. We expect them to take on leadership roles and we communicate a range of messages designed to build confidence, self reliance and independence. Not surprisingly, girls flourish in these environments.

In an environment where competition for public and private resources and support is increasing, girls' schools must continue to develop new and imaginative strategies that will ensure they are able to continue providing educational settings in which girls take centre stage.

benefits of single-sex education is that the genders are free to explore the full range of educational opportunities offered to them.

A third challenge for girls' schools is one that relates to issues of size and economic viability. Girls' schools simply do not have the resources available to boys' and co-ed schools. The effects of such inherent disadvantage and the existence of barriers to fundraising mean that, when compared with boys' schools, many girls' schools must operate in an ongoing environment of under-resourcing. Even the most cursory glance at what some might interpret as the over-resourcing of some boys' schools might suggest a new formula for government support and a new paradigm for fundraising.

In an environment highly influenced by the need to continually upgrade and expand facilities, girls' schools in particular face increasing pressures to maintain and grow enrolments, and to increase their income through fundraising campaigns and other activities such as bequest programs and gifts from former alumnae. By themselves, tuition fees and government grants are often insufficient to cover the costs of building programs and this means that finding additional funds becomes an integral part of school operations.

Despite their widespread adoption, existing models of fundraising and philanthropic support that have proven successful in boys' and co-ed schools are not always appropriate for a girls' school. Assumptions about boys' ongoing relationship with their old school and the ways in which this can translate into a lifetime of giving back to their old school don't necessarily apply in the same way in a girls' school.

What for a male may well be a relationship of mutual benefit that extends way beyond Year 12, may be something quite different for a female. The ways in which a boy may be encouraged to keep in contact with his old school are often more difficult to maintain in a girls' school. Within the confines of a school community such things as a public awareness of generations of boys bearing the same surname, for example,

does not exist in a girls' school – despite the existence of multi-generational attendance at many of these schools. In practice, one consequence of the differing relationships enjoyed by former students with their old school is that models of fundraising that may work well in a male environment don't always convert with equal success to a girls' school. When compared with the situation prevailing in many girls' schools where much of the fundraising is concentrated on the current parent population, a boys' school can expect, and will frequently receive, philanthropic support from both its male alumni and existing parents, many of whom are also alumni of the school.

The challenges for girls' schools, then, are many and varied. In an environment where competition for public and private resources and support is increasing, girls' schools must continue to develop new and imaginative strategies that will ensure they are able to continue providing educational settings in which girls take centre stage, for surely this is what we in girls' schools understand to be our core business. As teachers and educators we are creating an institutional and classroom setting in which girls can express themselves freely and frequently, develop higher order thinking skills and dare to take on new challenges in an environment that is both dynamic and supportive. ■

Meg Hansen is the principal of Lauriston Girls' School, Melbourne.

Lauriston Girls' School principal Meg Hansen and students: the challenges for girls and girls' schools are many and varied. Picture courtesy Lauriston Girls' School, Melbourne.

LINKS: www.lauriston.vic.edu.au

FURTHER READING

Sax, L. (2005). Why Gender Matters: What parents and teachers need to know about the emerging science of sex differences. New York: Doubleday.