

# Girl Power

Shelford Girls Grammar is a school that has been a leading advocate for single sex education. Principal, Polly Flanagan, explains the advantages.



It is rare these days to find a small, boutique girls' school in an education system awash with large co-educational campuses. Many have swung towards co-education for economic viability reasons, but for 112 years, Shelford has maintained the philosophy that girls' only schools best suit female learning needs. This is based on the educational research findings that boys and girls have different cognitive, social, physiological and developmental growth rates.

Polly Flanagan says the campus is limited to 600, from early learning to Year 12 and the independent Anglican school takes a modern, well researched approach to tailoring its programmes for girls. This is underpinned by what Polly describes as a time when parenting "is so much tougher." Heavy use of social networking sites, high levels of personal computer use and access to television, has created fallout for the development of relationships. And, having taught in all education sectors – government, Catholic, segregated classes and independents – Polly says she firmly believes that there are specific distinctions between how boys and girls learn.

By concentrating solely on programmes that inspire high levels of individual participation, she says, stereotypes about what boys and girls can and can't do are eliminated and it allows girls to grow in confidence. "The old argument that girls need to interact with boys in a school environment doesn't really apply any more. The social networking and connectedness means they do have relationships with boys. But, in a small school community such as this, there are fewer daily social pressures and distractions, particularly through the teenage years."

High levels of participation are important at Shelford. The girls take on all the leadership roles, be it in arts or drama, where they will fill the male as well as female roles, or sport, where the emphasis is not so much on winning as it is on having a common vision.

Research carried out by the Australian National University (ANU) and Essex University has shown that teenage girls who attend single-sex schools are more competitive than those attending



co-educational schools. ANU's Professor, Alison Booth, and Dr Patrick Nolan from Essex asked 260 boys and girls to enter a competition that involved risky economic decision-making. The girls from the single-sex schools behaved more competitively compared with those from co-ed schools and family background was not a significant factor.

"The 21st century world that our students will inhabit will be an unpredictable, rapidly changing and demanding one. We believe that girls can be best prepared for this in a girls' school," Polly says.

Parents can explore these concepts further during the school's open days. Polly says that they won't find expensive marketing programmes, but rather "a small school with a cottage garden" where the emphasis is on relationships, the quality of the teaching and learning. "It is a great leap of faith as to where you put your child for their education. Parents should trust their instincts and really get a feel for a place first," Polly says.

Further information: [www.shelford.vic.edu.au](http://www.shelford.vic.edu.au)