

National Coalition of Girls' Schools



# Steeped in Learning: The Student Experience at All-Girls Schools

By Richard A. Holmgren, Ph.D., Vice President for Information Services and Assessment, Allegheny College





# Steeped in Learning: The Student Experience at All-Girls Schools

A REPORT PREPARED FOR THE NATIONAL COALITION OF GIRLS' SCHOOLS

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## The robust learning environment encountered by students at all-girls schools is highlighted by a recent survey of high school students.

In the spring of 2013, a total of 2,013 students attending member schools of the National Coalition of Girls' Schools (NCGS) participated in the High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE), which explores facets of students' attitudes, behaviors, and school experiences that are known to affect learning. Also participating in the HSSSE study were 5,210 girls from coeducational independent schools and 5,741 girls at coeducational public schools. The resulting report compares the experience of girls at all-girls schools with that of girls enrolled in coeducational institutions.

### Overview of the Results

The survey reveals that girls attending all-girls schools are more likely to have an experience that supports their learning than are girls attending coeducational schools. In particular, girls attending all-girls schools report:

- having higher aspirations and greater motivation than their female peers at coeducational independent and public schools.
- being challenged to achieve more than girls at coeducational independent and public schools.
- being more likely to engage actively in the learning process than their female peers at coeducational independent and public schools.
- being more likely than girls at coeducational public schools to engage in activities that prepare them for the rigors of the real world.

The girls' responses provide unequivocal support for the value of an all-girls educational environment.

- more frequently encountering a learning environment that welcomes an open and safe exchange of ideas than girls at coeducational independent and public schools.
- gaining more facility than their peers at coeducational independent and public schools with core academic skills such as writing, speaking, critical thinking, and independent learning.
- experiencing higher levels of support from their classmates, teachers, and school personnel than girls at coeducational public schools.

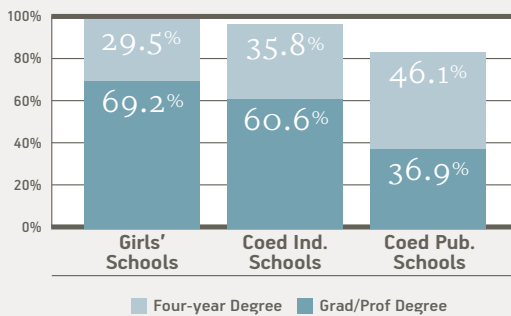
In the pages that follow, these facets of girls' experiences at all-girls schools are explored in more detail.

# Key Findings

## Girls' Expectations Matter

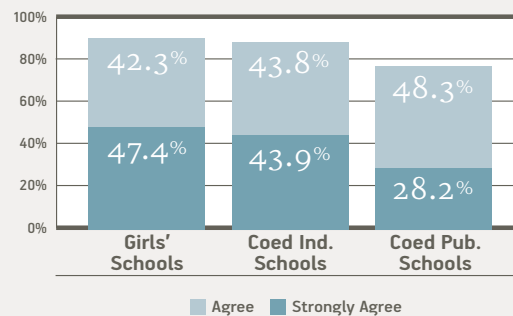
The attitudes and aspirations of a student's peers have a powerful influence on the student's own outlook. Students at all-girls schools are steeped in an environment in which learning and success are valued. **They have higher aspirations and greater motivation than their female peers at coeducational independent and public schools.**

### The highest degree girls expect to earn



**Virtually all** students at all-girls schools expect to earn a four-year degree and more than two-thirds expect to earn a graduate or professional degree. This compares favorably to the response of girls enrolled at coeducational independent and public schools.

### Pride in quality of school work



Students at all-girls schools set high standards for themselves. Ninety percent agree with the statement, I take pride in the quality of my school work, which compares favorably to the response of girls at coeducational independent and public schools.



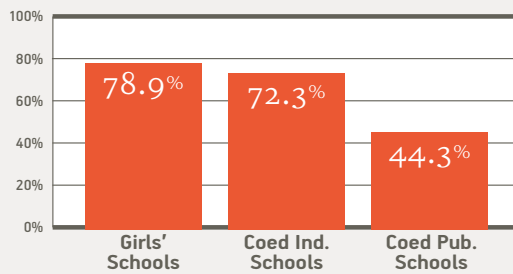
### Desire to learn and succeed outside of school

When asked what motivates them, **94.9%** of students at all-girls schools (compared to 93.5% of girls at coeducational independent schools and 86.7% of girls at coeducational public schools) agree or strongly agree they are **motivated by their desire to succeed** outside of school and **83.9% by their desire to learn** (compared to 81.0% of girls at coeducational independent schools and 66.1% of girls at coeducational public schools).

# Teachers' Expectations Matter

For optimal learning, teachers' expectations must align with student goals. We know that students at all-girls schools have ambitious goals, so their teachers have the responsibility of creating an environment that challenges them to achieve their dreams. **Students at all-girls schools are challenged to achieve more than their female peers at coeducational independent and public schools.**

## Do most classes challenge girls to their full potential?

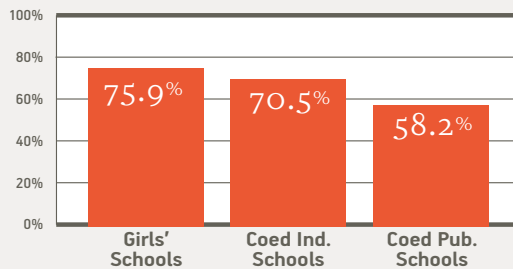


More than 75% of girls' school students report most of their classes **challenge them to achieve their full academic potential**. A similar proportion report **giving their maximum effort** in most of their courses. In both cases, the challenge and effort are higher than that reported by their female peers at coeducational independent and public schools.



Learning is more than rote memorization, and virtually all students (97.9%) at girls' schools report their schools emphasize understanding information and ideas in their classes. Girls at coeducational schools (96.6% at independent and 84.5% at public) do not report as much emphasis on understanding.

## Do girls give maximum effort in most of their classes?

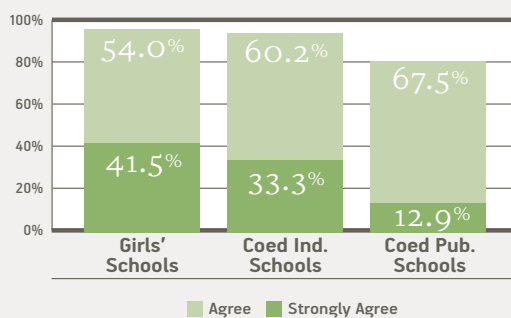


**Students at all-girls schools are challenged to achieve more.**

## Engaged Learning Matters

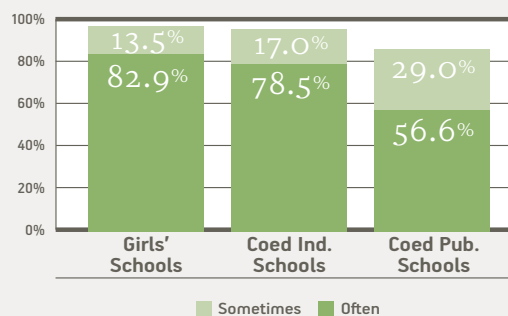
Learning is an active process, and deep learning requires that students engage with the material to make it their own. **Students attending all-girls schools are more likely to engage actively in the learning process** than their female peers at coeducational independent and public schools.

### Degree to which girls agree, “Teachers engage me in classroom discussions”



Girls' school students report **more engagement** with course-related **speaking and writing** than their female peers at coeducational independent and public schools. In particular, **over 95%** report **participating actively in class discussions**.

### Frequency with which girls feel they attend class with all assignments completed



**More than three-quarters** of girls at all-girls schools report often attending class with **all assignments completed**, and fewer than 5% report rarely completing assignments before class, a marked contrast to girls at coeducational public schools.



**Students attending all-girls schools are more likely to engage actively in the learning process.**

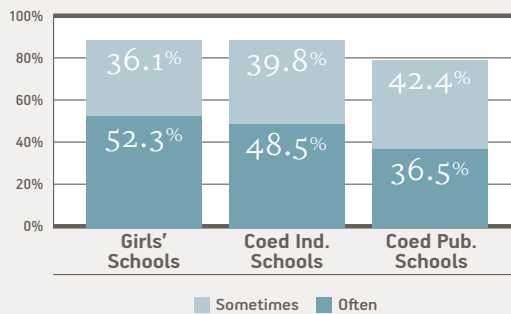
### Formal writing assignments and preparation

**Over 96%** of girls' school students report **completing formal writing assignments** (compared to 94.0% of girls at coeducational independent schools and 84.4% of girls at coeducational public schools), and **over 85%** report **preparing multiple drafts** of their written work (compared to 82.7% of girls at coeducational independent schools and 73.9% of girls at coeducational public schools).

## Preparing for the World Outside the Classroom Matters

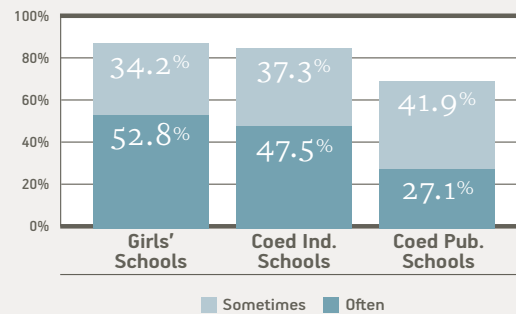
In the world outside of school, the answers are not always found in the text. Solving problems requires knowing how to find answers beyond the established sources and being able to connect ideas from one area to those from another. Sometimes, there are no clear answers, and it is important that students learn to deal with that ambiguity. **Students attending all-girls schools are more likely to engage in activities that prepare them for the rigors of the real world than girls at coeducational public schools.**

Frequency with which girls feel they worked on something that required research outside assigned texts



All-girls schools prepare students for the world beyond school by requiring outside research and challenging them to grapple with problems with no clear solution. Such experiences are more common for girls at girls' schools than for girls at coeducational public schools.

Frequency with which girls feel they discussed questions in class that have no clear answers

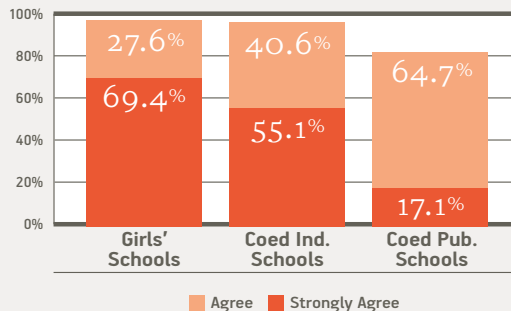


Girls' schools encourage students to link concepts across problem domains. Over 80% of students at girls' schools report having connected ideas from one area to another (compared to 77.1% of girls at coeducational independent schools and 61.2% of girls at coeducational public schools).

## Safety Matters

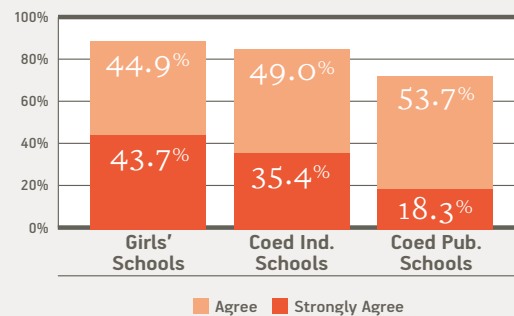
Deep learning requires that students feel safe to express themselves and their ideas. **Girls' school students are more likely than their female peers at coeducational independent and public schools to experience an environment that welcomes an open and safe exchange of ideas.**

### Do girls feel safe at their school?



**Almost all** students at girls' schools report **feeling safe** at their schools.

### Do girls feel comfortable being themselves at their school?



**Over 88%** of girls' school students report they are **comfortable being themselves** at school, which means they are **free to focus their energies on their learning** rather than self protection, more so than their female peers at coeducational independent and public schools.



Over 86% of girls' school students report being less likely to be bullied by classmates than their female peers at coeducational independent schools (83.0%) and public schools (73.3%).

### Are girls' opinions respected at their school?

An atmosphere of respect provides girls' school students the opportunity to share their views openly and learn from peers. Girls' school students report **giving and receiving respect at higher rates** than do their female peers at coeducational independent and public schools.

Nearly 92% of students at girls' schools report their **school contributed to treating people with respect** (compared to 89.4% of girls at coeducational independent schools and 73.6% of girls at coeducational public schools), and **86.7% feel their opinions are respected at their school** (compared to 82.9% of girls at coeducational independent schools and 58.1% of girls at coeducational public schools).

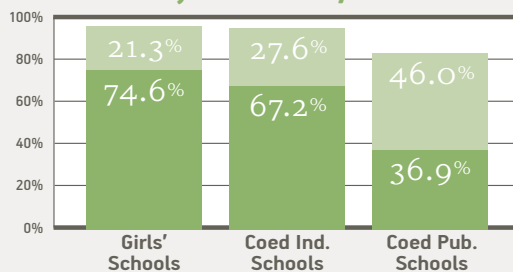


## Results Matter

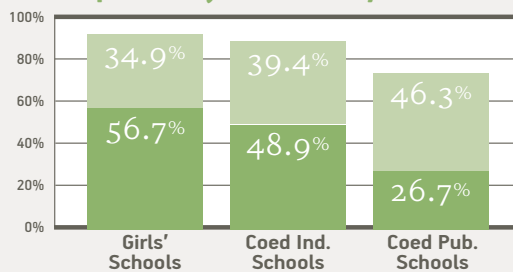
Student self-assessments suggest girls' school students' high aspirations and the robust learning environment provided by their schools are critical in students developing the skills they need if they are to succeed in college, which virtually all students at girls' schools aspire to do. **Students at all-girls schools report greater gains on core academic and life skills than do their female peers at coeducational independent and public schools.**

### How much do girls feel their school work contributed to them...

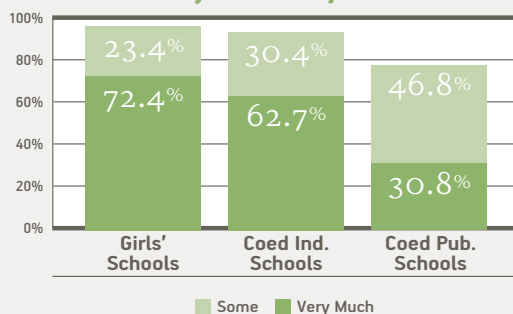
#### ...writing effectively?



#### ...speaking effectively?



#### ...thinking critically?



Almost 95% of girls' school students report their school work has contributed to successfully reading and understanding challenging materials, which compares favorably to girls at coeducational independent schools (92.5%) and public schools (76.9%).

### Teamwork and independent learning abilities

Students at all-girls schools report their school work both contributed to them **working well with others** to complete a task and to **learning independently**. Nearly **91%** report **developing teamwork abilities** (compared to 88.4% of girls at coeducational independent schools and 77.3% of girls at coeducational public schools), and **93.9%** report **learning to work independently** (compared to 91.4% of girls at coeducational independent schools and 79.3% of girls at coeducational public schools).

**Almost all students at all-girls schools report significant gains in their writing, speaking, critical thinking, reading comprehension, teamwork, and independent learning abilities.**

## Support Matters

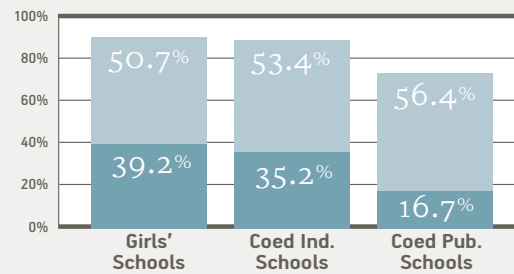
All-girls school students expect a lot of themselves, and their schools work hard to create an environment that challenges girls to achieve their full potential. Faculty and administrators at all-girls schools recognize students need support if they are to thrive. **Students attending all-girls schools experience higher levels of support from their classmates, teachers, and administrators than do their female peers at coeducational public schools.**



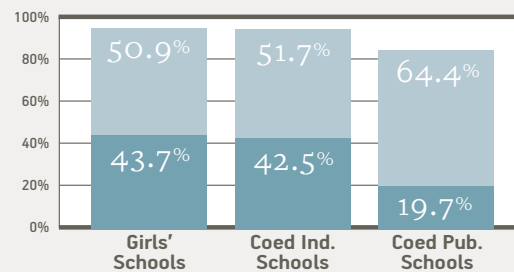
To be successful, students need more than just a feeling of support. That support must translate into actions geared toward student success. Girls' school students (95.8%) report receiving more frequent feedback on their assignments and other course work than girls at coeducational independent schools (92.9%) and public schools (79.5%).

### Do girls agree they are supported by...

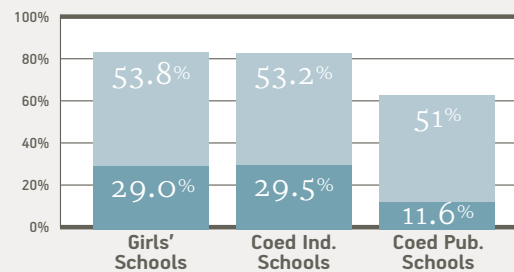
#### ...other students?



#### ...teachers?



#### ...school administrators?



Agree Strongly Agree

**Students attending all-girls schools experience higher levels of support from their classmates, teachers, and administrators.**

## Conclusions

The HSSSE study identifies several areas in which **all-girls education appears to better prepare female students for success, especially in terms of their aspirations, engagement, readiness for the real world, and support of their endeavors.**

**Based on the data reported by girls attending all-girls schools, we can conclude that these students compared to their female peers at coeducational schools:**

- have higher aspirations and greater motivation.
- are challenged to achieve more.
- are more actively engaged in the learning process.
- are engaged in activities preparing them for the world outside of school.
- feel more comfortable being themselves and expressing their ideas.
- report greater gains on core academic and life skills.
- feel as or more supported in their endeavors.



### About the Author

As Vice President for Information Services and Assessment at Allegheny College, Rick Holmgren heads Allegheny's Learning, Information, and Technology Services group, which includes the Library, Computing Services, and Institutional Research. He came to Allegheny in 1988 after earning his Ph.D. in mathematics from Northwestern University. A tenured member of the mathematics department, Dr. Holmgren accepted an administrative position as Associate Dean of the College with primary responsibility for faculty development in 1999. Since then, he has served in a variety of administrative roles including Director of First-Year/Sophomore programs and advising, chair of Allegheny's accreditation review team, assisting with Allegheny's strategic planning efforts, and founding the Learning Commons. In 2005, he attended the Frye Institute and was appointed head of the Learning, Information, and Technology Services group shortly thereafter. In addition to working in the Dean's office, Dr. Holmgren serves on Allegheny's Administrative Executive Committee.

### About NCGS

The National Coalition of Girls' Schools (NCGS) is a leading advocate for girls' education with a distinct commitment to the transformative power of all-girls schools. The Coalition acts at the forefront of educational thought, collaborating and connecting globally with individuals, schools, and organizations dedicated to empowering girls to be influential contributors to the world.

### About HSSSE

The High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE) is a comprehensive survey on student engagement and school climate issues. The Center for Evaluation and Education Policy (CEEP) at Indiana University works with schools, districts, national organizations, and foundations to administer the surveys. Since 2003, HSSSE has been used to measure the engagement of high school students with more than 400,000 students in over 40 states completing the survey between 2006 and 2013.

The ultimate goal of HSSSE is to strengthen student engagement in educationally purposeful activities in secondary schools nationally. HSSSE provides information that can be used to generate discussions on teaching and learning and to guide student improvement initiatives.

To learn more about the unique advantages  
of all-girls schools, visit [www.ncgs.org](http://www.ncgs.org).

National Coalition of Girls' Schools

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