



# The classrooms where diamonds are a girl's – and boy's – best friend

**Lucy Hodges** reports on the growing trend for UK independent schools to offer both single-sex and co-education, separating children at key points to take into account the speed at which each gender matures

Pupils at Dame Allan's School in Newcastle cut a dash by wearing a red diamond-shaped badge on their blazers. No prizes for guessing why. They attend a diamond school, one of a dozen such independent schools in Britain which are educating boys and girls in the same institution but giving them single-sex education during puberty.

"The key thing is we believe boys and girls grow up in different ways

and have differing needs," says Dame Allan's principal Dr John Hind. "Girls grow up faster. They mature earlier than boys, and their learning styles are different."

Antony Faccinello, warden of Forest School in East London, agrees. "Boys want to be less abstract and to have things presented concretely," he says. "With the diamond we can really focus on learning and teaching. The benefits are massive."

Diamond schools are so-called because of the shape of their structures:

the sexes are educated together at the beginning, when they are in prep and pre-prep school, and at the end when they have grown up and learnt how to socialise with one another. But in the middle boys and girls are in separate classes for most – if not all – their lessons.

The precise details vary but the basic idea of co-ed junior years, single-sex for senior school and a co-ed sixth form is the model.

There are two types of diamond school: the two-site and the single



girls', so modern science is reinforcing what teachers have noticed for a long time.

Why do schools go diamond? The answer is largely pragmatic but it's also laced with arguments about what is best for children from a pedagogic viewpoint.

Schools merge and change often for financial reasons. In cases where a boys' school is joining with a girls', staff are experts in single-sex teaching, believing that it works well. Parents also favour it for certain age groups, and their views have to be taken into account.

**'We can really focus on learning. The benefits are massive'**

**'It's a single-sex education relevant to the 21st century'**

"The diamond structure liberates these groups from negative peer pressure," says Kevin Carson, co-interim head of The Grammar School at Leeds. "I have worked in different kinds of schools and have seen the pressure to perform and the distraction that the opposite sex brings. What the diamond does is it gives boys and girls more chance to flourish – and it's more inclusive."

Like Brentwood, The Grammar School at Leeds has seen girls excelling at sciences and maths. It also boasts three women heads of department in maths, biology and chemistry. Carson wonders if this is part of the diamond effect.

The 1600-pupil Stamford Endowed Schools in Lincolnshire went diamond for pedagogical reasons, according to the head of the boys' section Will Phelan. "It was the desire to have a much cleaner and educationally sharper way of doing things. We're the only boys and girls school in our area. I really like the fact that children start at age three and go through to the age of 18."

Some schools have an eye to positioning themselves in a competitive

site. The former come about through the merger of two schools in a town. Boys and girls are taught on separate sites from 11 to 16 and in the sixth form move between the two.

The single-site model arises from admitting the opposite gender into single-sex schools. In these boys and girls are taught in separate classes in the same building, but come together for lunch.

"It works well," says Ian Davies, headmaster of Brentwood, which began taking girls in 1988. "Pupils in the senior school get together for music, drama, CCF and Duke of

Edinburgh awards. They are only separated for lessons."

Brentwood has noticed girls gain real confidence in English and maths this way, and go on to study engineering and physics at university. "It enables us to focus on what might be seen as weaknesses in the genders, for example, girls are less spatially aware than boys and boys need help with communication skills," says Davies.

These are not simply the opinions of heads. Recent research into adolescent brains shows that boys' brains develop at a slower rate than



**'We have grown in confidence'**

**Beth Lovett, 17, is head girl of Berkhamsted School in Hertfordshire, having entered the prep school eight years ago with her twin brother Chris.**

"My parents chose Berkhamsted largely because it was a diamond school. They wanted my brother and me to be educated equally, with similar opportunities. They didn't want us to be known as the twins and to be compared with one another.

In the prep school, girls were educated with boys but I was in a different class from my brother. That worked well. In the senior school we were taught completely separately from the boys but came together for sport



and school trips as well as Duke of Edinburgh awards and the CCF. That allowed us to flourish in our own ways. Chris was always more academic than me. I was the sporty one. Many teachers didn't know we were twins. Being apart from 11 to 16 enabled us to develop at our own rates.

It's been great in the sixth form when all students come together again. We have grown in confidence, and we did sport, music and drama together all along, so we knew one another and get on reasonably well. It's important for us to join together at this age because you become more comfortable being around boys – and boys with girls – which makes you ready for life and university.

Chris and I are in different houses but take some of the same subjects. We both took economics and maths AS-level last year and are planning to go to university – but not the same one, perhaps partly due to the confidence and individuality encouraged by the diamond structure."



**'University – and life – is co-educational'**



**Michael Bond is vice principal of education at Berkhamsted School, an 1,800-pupil school in Hertfordshire with a diamond structure. Boys and girls are taught co-educationally in the prep school and the sixth form but separately between the ages of 11 and 16.**

"A diamond school makes sense for parents who have children of both sexes and want them educated in the same institution but in a single-sex way during puberty.

You get the best of both worlds. Up to the age of 11, there are no reasons why boys and girls should be educated separately. When puberty hits, there's an educational argument for them to be in separate classes. Girls mature younger and have different learning styles from boys. Having boys around can be distracting just as being with girls can distract boys.

Boys appreciate and respond to clear, firm boundaries and don't mind if you tell them they have crossed the line. Girls don't respond as well to that kind of approach.

Once they are of sixth-form age there are strong educational reasons for girls and boys to come together: after all, life is co-educational, as is university."

marketplace. Clifton High School, a former all-girls' senior school in Bristol, looked long and hard at how it needed to change, visiting 20 schools to examine different models of schooling.

"We concluded that the best was what we call diamond-edge," says principal Dr Alison Neill. "We did it to have a distinctive offer."

Clifton High now teaches children separately at the ages of 11 to 14 (Years 7, 8 and 9) in certain subjects – English, maths, physics, chemistry and biology. The Year 7 boys and girls also receive separate classes in foreign languages. For everything else, the children are taught co-educationally.

The Royal School Haslemere also teaches a variant of the diamond model. Like Clifton High it used to take boys up to junior school. Now it has become diamond, taking boys right through but separating the sexes out in Year 3, which is before most diamond schools introduce single-sex education.

Children are taught in single-sex classes up to the age of 16. "We are in transition," says the principal, Anne Lynch. "In 2018 we will be mixing our sixth form."

Another school in transition is the Stephen Perse Foundation in Cambridge, which is adopting a diamond-edge structure. From Year 9, girls and boys will be educated separately in English, maths and science. Pupils in Year 9 will also have separate lessons in the humanities and foreign languages as well as in sport and creative subjects.

"It puts us in a strong position in Cambridge," says principal Tricia Kelleher. "What we're offering is a single-sex education that is relevant to the 21st century."

The main drawback of the diamond structure is that it is often more costly to lay on classes for both sexes than to educate co-educationally. One school – Teesside High School – has ceased to be a diamond school in the last year. Small schools in particular find it difficult to lay on separate classes in subjects such as languages, which is why they continue to educate children co-ed in these classes.



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