

# Leading girls' education

Looking for the best start for your daughter? With nearly 140 years experience, no one knows more about educating girls than the GDST



The Girls' Day School Trust is the largest single educator of girls in the UK (and the UK's largest educational charity). We know about the education of girls – we understand how they learn and grow. We know the importance of building resilience and intellectual risk-taking, and we have a deep understanding of girls' education and pastoral needs at every stage in their development.

## A UNIQUE NETWORK

At the same time, because we have twenty-four schools and two Academies, we are an extraordinarily effective network for knowledge sharing and for the dissemination of best practice (whether it is excellence in hockey, supporting all our medical school applicants to obtain places, or maximising our girls' potential in public exams).

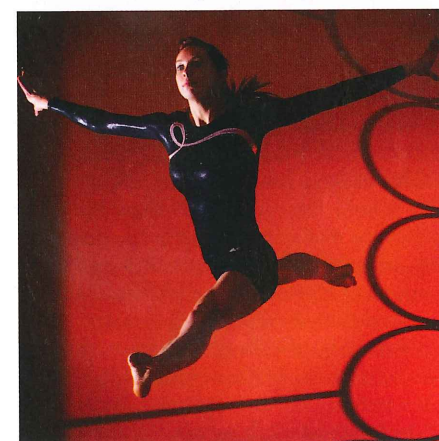
We are also able to develop and promote talented teachers through our network. In our schools girls can find their 'maximum stretch' – academically, physically and artistically – and being able to develop their talents uninhibitedly in a single sex environment is enormously important for them.

**"In our schools girls can find their 'maximum stretch' – academically, physically and artistically"**

## FULFILLING POTENTIAL

The results speak for themselves – GDST girls outperform the independent school sector as a whole at GCSE and A Level by a significant margin. Nearly all our Sixth Formers achieve their choice of higher education destination, and our Oxbridge and Russell Group results continue to be impressive, even as competition for places mounts. And our Key Stage 2 results show the outstanding performance of our Junior Schools.

All but two of our schools are all-through (3-18) and this gives us the unique advantage of being able to help a girl develop from her earliest years, building the foundations of curiosity, love of learning and adventurousness in the classroom and the sports field. Characteristics that will make the GDST school leaver so recognisable both to university tutors and future employers, for her confidence without arrogance, and her ability to take on every challenge, to 'feel the fear and do it anyway'.



**gdst** Girls' Day School Trust

For more information on the GDST please visit [www.gdst.net](http://www.gdst.net)



can be yourself. You can play Hamlet. You can be you – and that is immensely powerful in those formative years when you are setting yourself up for the future. It can be incredibly grounding."

In a single-sex environment, girls are far more likely to take risks – from the awkward teenager who feels shy about putting up her hand in class, to the go-getting extrovert who desperately wants to play the lead in the school musical."

Feeling comfortable about taking risks is one of the ingredients that makes girls schools successful," says Debbie Leonard. She recalls a recent gymnastics and dance display at her school in which 400 girls "of all shapes and sizes and ability levels" joined in. "It was great fun, but you couldn't have created that kind of atmosphere with the distraction of boys and girls being worried about how they looked."

Mary Pat Larman says this was one of the reasons why she chose to send her daughter Bridget to Croydon High School. "Girls are encouraged to pursue every subject area and there is no stereotype that science is a boys' subject or anything like that. It is just normal to see girls choosing maths or chemistry, just as it would be to see them choosing a language or social sciences."

This attitude is part of the culture that girls' schools work hard to create and maintain, says Helen Fraser. She points out that psychological differences between girls and boys mean they approach learning very differently with girls preferring to work more thoroughly while boys just want to race through everything returning to revise at a later date. Differences in the way boys and girls respond to feedback also has implications for teaching and learning styles. "When a girl gets a bad mark, she is much more likely to say it is because she is hopeless at maths," says Fraser. "A boy is more likely to blame it on the teacher." In

a single-sex school, teachers can tailor their practice much more closely to the needs of their students. "Girls are more risk averse than boys, and they need help building up their confidence. Without boys around, girls are less inclined to think 'if I put my hand up and say this, will I look silly?'"

As well as giving girls confidence, being educated in an all-girls' environment helps develop resilience, says Helen Wright.

"We've only started valuing women's education in the last 100 years and we have had the vote for less than that. There are a lot of pressures on women in terms of appearance, what your role is as a woman in society and whether you should work once you become a mother. We are still in the process of evolution as a society, and women do still face hurdles, so we need them to be as resilient as possible."

Debbie Leonard agrees, adding that the best gift girls can have is confidence and a can-do attitude. "We know there are still barriers out there but we tell our girls that someone has to be first. And if they fall at the first hurdle, we encourage them to get back up and try again. It's this that gives them the confidence to go into leadership and not be frightened of it."

And in single-sex schools, there are many opportunities for girls to take the lead. "They are the ones who represent the school in sport, read out the match reports and who compete in the debating team," says Larman. "They are expected to lead, so they step up to the plate."

But it is a difficult time to be a teenager. The rise in celebrity culture has created unrealistic role models for girls, many of whom now feel under pressure to be the prettiest, the cleverest and most accomplished in their friendship group. Earlier this year, the GSA published a book, *Your Daughter: a Guide to Raising Girls*, which contains advice from heads of independent schools on a range of topics such as eating disorders, teenage tantrums and tattoos.

But are issues like eating disorders and body image issues more common in all-girl environments? Apparently not, says Nicky Hutchinson, co-author of *Body Image In The Primary School* (Routledge). "In an age of Facebook accounts and mobile phones, children are forever changing their image on social networking sites. Computer games show various stereotypes: scantily clad women and masculinised aggressive men. These messages are being picked up by children regardless of whether they go to a single-sex school or not."

**Left** Most girls' schools have strong pastoral systems  
**Below** Girls' only education tends to extend childhood for longer



PHOTOS: COURTESY OF CHELTENHAM LADIES COLLEGE