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The Latest PISA Report: Girls' schools in Australasia continue to excel in providing academic, social and emotional benefits to girls

The latest PISA report has been analysed, and once again it shows that girls' schools are providing a valuable environment where girls can reach their full potential and are supported academically, socially and emotionally. PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) is a global study conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). It is an important benchmark that evaluates the educational performance of 15-year-old students in 81 countries and provides an assessment of student abilities in reading, mathematics and science. This PISA assessment was delayed from 2021 to 2022 due to disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Nonetheless, the results are valuable and give fantastic insight into the academic, social and emotional benefits of girls' schools in Australasia – especially in light of the wellbeing challenges faced since the pandemic.

The pandemic did impact students' learning outcomes, with the PISA report showing a reduction in scores for mathematics and reading across OECD countries. While the impact of COVID-19 did affect all students, including those at single-sex schools, students attending girls' schools had better academic and social outcomes compared to their co-educational counterparts. Concerningly, the pandemic disproportionately affected socio-economically disadvantaged students with a worsening of existing inequalities. This reinforces the important initiatives of schools that support students in this demographic. Shifting to online learning during this period was a challenge for many students. The report showed that key areas where students were impacted by this included online learning, lower levels of engagement and difficulty in managing their schoolwork independently. This was compounded by the distraction of digital devices, gaming and social media, although the positive learning environment at girls' schools plays an important role in helping students navigate these challenges.

A topic that has been forefront of mind for many is girls' safety amidst rising awareness of bullying in all forms. Research shows that students who feel safe at school perform better academically and report higher levels of life satisfaction and wellbeing – and PISA confirms this outcome. A safe and supportive school environment is essential to enhance not only educational outcomes, but to support girls' overall, holistic wellbeing. This contributes to ensuring that girls are prepared for success in their post-school lives. In particular, the PISA data showed that girls' schools achieved better outcomes for girls than co-educational schools in the areas of academic achievement and engagement, confidence and motivation, and addressing bullying, safety and belonging.

The data from PISA shows that students from girls' schools have higher educational outcomes and better learning experiences. This is consistent both before and after survey results are adjusted for socioeconomic factors, and continues the same trend seen in earlier PISA reports from 2015 and 2018. Girls at girls' schools scored higher on mathematics, reading and science measures, experienced less disruptions in classrooms and had higher tertiary aspirations. They are also more likely to engage in leadership, enjoy the process of cooperating with their peers and experienced lower levels of bullying. Girls' school students also report that they are less distracted by digital

devices during class, and importantly, are less anxious if these devices are not with them. These results demonstrate that in girls' schools, learning and wellbeing strategies designed to meet the unique needs of girls are helping them reach their full potential. Even when you consider the decline in academic results that occurred as a result of the pandemic, students at girls' schools did not have as stark a decline compared to girls in co-educational schools – further reinforcing the value of targeted learning strategies designed for girls.

A very enlightening area of the PISA results is the data on safety and belonging. Girls' school students had much better results when asked if they felt like they belonged and connected with their school community. They were also more likely to feel safe and less at risk of bullying and had higher rates of inclusivity. This was consistent across all forms of bullying, including physical bullying, spreading of rumours, and exclusion. The benefits of this are further enhanced by other non-academic skills the students have developed, including curiosity, assertiveness and perseverance. These are essential traits to help students overcome challenges and take advantage of opportunities. They help strengthen resilience and academic buoyancy, both of which can support a sense of belonging and can contribute to students persevering through challenges, obtaining a higher level of academic achievement, and staying in school longer. Collectively, this is a safer social environment with lower levels of peer-related bullying and intimidation that provides a foundation upon which girls can develop their emotional and social wellbeing as well as their academic successes.

These are more than academic results and survey figures. They reveal the benefits an all-girls environment offers to students at girls' schools. Yes, the academic outcomes shown in the PISA results are undoubtedly important. But the holistic wellbeing of our students is also paramount. When students feel safe and accepted, they are more likely to engage with their studies, participate in class, and focus on learning. Lower rates of bullying and greater feelings of belonging can help contribute to better academic and wellbeing outcomes for girls. In girls' schools, students don't face the disruptions that can occur in coeducational environments. With less pressures to conform to social expectations, and opportunities to willingly engage in leadership, girls can flourish in a learning environment that is more collaborative and supportive. And PISA shows that this is an environment girls' schools are providing.