

# Would your child thrive in a 'diamond method' school?

The single-sex or mixed debate might be over for parents. A third option has arrived, says *Guy Kelly*

**I**t is an age-old discussion had by parents all over the country as their children near the end of primary school. What would be the best option for secondary: single-sex, or co-educational?

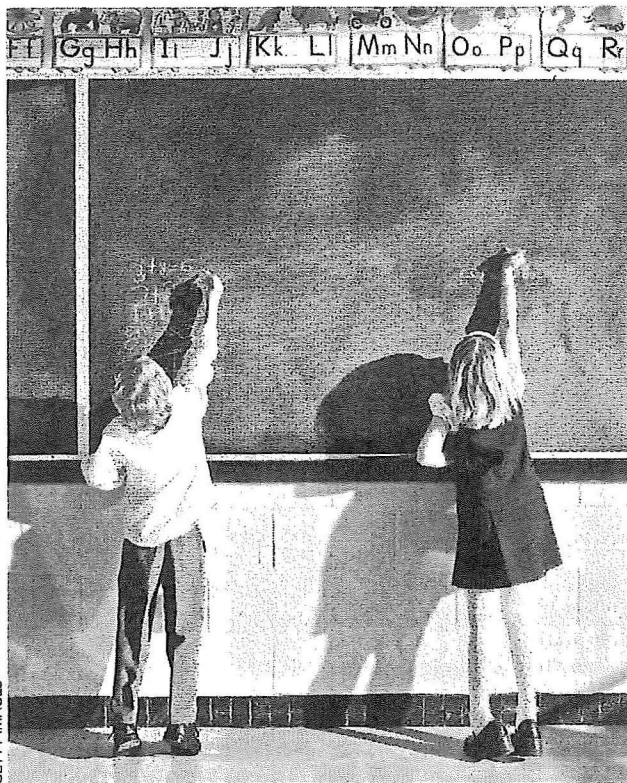
The arguments for and against each system will be familiar, and backed by enough evidence (both of an anecdotal and an academic kind) to reasonably conclude either way. Study after study has long suggested teenagers do better in single-sex classes, where there are fewer distractions presented by the opposite sex. On the other hand, some see co-eds as vital to the social development of a child, allowing them the chance to grow up comfortable around the other sex, building mixed-friend groups and adequately preparing them for university and adult life.

It's a dilemma, but for some parents, that "either/or" is becoming a thing of the past, as a small but increasing number of schools are presenting a third option: both?

The so-called "diamond" model of education generally involves mixed classes in lower or prep school years, before moving to single-sex academic lessons (albeit mixed for all extra-curricular activities outside the classroom) between the key years of 13 and 16, and then co-ed again for sixth form. Together, apart, back together – hence the diamond.

It is presented as the "best of both worlds", and proponents would say it is borne out by impressive results. In August, one of the diamond model's proudest advocates, New Hall School in Chelmsford, scored its best GCSE results to date – 54 per cent of grades at A\* or A – after being named the *TES* Independent School of the Year in 2016.

"I think the results we've had are as a direct result of students experiencing accelerated learning through the model, once the pressure of stereotypes has been taken off by single-sex classes and distraction is removed," says Katherine Jeffrey, New Hall School's principal. "As a general rule, we find



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that boys have higher energy levels and less concentration when they begin lessons, so might require some hands-on interaction tasks at the start, for instance, while girls don't need that.

"Without stereotypes, too, no one is afraid of certain A-level choices – that English and modern languages are for girls, maths and science are for boys – or think something might not be for them, thanks to their gender."

While New Hall and most of the dozen or so other schools that use a version of the diamond structure apply segregation to all lessons at secondary level, the latest adopter, Leweston School in Dorset, will be using it for only certain subjects.

Starting in September 2019, the school will switch to the diamond model only for Stem subjects – maths, biology, chemistry and physics – areas where they believe pupils can most benefit from single-sex teaching. For decades, various studies have suggested the low proportion of women taking Stem subjects at university is due to a lack of enjoyment at school, and whether that's the boys' fault or not, staff at Leweston hope the shake-up can improve that.

Kate Reynolds, head of the senior

school at Leweston, says: "In science, the research we had showed that boys tend to step forward and leap into experiments, getting the equipment and getting involved, while girls prefer to step back and watch. By separating them, we are levelling that out."

Shifting to the diamond model can be expensive to implement, which may hold back a widespread restructuring. Schools need to have the sufficient size for the scale of economy involved in dividing classes up to make sense, for instance, meaning the most common adopters have been institutions amalgamating separate boys and girls schools, or single-sex schools introducing pupils of the other sex for the first time.

Berkhamsted School in Hertfordshire, a product of a merger in 1996, has used the diamond system for more than 20 years, and sees it as a major attraction to parents. "It is a definite strength we have here, and something the parents like," says Liz Richardson, the head teacher of Berkhamsted Girls. "A lot of people might be reluctant to send their children to single-sex schools. This means it's like multiple schools in one. To have the best of both options makes a lot of sense."