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## The Gender Gap in U.S. Teen Experiences: Can girls' schools still make a difference?

At girls' schools, significant time is dedicated to ensuring students have the best opportunities available to achieve their full potential and enjoy a positive, holistic education experience. Research consistently shows that the benefits of girls' schools have a crucial impact for students. Recent data released by the Pew Research Centre shows that teenage girls and boys in the United States are facing different pressures, and have different experiences at school, but they still want the same things out of life. Yet they take different paths to achieve these outcomes. This research ran alongside a second study that asked U.S. adults their opinion on these topics. The outcomes are at times startling, and show that the role of girls' schools is as important as ever.

This research was based on surveys with U.S. teens aged between 13 and 17 years, and shows that despite some shared challenges, there are differences between the teenage experience for boys and girls. Unsurprisingly, anxiety and depression are major challenges reported by teens of both genders, but are more common among girls. Teens feel that boys and girls are equally impacted by pressures to get good grades at school, with girls facing substantially more pressure to look good and fit in socially.

The school environment was a major focus of the survey, with one in five students citing bullying at school as a problem, with similar numbers reporting drug use as a concern. Respondents also felt that physical fights and alcohol use are problems faced in schools. And there was a widespread perception that boys are more disruptive in classes than girls. Both boys and girls felt that girls are more likely to engage in leadership roles while in school.

Attitudes toward girls' extracurricular activities also came into focus, and highlighted the widespread belief that boys' sports teams are valued more than girls' teams. In fact, only two per cent of teens felt that girls' sports teams are valued more than their male equivalents. This was accompanied by all teens citing ongoing pressures to be engaged in extracurricular activities. They also referred to academic pressures as another influence on their school experience. Another widespread belief among survey participants was that girls achieve better in school than boys, and are more likely to speak up and answer questions in class.

While the survey results did not differentiate between students who attended girls' schools and coeducational schools, the attitudes towards friendship networks reinforce the importance of recent research on social networks in girls' schools. 64 per cent of teens in the study said they have between one and four close friends. Being able to turn to friends for emotional support was very important for students, especially girls. In fact, 95 per cent of girls responded that they have a close friend they trust enough to turn to for emotional support. Recent research has shown that social networks in girls' schools are much stronger than in coeducational environments. The importance of these networks for girls in this study reflects the importance of friendship networks, even when they are small in size.

Boys and girls largely have the same goals for their futures. 86 per cent want a job or career they enjoy, 69 per cent want close friends, and 58 per cent want to have a lot of money. There is substantially less emphasis on

marriage and children, and far more focus on job satisfaction, friendships and financial success compared to previous studies. Yet boys' and girls' planned paths to these goals are different. Girls are more likely to say they will pursue a four-year college degree, compared to vocational options, full time work or military service for boys.

Offering girls a wide range of pathways where they can freely and openly explore options to achieve their goals, including but not limited to tertiary study, is essential to supporting their holistic development.

Likewise, the development of friendship networks and a strong sense of school belonging has been shown to positively impact girls' success and motivation. Yet it is the adult survey conducted by the Pew Research Centre that raises some observations that further highlight the importance of the work girls' schools are doing in this space.

Compared to previous studies in the last ten years, Americans are now less likely to say there is too little emphasis on encouraging girls to be leaders, to do well in school and stand up for themselves (although when results are sorted by gender, women are more likely to say there still needs to be more emphasis on this for girls). These survey results have been analysed with the suggestion that there is a narrowing of the gender gap compared to previous surveys. The findings reveal a belief among adults that there have been gains made in girls' education and more investment in boys' education is now needed to address the challenges boys face, starting as early as kindergarten. Notwithstanding the importance of ensuring that all genders can access supportive, holistic education options, the perception that girls have made "enough" gains in the gender gap to alternate focus to other areas only reinforces the need and value of girls' schools and their missions to support girls' education and holistic wellbeing, and to continue advocating for the best educational opportunities possible in a supportive, all-girls environment.

## References

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