

feature

# Single sex high schools in Canada

Single sex schools in Canada are popular with international students, as **BETHAN NORRIS** discovers.

Many single sex secondary schools in Canada find that they have more applications from overseas students than they can accept. At Branksome Hall Girls School in Toronto, ONT, this means that academic standards among their international community are particularly high. "Our international students are among our very strongest students and regularly achieve Honours and High Honours standing," says Ruth-Ann Penny at the school. "Our residential programme is relatively small, so we can afford to be selective in a way that perhaps bigger boarding schools cannot afford to be."

At the Bishop Strachan Girls School in Toronto, ONT, too, competition for places is tough. "Our international student numbers have continued to increase over the last few years," says Maria Radford at the school. "Each year we turn away a number of international applicants because they would not benefit from our rigorous academic programme with their current qualifications."

The schools themselves put their popularity with international students down to their good reputation, a factor that is enhanced by their single sex status. "Many international students are familiar with single sex environments as a lot of schools overseas segregate students by sex," says Gordon Allan at St Georges Boys School in Vancouver, BC. "As well, there is growing research to suggest that boys and girls are fundamentally different in their learning styles and that single sex schools can focus on each gender's unique needs."

The academic benefits of studying at a single sex school are emphasised by Radford. "Brain research indicates that girls and boys learn differently," she says. "We research and apply the latest methods to what we do in the classroom. For example, we use cooperative learning strategies in the teaching of math and science. As a result, girls from our school rank very highly on the math competitions offered in Canada."

However, it is not just the academic reputation of a school that attracts international students and their students, as Penny points out. "The girls who choose us [do so] for our academic reputation and the plethora of sports, clubs and leadership opportunities we offer," she says. "We do, however, focus on health and wellness for young women and issues of personal safety and care. This dimension of our work is very important to international families."

While international student demand in this sector remains high, many schools do spend time devising recruitment strategies to ensure an even mix of nationalities at their school. "Recruitment has had the biggest impact on our enrolments," says Radford. "We visit the Caribbean and Asia several times each year." She adds that, so far, education agents have played little or no part in their international recruitment strategy, but this could soon be about to change. "There are certain markets from which we have little representation in our student body where we might consider using agents," she says. "These markets include Europe, Russia, Africa, India and South America."

Agents don't seem to figure strongly as a method of recruitment for many schools, yet Allan acknowledges that they can be useful when dealing with very new student territories. "They can be helpful and we are looking at them in our future marketing plans," he confirms. "However, we are very cautious as the industry is generally unregulated and we have had some bad experiences."

Overall, the attitude towards agents seems to be one of caution. However, the benefits can outweigh the risks, as Penny explains. "Where the agents are good and have a strong network in place in their country, know schools and students [and] help parents make wise choices – rather than just grab their money – we work with agents and yes, they do have a tremendous influence."