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Separate but equal? The enduring appeal of the single-sex public high schools of New South Wales

Fiona Jane Mueller
University of Wollongong

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**SEPARATE BUT EQUAL?
THE ENDURING APPEAL
OF THE
SINGLE-SEX PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOLS
OF
NEW SOUTH WALES**

A thesis submitted in fulfillment of the
requirements for the award of the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

from

UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

by

FIONA JANE MUELLER
BA DipEd MEd

FACULTY OF EDUCATION
2007

Thesis certification

I, Fiona Jane Mueller, declare that this thesis, submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the Faculty of Education, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Fiona Jane Mueller

.....

Date:

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Abstract

During the 1960s the government of New South Wales adopted a comprehensive, coeducational model of schooling. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s dozens of boys' and girls' public schools were closed, amalgamated or restructured as a result of new policy commitments to equality of opportunity in education. Forty-six single-sex high schools remain in the public provision today, less than half the original number. Of these, twenty-four are girls' schools and twenty-two admit only boys. While one boys' school is located in a northern region of the state, the other forty-five are all to be found in the Sydney metropolitan area.

The single-sex public high school provision in New South Wales constitutes an Australian educational phenomenon. However, despite the unique nature and extent of this provision in contemporary Australian public education, the schools attract little mention in the research literature. Likewise, official education publications, particularly those intended for consumers, provide few references to the single-sex option. In this thesis, evidence is provided of the incomplete implementation of policies favouring the coeducational, comprehensive model. The contention is that this reflects an unresolved ideological tension between those who believe that educational equity can only be delivered through identical provision and those who maintain that segregation of the sexes can enable a more effective focus on the needs of male and female students, both during secondary school and in preparation for the post-school world.

This project focuses on the surviving New South Wales single-sex public high schools as a group left out of contemporary educational discourse. In seeking to understand their enduring appeal for consumers, the following key questions guided the research:

- Which schools are they?
- What sustains them?
- How do the schools fit into the provision of public education?
- What does the future look like for these schools?

A wide range of historical and contemporary informants, including former Ministers for Education, senior bureaucrats and retired principals, together with participants from nine single-sex public high schools, provided comprehensive data to answer these questions. In the absence of a policy discourse that engages with the single-sex public school option, this study examines the characteristics of these institutions, the basis for their enduring appeal to consumers, and the strategies used by some to distinguish themselves in a highly competitive education market.

Fiona Jane Mueller
July 2007

Acknowledgments

This thesis honours the work and dedication of educators throughout the New South Wales education system, particularly those who gave so generously of their time to tell their stories of the single-sex public schools.

To the following individuals I extend my deepest appreciation:

Professor Jan Wright (Wollongong), who supported and supervised this research project with enthusiasm and wisdom

Norma and Dick Crampton (Wollongong), who gave me a home away from home

Hilary Dixon (Sydney), who inspired me to write

Rhondda Anthony (Sydney), formatting specialist

Bill Maude (Canberra), mentor and friend

Jill Mueller (Melbourne), Rick Mueller (Queanbeyan), Jason and Michelle Mueller (Sydney), Rowena Mueller (Sydney) and Alex Mueller (Zurich)

John, Bethany and Ryan Wilshire