

Full Co-Education at Norwich School

Questions & Answers – August 2008

When will it happen?

Girls will be admitted at ages 7, 8, 11 and 13 in September 2008 – as well as our conventional 16+ intake. In September 2009 there will be girls in every year group except Form Three (10+) and Middle Five (15+). From September 2010 and beyond, every year group will be co-educational.

Why are you going co-ed?

Norwich School already has a co-educational sixth form. We should not forget that there is now a fourteen year track record of great success at that level – for boys and girls. In 2007-8, there were more than 90 girls in the School.

So why extend co-education to the whole school?

In short, we see opportunities to improve further the education provided here.

An expanded school, with around 1000 pupils, will enable us to develop our buildings, resources and general educational environment. The Governors also wish to ensure that we have a sustainable school – one that is built to last with regard to finances, buildings and admissions.

Full co-education will enable the School to improve our educational provision for all pupils – boys and girls.

Further to those vital considerations, we have a desire to be a truly ‘family’ school – one open to both genders throughout. A Norwich School education is unique in its style, and we would like it to be available to 7-18 year old girls – as well as boys.

Will fees have to be increased to fund the changes?

We are determined to remain within the Cathedral Close and to sustain our full and varied programme of games and activities. These goals come at a considerable price, however, and we are seeking ways of achieving them while being as affordable as possible.

If we were to maintain and improve the School’s facilities with the current number of pupils then fee increases would have to be greater than those needed for a larger school. The financial pressure on parents has been a major consideration and motivating factor for these plans.

Why don’t you expand the School with boys only?

This would be possible only if the School were to change its entry standards and academic emphasis – and we do not see that as an option. Although the population of Norwich is increasing, the demographic analysis reveals an anticipated fall in the number of school age youngsters; and the drop in numbers of boys is expected to be slightly greater than that for girls.

How can the School site cope with 160 extra pupils?

We have secured extra property around the Close and converted and expanded some existing school buildings. The teaching area per pupil will increase as a result of these changes.

Is there any demand for full co-education?

Yes – increasingly we field enquiries from parents who are looking for a family school. There is considerable frustration in many families that the distinctive Norwich School education is not available to girls below 16 years old.

Who made the decision?

The Governors made a unanimous decision to develop the School in this way. The Head Master and School's management team all advocate the change and see benefit in it.

We like Norwich School just the way it is. Why do you have to change?

We like Norwich School too! We are very proud of it, and we want more people to be able to benefit from it. But there are aspects we want to improve, and the best way to do this, without raising fees prohibitively, is to expand into the wider co-educational market. Like any good business or organization, we cannot afford to stand still. The educational, political, social and economical landscape is continually changing and we must respond appropriately.

Some people chose to send their boys to Norwich School because it is a single sex school below the Sixth Form. Have you considered their feelings?

Via the last school survey, the Head Master's three presentations to parents and individual letters, many parents have expressed their views on full co-education. It is certainly an emotive issue and the full range of sentiments – from great excitement to total opposition – have been expressed. The Governors, Head Master and Management Team have weighed all opinions very carefully indeed and have all seen the full survey analysis; a number of locally based governors, including the Chairman, attended the presentations to parents.

What did the presentation evenings and recent survey tell you about parental opinion?

That the School is highly thought of and, at the same time, has parents, pupils and staff who perceive room for improvement. Many excellent suggestions emerged, and we shall do our best to incorporate responses to the constructive criticism in our new Development Plan.

With regard to co-education, a simple question was asked of parents and staff: 'If Norwich School were to become fully co-educational, would you welcome the change?'

As you might expect, there were significant numbers for and against – as well as many who were unsure.

And yet you are still going ahead despite the number who seem to be saying 'no'?

The survey was conducted before any information regarding the size of school, competition for places and wider development issues had been made explicit. Following the Head Master's presentations to parents and to staff on school development and the place of co-education within it, many viewed it more positively.

We should also bear in mind that parents and staff were asked to imagine a significant change to admissions policy at a school which most hold in high esteem and would not want to change. Much of the negative reaction was, in our view, prompted by a reluctance to see traditional strengths undermined. The Governors are determined that those strengths will be upheld and – with an expanded, co-educational school – built upon.

Rumour has it that the decision was taken a long time ago. Is this true?

The Head Master, Management Team and the Governors have discussed the pros and cons of school expansion and co-education over a long period. However, no one has wished to commit to a decision without complete confidence that such a change would be entirely right and practicable. The Governors reached that conclusion in September 2007.

Local parents will no longer have the option to send their sons to a boys-only academically focused independent day school. Why are you denying them that option?

It is true that there will no longer be an all boys alternative in this area. However, there is no fully co-educational academically focused independent day school in the entire county – a most unusual circumstance in a national context. (In fact, according to data from the Independent Schools Council, Norwich is the only city or town of its size that does not have a school of that type.) Judging by our admissions enquiries, the demand for a fully co-educational Norwich School is considerable.

Is this just to improve results and climb up the league tables?

Mercifully, there is no pressure on Norwich School to do that. Results in recent years have typically placed the School above all others in Norfolk and Suffolk. That has been particularly pleasing given our continued commitment to a broad and varied education.

How many boys and girls will there be in the Norwich School of the future?

Looking at the local scene and the experience of similar schools elsewhere in the country that have already undergone this sort of change, we predict an ultimate ratio of approximately 65:35 (boys:girls); this is roughly our current ratio in the Sixth Form. Such a change could not happen at once – it would be staged over several years – but the future numbers may be approximately 650 boys and 350 girls from age 7 to 18.

With the introduction of more girls, will my son be less likely to get a place?

Not necessarily. Let us look at the current numbers and compare with the estimate given in the last answer:

At present there are 90 girls and 750 boys: in the future there may be 350 girls and 650 boys. This does show a reduction of boys' places, but a moderate one – and one made over a few years, not all at once. When we also consider that the number of young boys is expected to fall slightly in this area, the change to levels of competition may be only slight.

Won't the School's character change?

The fundamental qualities of Norwich School will not change. Such important features as an ambitious approach to scholarship; dynamic teaching and learning; a full and varied education with plenty of sporting, cultural and extra-curricular activities – these will all remain the same. We expect, however, that the presence of girls will enhance the School's atmosphere and that the two genders, educated together, will learn from each other in a complementary and productive way.

Will the curriculum be different?

Essentially, no. The emphasis will continue to be on the traditional, academic subjects. It is likely that some areas of the curriculum could grow as a result of more girls being here – but not to the detriment of other subjects.

Will games suffer?

No. All year groups will continue to have two sessions per week of games and activities – plus Saturday fixtures. Within our games curriculum we will provide excellent opportunities for boys and girls to enjoy high level sport and a full programme of fixtures.

Isn't it true that single sex schools perform better?

There is a lot of stated opinion on the subject, but much of the available research is either unconvincing or inconclusive. The HMC research, carried out by Buckingham University,

concluded that two factors, above any others, are a strong indication of school performance: ability of pupils at admission; and socio-economic background of the pupils. Beyond those, such features as school leadership and teaching quality have some significance, but the gender mix of pupils is so far down the list that its direct effect is difficult to discern.

One thing is certain: there are good schools (of all types) and less good schools. For example, Rugby School, The Perse, Portsmouth Grammar School, Sevenoaks and King's Canterbury (all co-ed, or about to be) are good schools, as are St Paul's Girls', Manchester GS, Wycombe Abbey and KCS Wimbledon (all single sex).

How will this affect the recruitment of staff?

Positively, we believe. An increasing majority of teachers was trained in a co-educational environment and they expect to work in one. Now, there are few teachers entering the profession who have the teaching of all-boys classes as their vocation.

Will this affect the independent schools for girls in the area?

Competition will increase to some extent – and that is not necessarily a bad thing. Good schools, when in competition with one another, tend to get even better. Having stated that, the competition may not be as intense or as direct as one might first imagine:

If Norwich School, some years in the future, were to have 350 girls across the 7-18 age range, there would be 260 girls more than our current number. Bearing in mind that as many as 50% could come to us from the state sector and the independent intake would be from several different schools, spread across 11 year groups – fears of a drastic erosion of other schools' admissions should be allayed.

JBH

August 2008