



Western Washington University  
Western CEDAR

---

WWU Honors College Senior Projects

WWU Graduate and Undergraduate Scholarship

---

Winter 2023

## Single Sex Education in a Gender Fluid World

Stella Sisson

Follow this and additional works at: [https://cedar.wwu.edu/wwu\\_honors](https://cedar.wwu.edu/wwu_honors)



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Sisson, Stella, "Single Sex Education in a Gender Fluid World" (2023). *WWU Honors College Senior Projects*. 641.

[https://cedar.wwu.edu/wwu\\_honors/641](https://cedar.wwu.edu/wwu_honors/641)

This Project is brought to you for free and open access by the WWU Graduate and Undergraduate Scholarship at Western CEDAR. It has been accepted for inclusion in WWU Honors College Senior Projects by an authorized administrator of Western CEDAR. For more information, please contact [westerncedar@wwu.edu](mailto:westerncedar@wwu.edu).

*An Interview Portfolio on  
Single Sex Education in a Gender Fluid World*

Stella Sisson

Winter Quarter 2023

### *Abstract*

Intersectionality always seems to be a never-ending crux that people are working on becoming more aware of. Even more difficult, gender fluidity at a single sex institution—how do we tackle that intersection? This is the point of my project. As someone who is about to enter the professional field as an outdoor educator, I spend a lot of time thinking about how I can make accessibility easier for my students. These days, gender fluidity in environments that were originally intended for one gender seems like it would have roadblock after roadblock. However, the working professionals at Seattle Girls' School work everyday to work towards their values of empowering girls, while also helping to make all gender identities feel welcome. This is a collection of interviews from different staff and faculty at the school in an effort to not say what is right or wrong, but instead have a written document of ideas that intends to inspire educators across fields on how to better help their participants. This is not a black or white topic and that's why we're talking about it today. Use this as a resource, not gospel.

### *Instructions for Reading*

In this portfolio, there are often comments written in the margins. It was inspired by a Greek practice called *scholia*, which is essentially an explanatory comment. On the right side in purple, we have analytical information to help give the reader more context. On the left side in blue, we have personal opinions and anecdotes, or thoughts I think are important to highlight. The margins are meant to be read; they are not a tiny footnote for a reason!

*Brenda Leaks*

“So could you just please start by letting me know your name, your pronouns, and your position at Seattle Girls’ School?”

“Yes, my name is Brenda Leaks, I use she/her pronouns, and I’m the Head of School at [Seattle Girls’ School](#).”

“And how many years have you been in your position?”

“This is my seventh year as Head of School.”

“Are there currently students at your institution who identify other than the gender of female?”

“Yes.”

“What alternate identifications are present and does that impact school culture? And if it does, how does it impact it?”

“Yeah, so we have students here who use they/them pronouns and who use he/him pronouns. And we even have students who share that they are open to all pronouns, we have trans students here--although our trans students... Well, let me think about this. Most of our trans students here are trans-female, so they identify as she/her. And we do have one or two students who--we've got a number of students who are non-binary, even if they use he/him pronouns, they're very open about their gender identity. There are students who are considering transitioning and

*Seattle Girls’ School*

Also known as SGS, this school is located in the Central District of Seattle, WA.

there are students who are openly identify[ing] as trans and everything in between.

“So, I think from a culture perspective, if anything, I think the impact on our culture is that it makes us more open and it makes us more... One of the challenges of a single gender school or school that has a single gender identity focus is that you can become kind of myopic in your view of how you interact with and engage people. **You can clump people based on assumptions about gender identity, right?** And we don't do that here because we know that we have a broad range of our students and our staff. And so we pause long enough to do the best we can to have inclusive language and inclusive practices that will help all of the students and adults who are in our community, regardless of their gender, feel like they're part of this community. So I think it impacts our culture for the better in that way.”

“Does having non-female identifying students change the mission and values of your school for you?”

“Oh, that's such a great question. No. This is a school and interestingly enough, our **mission statement** does not refer to girls. Our **values statement** does, but our mission is about inspiring and developing courageous leaders. And then it goes through the list of the things we want those leaders to do, including, you know, think independently, work collaboratively, learn joyfully, and champion change. Nowhere in there do

Based on my personal research the past two quarters, this is one of the major arguments in opposition to single gender education.

#### *SGS Mission*

“Our Mission is to inspire and develop courageous leaders who think independently, work collaboratively, learn joyfully, and champion change.”

#### *SGS Beliefs*

“Empowering a girl changes the world.

It is fundamental to understand and address issues of difference and oppression.

An integrated, collaborative curriculum challenges and engages students.

Middle school should be joyful, curiosity-filled, and safe and open to all voices.”

we actually refer to girls as the leaders who we are trying to inspire and develop.

“In our value statement, we do have a couple of gendered statements. I think the one that's coming most clearly is empowering a girl changes the world, right? And I think that's based on research that our founders and folks who were a part of the creation of that value statement. There's so much research that talks about, they call it the *Girl Effect*, right? That when you invest in a girl--particularly in a lot of third world countries and lower economically resourced countries and communities. When you invest in a girl, the girl is more likely to invest back into the community and that is what that value of ours refers to.

“We definitely are a school that raises up, elevates, creates awareness around bias against female identifying folks and that hasn't changed, even with having a gender expansive community over the years. And I think those students and the adults really challenge us to think about ways in which the binary of female, male, even as we're trying to elevate issues that impact limiting referrals. Thinking about how some of those same issues or even some worse issues impact people who are non-binary, trans and how we can think about those. Our kids are pushing us. They are always pushing us, which is a good gift.”

### *Girl Effect*

Watch this three minute [video](#) to learn more about this. tldr; Investing in girls gets you a return on investment throughout the whole community.

“From your personal perspective and experience, how do you make a gender mixed environment more safe and empathetic?”

“I think it starts with intention on the front end and then thoughtful engagement and response on the back end. So when I first got here seven years ago, in 2016, one of the very first conversations I was pulled into was an ask for permission from our faculty to have students write their pronouns on their name tags on the first day of school. I remember having this thought that I had been in mostly co-ed schools and already I was like, ‘How am I having more conversations about gender identity at an all girls school than I’ve ever had at any other school I’ve been at?’

“So, really sitting in that question, we decided together, myself and faculty and administrators that were a part of the conversation, that there was no question that the right decision for the school was yes. To ask people to write pronouns on the first day of school across all grades. I think it had previously been done in pockets here and there, in advisories and affinity groups, but across all grades, including fifth grade. And the reason is, on the very first day, you start referring to those pronouns. And if you don’t include and create space for everyone to share their pronouns, what then happens is the people who don’t use the expected identifications at an all-girls school have to come out. On the first day how do they know that they’re safe enough to do that and how do they know how they’ll be received?”

“Well, at SGS they don’t have to worry about that because everyone’s doing it and inevitably in every grade there are students who don’t use

she/her pronouns and there are adults who are not. So by virtue of us requiring every student and every employee to do that, we're communicating that one, it's important to us and two, that everyone from the first day, a new community member, student or adult is not alone in that. We also made the decision that first year--we haven't done it in probably the last two or three years, but in that first year we made the decision to write a letter to families letting them know that that's what we were doing and as expected, we got some pushback because I think adults are not as with it, right, as kids are. And a number of the adults in the community were kind of confusing and fusing issues of gender identity with issues of sexuality and feeling like, 'Oh my God, the first day of school, how are you having kids talk about this?' And you're like, 'no, no, no, no, no, no, we're not. We're not asking people [their] referred sexual partners, we're asking them about their own personal identity in terms of their gender.' So it took some conversations and some work on our part to help parents understand that. But like I said, we haven't sent that letter in the last few years, right, because it's now a part of our culture and a part of something that people anticipate.

"I think also our affinity groups are part of that and the ways in which we create those spaces for kids to feel like they can connect with people who share their identity and that is 100% normal. I think the ways in which we bring examples and mentors into our community, people who speak in Community Meeting, people who volunteer in our classrooms, people who volunteer in our co-curricular programs. The span of their gender is

#### *Affinity Groups*

These are club-like groups that meet during the school day and aim to have members who identify similarly. Some are open to all, and some are closed for those who identify only. For example, one of the newest is the Trans Affinity and that would be an example of a closed group.

#### *Community Meeting*

A time set aside each week for the entire school to meet. It allows them to present cool information, give out important reminders, and have great guest speakers.



live, you know. This is not a place where every person looks like, you know, name it stereotypical female person. And I think that that helps create the environment where people are safe and feel like they're included. And then when issues come up, I think we address them and we address them with a restorative perspective.

“It was probably right before the pandemic that we had a couple of students who were just really like, ‘these people don't get my pronouns right.’ And I'm like, ‘ah,’ right? And, you know, we sat in that space. I mean, I have heard of school communities that really try to shame kids, right? ‘Well, we're trying. And this is hard. And you have to be patient with people. And, you know, we're doing the best we can.’ [And while we do convey the message that grace is important when people are learning new behaviors, we also convey the impact on the person who has to one, have an identity that people struggle with honoring, and then, two, they have to then be the person who gives grace while people struggle to honor their identity, right.](#)

“So here we hold all of it and we practice together and we, you know, coach. So I think those are what we do when it goes wrong and when it's adults who are the people who have the errors or create the harm, we're honest about that. [You know we're honest about that.](#) You know we're honest about thinking differently. There was a situation last year with our yearbook that I still don't know that we've 100% figured out. There is a deadline by which you have to get pictures and names into the yearbook, right? And when a student comes out, changes their, you know, like, ‘This

is my identity. I'm ready to share that with the world.' And it's after that deadline. What's in the yearbook are the name and the pronouns that they provided at the time of the printing. And then what comes out and gets in their hands and they're like, 'oh,' right. And we have that situation happened last year and it was really impactful for that student and their peers and then eventually the community of the ripple went out and we sat in it and we were like 'This is something we never thought about it like we never thought about whether we could, we would do.' And now we're having that conversation. What will we do this year, right? How will we make sure that we one check in with students? And two, you know what happens if someone comes out and shares their pronouns? And their identity in a new way? How will we, you know, are we going to have stickers? Are we going to communicate [that] we're having a conversation now that we never had, and we were honest when it came up that we never had that conversation. And I think that creates a space where not where harm doesn't happen, but where people feel safe anyway because they know you're going to sit with them. **It's almost like harm is going to happen and the people who are harmed are going to help me repair it, as opposed to what happens in a lot of communities where it's like harm happens and you have to deal with it.**"

"Do you think single sex education works in a time where more and more folks redefine their gender identity in the middle and high school years? Does it make sense?"

It seems like SGS is almost conducting an experiment. Most change or difference in our society is met with backlash or negativity. This school is instead trying to embrace and encourage change to create better humans. Instead of giving them a set of hard rules on what they can't do, they focus more on tackling each topic as it comes their way.

“You know, it’s interesting. I was visiting another school recently and I asked a question about gender fluidity within their school. It's a school with an interesting model because they've got both boys and girls, even though the boys and girls take classes separately. I was not surprised to hear that within the female identifying side there was more gender fluidity than on the male identifying side. And it actually made me feel like, and I feel like I see this here at SGS as well, to some extent, [having a safe community where you can come out and feel like you'll be embraced in a moment when you're trying to deepen in your own identity and like figure out where your truths are.](#)”

“To some extent, these kinds of environments are even more important for those students than they were. I know people who have not come out well until well into their adulthood because they didn't feel safe in those formative years where they were in a community like this one where they can say, ‘This is who I think I am’ and know that they would be held and supported. I don't know, maybe all schools should be girls’ schools.”

“Do you admit male identifying individuals?”

“No. So our admissions policy is that we admit female identifying students regardless of the gender they were assigned at birth. And we admit nonbinary students who were assigned female at birth. Now the reality is that we are trusting people at their word in terms of them adhering to that policy. I don't believe that we've ever had a cisgender male apply. No, we don't admit cisgender males. And we don't and if it's clear we wouldn't

admit a gender fluid or non-binary person who was gendered as male at birth.”

“I want to know what you personally are really proud of creating or what the school has created and what should be implemented into other spaces as a very useful tool.”

“I think the proudest that this is a community where everyone learns. And where it's accepted and expected that everyone learns. I said a bit earlier that, you know, coming here was the first place I've ever been where I was having as many conversations about gender identity. And I really struggled in my first two years. I struggled with pronouns. I struggled. And I felt both the challenge and the compassion of this community in a way that was helpful and supportive, not shaming. I don't know what kind of SGS special sauce... I don't know.

“The way to replicate that is people making a mistake and what their response is and having that happen over and over again. And having that person make the mistake be the newest kid to the community, the newest, youngest, lowest amount of social power, kid and the boss and what happens and what happens? What do I say when I make a mistake? I say ‘oops, I'm sorry.’ And I recognize the impact. And so I think that's the piece that takes a lot of courage for organizations to create this kind of environment where everybody in here has to learn something.

“Nobody's an expert at any, or at least not at everything. And there's a recognition that things are always changing and it's our job to keep

changing with it. I think that's what I'm most proud of about this community. It's actually, it's our culture. Yes, affinity groups are amazing. Yes, the ways in which we like, you know, everyone shares their pronouns. Amazing. But none of that would, none of that would matter. It would still be very toxic. Generally, you'd have these pockets of safety as opposed to this whole community of safety."

*Miryam Harvey*

“For the sake of evenness, could you let me know your name, your pronouns and your position at Seattle Girls School?”

“Excellent, yes, you need that for the record. My name is Miryam Harvey, I use she/her pronouns, and I am the Dean of Faculty and Students at SGS.”

“And am I right in assuming you just started this fall?”

“No, I started three years ago. I started during the pandemic. So, in 2020, yeah.”

“What action, and this can be personal or as a whole, has [been] taken on this situation? Is it a priority? What’s the process like to create a more comfortable environment? And I guess we can frame it in the setting of your job specifically.”

“So, under my scope of job it is lived and talked about daily. I deal with the student body. So, in small ways, having conversations with students about their pronouns, about their identity, about their names, and making sure that I remind, along with my team at work, that advisors also check in with students. We have created systems to help us kind of keep track. We have an internal list of student names that are registered with images. So any **advisor** can have the ability to add a comment to it. So they can’t edit it, because we want to make sure we get the ping every time someone adds a comment. For example, if you hear that one of your

*Advisors*

Advisors at SGS function similarly to a homeroom teacher and they have advisories—a group of students that are in the same grade.

students, any student in any grade, is now using a different name or changing a pronoun, we make a comment for that student and then the question is always asked, you know, advisor, please follow up. Is this safe to use internally or externally? So we have columns of is it safe? Is it not safe? Have we communicated with home and all of that, so that way we know. Right now, at this moment, whether because they had the conversation with adults or because they don't feel safe, we are only using the name or the pronoun internally at SGS. And then with communication with outward facing things, we are using their legal name. So it's just a fluid conversation as well. [And why we have that document is because kiddos in middle school years, as we know from their development, are constantly changing their names and their pronouns.](#)"

"What percentage of your student body is non-binary or let's say non-female identifying?"

"That's a hard one. It isn't a large population to be perfectly honest. It feels larger from student conversations or conversations with families because just like anything, it feels bigger than it really is. We do have a very robust, and this is new to this year, we have for the first time Trans Affinity. Who is in the affinity? We do not know. It is a closed door, only if you identify policy. Because it is a safe space for them. But it is a robust group. Is it as large as Alphabet [Alliance]? No, but it is a large enough number of our faculty and our student body that that space was needed.

So it was created here, which is awesome. And we have created many new affinity and alliance spaces.

“You were a student here in 2014, so there’s been a lot of change in the last decade. The percentage of the student body... I mean obviously 5th grade has 22 students, so if even two of them are non-binary, then that would be 10%, which still feels like quite a bit. But if two students [are] in 6th, 7th, and 8th grade, we’re looking at 40 students [in a grade], it would be 5%. So I’m going to say, there’s always going to be at least one to two students in every grade. And as they grow, they change into more confidence and more certainty so that sometimes that number rises from year to year. And sometimes, it’s incredible to think that sometimes our 5th graders, within the first couple months feel comfortable enough to come out and share that part of their identity. And some actually transferred from a different school to here because they are non-binary and they knew that they would receive support.

“So it’s a very large spectrum of families that don’t know the family is very supportive and chose this school because of it. I’m going to say out of the student body, probably 5% is more accurate than 10%. We still have a good number. If we think about 140 students, that’s quite a few. That’s the day-to-day experience, and then one of our petitions from last year from two siblings was that we didn’t have a safety net created so that everybody could communicate in outward facing ways to make sure the yearbook and in communication had the proper names and pronouns. They were really adamant, so then this year in particular for the 2022-



2023 school year, it now lives in the Family Handbook. It's very small, but it is a guideline and for the families that it matters to or the students that need that representation, it's very important for them. [Not only do we have it on our website, we also have included the guideline for name changes, like preferred name changes in communication and all the systems we've created to safety net them.](#) They have a very specific timeline and what are the things we need to communicate to students and families of what we can do. So yearbook name changes and picture updates, or something as small as adding their preferred name to their profile--their online profile. Or changing their email address so that that way their email and login reflect their preferred name.

For a school that works extremely hard to affirm every gender identity, it's clear that the world we live in was built not just based on the patriarchy, but also on the gender binary, shown by the work faculty, staff, and students must do to undo those structures.

["So those are small ways that we affirm their choices in connection with what they want and what they need and their parents.](#) Plus that handbook, we've created internal systems that follow and of course the day to day lived document that we have."

"What alternate identifications are present these days at SGS?"

"I mean we have female identifying, non-binary, and male identifying. I can say that much."

"Does SGS admit trans-men? Individuals that were born female, but transitioned to male before their time at SGS?"

"Before their time at SGS no, during their time at SGS yes."

“Could I just press and ask about the rationale behind that?”

“We just haven’t had the candidate. It’s not because we don’t. That might be a really good question for someone who has been here longer than me. Because I do know that there is history and there’s definitely faculty and staff and administration that know much more. In my three years, [this hasn’t happened] but that doesn’t mean that we don’t allow it. It’s just that because we haven’t had a candidate. And you also have to think about what elementary school they come from. That may be a factor and the age that they apply, right. They apply in fourth grade to be a fifth grade student, so that may be for some still too new, but not always. So it really, really does depend. In my three years, no, because we haven’t had a candidate.”

“Does having non-female identifying students at SGS change the mission and values for you?”

“No.”

“Do you have experience with gender mixed environments?”

“Yes, most of my education, well at this point it’s more than half and half, but the first decade was in a coed public high school with 2,100 students.”

“How did gender mixed and gender enclosed programming shape your perspective on this topic?”

“I started teaching and then moved into my role as dean less than a decade ago, but definitely the second half of my career. And my relationship with students has changed that. I have to be perfectly honest, in the early 2000’s when I started this journey, I was at a Catholic high school. It was a public funded Catholic high school in Toronto. We were not allowed at the time--anyone who identified as **LGBTQAI** as a faculty member and we were not allowed to have clubs that were affiliated in any way.

“We [had] them, I created them, I created that safe space for my students, we just called it a support group, but we didn’t name what it was. And it was just by invitation only for students to come. So the landscape has changed quite a bit, obviously from that experience. But to answer your question, yes, my relationship with students, the day-to-day relationship I’ve always had with them in my career to now influences everything I do because it is for them. So whatever they need they get.”

“This is, to an extent, a gender mixed environment in a single sex institution. How do we make that space safe and comfortable for all individuals?”

“I mean because we live the mission in both our students and our adults--our adults are the same--that we are building--just like in the old building we had non-gendered bathrooms. Some of the bathrooms had multiple

**LGBTQAI**

Lesbian

Gay

Bisexual

Transsexual

Queer

Asexual

Intersex

There are many other identities. These are the ones listed in this specific transcript, but this is usually used in an all-encompassing context.

stalls and some of the bathrooms were single stalled. So part of the vision for our [new building](#) was that we're just going to have single bathrooms all over the school. We have five bathrooms on the second floor and two on the first floor that are both adults and students. Everybody goes in and everybody gets that same level of privacy. And they are non-gendered because we eliminated all of that. We create that safety for students as well.

“You know, we have conversations with students and families about what they need and provide that. The way that we change our language is very true to that. [We don't name brothers and sisters, we use siblings.](#) We don't use girls and anytime we have a speaker we have a protocol of this is an all-girls and gender non-binary school. Some of our students and faculty identify as male so we use student or youth or adolescent. We don't use anything that's gendered. [Even when we talk about periods, we talk about the menstrual cycle, but we don't say feminine hygiene products.](#) The way that we speak of things is very intentional.”

“What are some of the roadblocks you've faced working with gender fluid populations and what does that look like from the student perspective and the parent perspective?”

“Everybody is going to be different. All of our students are on different timelines and so are our families. Having them have trust in the process. We're very, very open with families. Like yeah, your kid can try on [different hats], and sometimes it has nothing to do with gender and

#### *SGS's New Building*

Within the last year, SGS has opened a new building in Seattle, which is an upgrade from their previous facility. The space was designed with the kind of education they do in mind.

sexuality or sexual orientation when they change their name or pronoun. Sometimes that's who they are in adolescence. So trying to educate [parents] in that, trying to educate our new families and what we do and who we are. How we don't tolerate just acceptance or tolerance. [These are lived people in our community, so yeah we are going to protect, celebrate, talk about, teach about, this is what we do.](#) So those are educational points that yeah, we have hard conversations with students and adults. They know but then they don't really know when they start experiencing things that kiddos bring back.

"Then the other part of it is that we deal with any system that's created to keep information together. So 'Stella' would have a profile that connects with your transcript and your medical records. And with Covid in the last couple of years, we've had to do a lot of testing that connects to insurance. So if 'Stella' has a different preferred name or different preferred pronoun doesn't match up with the legal document we have, we've run into a lot of issues with that because our kiddos obviously feel impacted to have a Covid spreadsheet or a covid tube [with legal names]. And you know, they're little so sometimes they don't understand that this is a legal document. Unfortunately, if we put something other than your legal name, the test won't match with insurance and then they'll reject it. It's such a hard conversation to have. With transcripts it's a hard conversation to have.

"So of course, if everyone's on board and everyone says use preferred name in and out of school, that's awesome. So, our trusted and true

Wendy will write a narrative using preferred name, but then does that match up with the transcript? And then we're thinking about next schools and where they're applying. And the school, sometimes without telling us, will go, 'Why is the name different in every iteration of a year?' There might be some judgment there, some bias there that we don't ever know about. *We can't change the name of the transcript because it is the legal transcript. They have to connect with the fluidity of elementary school and high school and it's beyond [our control].* So that's hard. When they go on the *Washington D.C. trip*, it was hard for them last year. With the [outsourced] company, they use the legal names because the kids are traveling. This is another disconnect that we're referring to. Flights, planes right, tickets that we have to print; all of it has to be legal. Those are the hiccups that we constantly have to go through because they're not controlled by SGS. So when legal [issues come up], that's when kids get impacted."

"And with the social factor, would you say that most kids are accepting of gender fluidity?"

"I would say most kids yes. I would say that some still have messaging, whether it be at home or families. I hear a lot with my students that are exploring that have extended families that will say that they don't accept. So that's the hard one. Bringing back because they're exploring or they're friends are exploring, like the commentary that they hear from the outside

*The Washington D.C. Trip*  
A trip offered to 7<sup>th</sup> graders at SGS where they take an even closer look at the American government and systems in place all while in Washington D.C. They also meet students from all over the US who are participating in the same third-party program.

margins of their life, family included. But most of them are [accepting] because of the environment they're in.

"We normalize mental health, we normalize all of the things. Feelings, making mistakes, being human, all of it. All of the good, bad and perfect that happens. So for them, that's just how we talk about identity so it's part of the fabric."

"Do you think single sex education works in a time where more and more individuals change their gender identity in the middle and high school years? Does it make sense?"

"Yeah it does. Some of our gender non-binary students have applied to [Holy Names \[Academy\]](#) and they love it. So it's working. I have seen how transformative single gender education can be, especially at this age and what's going on with their bodies despite the gender identification and we can have those conversations and support. I think yes, I've gone through and seen the effect. It was really, really popular, and then about fifteen years ago, it became very unpopular, and now it's coming back again throughout east to west. I think there's so much benefit to it and it's great to focus on. And to be honest, we sometimes have a student that says they're really affirmed in [their] male identity now and I'm finding it hard to exist in a single gender school so I'm going to find a co-op, dual option. And we have that too, and we work with them on that journey and get them what they need at that time."

#### *Holy Names Academy*

A private Catholic girls' school in Seattle, WA. It is the primary single gender high school for girls in the city. It is a common choice for a SGS student's next step.

I reached out to them to weigh in on this topic but was met with no response.

“Does gender fluidity change how students are admitted?”

“On our website, we have it very prominently there, and we do talk about it when families and students come to visit in a Community Meeting, let's say. We're all announcing our names and pronouns. We definitely don't hide it and it's part of how we speak of our school and our culture. [We're very transparent about who we are and what we stand for.](#)”

“Do you admit non-binary students?”

“Yes.”

“How are parents reacting to students who come out as non-female identifying part way through the journey?”

“Again that's a spectrum. It really has to do with access and knowledge and culture. Every student and every family is so different. They may be accepting of everything, and some have a struggle. They're confused, they want to continue to have conversations, education, and support groups sent to them. We definitely have a huge spectrum of that too. The Family Handbook is more of a code of conduct. The education and the guidelines that we use are really because of outreach. We have Family Education Night and sometimes we have families that say, 'Hey, I'm really curious about this. Can you connect me?' So we did it on a one to one basis because we are a small enough community.”



“What are some benefits of a more gender fluid population at your school?”

“It’s a real indicator of what’s going on in the world. Like I said, we have adults that are the same, so [the students] get to see themselves in the adults in the community. Whether they’re like families or our faculty and staff. So having students like that is great to mentor and support and hold them through this journey together. The benefits are that this is real life. We get to really experience life with them along this path.”

“Let’s say you have total control; is there anything you would change or do differently or think has room for improvement?”

“If we could do anything, and it doesn’t just have to do with this issue, I think time for our faculty to deep dive into education. Professional development, speakers and workshops about all the things we need to know about our students and how to support them. How students who are on this journey, not only in adolescence, have a higher level of mental health needs. We have to watch that whether it’s self-harm or eating restrictions or any body dysmorphia they’re going through. How to really acutely support that. It all goes hand in hand.

“Professional development and speakers for mental health and non-binary students and anti-black and anti-racism education. We’re talking about communities that are intersectional. The way we can support a student who is very accepting and supportive and has access to mental

and academic support is going to be very different from a student who is out of all of those options. Each student is so individual and so is each family and the intersectionality and privilege that comes with that too and then the lack of privilege. Who is in and who is out. Having all of that support and all of that education would be perfect.

*Wendy Ewbank*

“Could you please let me know your name, pronouns, and position here at SGS?”

“My name is Wendy Ewbank, I use she/her pronouns, and I am a Social Studies teacher at SGS and have been here for twenty years.”

*[A portion of this interview was lost due to a technical difficulty.]*

“Now compared to fifteen years ago, what would you say are the biggest changes in relation to gender fluidity at SGS?”

“I think there’s much more visibility in society, which is giving students more ability to experiment at an earlier age with their own identities. And voice their own and embody their own, so I think a combination of things has happened, but it has changed and has grown over time.”

“What alternate identifications are present and does that impact school culture? How?”

“I think it impacts school culture in positive ways in that it makes us an even richer community. [The more identities we learn about, the more open minded and curious and appreciative we all are--adults and kids.](#) So I think it’s only been good.”

“Does having non-female identifying students change the mission and values of your school for you?”

“No, I think it makes us clarify what--and I’m not on the marketing end or communications end, but I know that it is a challenge when your **name** with big letters on the side of the school says Seattle *Girls’* School.

There’s never been a question that someone who identifies as a girl and entered our school would be able to stay, no matter how they identified or changed their identity during their time with us. There was no question. They were here and they were going to stay. Now I think our institution is thinking about the entry being different. In other words, do you have to be [female] identifying coming in? That is changing and it’s making us look at the language around that. I absolutely feel it’s still consistent with our mission, it just takes more finessing.”

“Do you have experiences with gender enclosed versus gender mixed programming and how did that shape your perspective on this topic?”

“I taught at a co-ed public school. I have always known, not all the boys acted like boys, [and] not all the girls acted like girls. Gender has been, in my own mind and heart, very fluid. But it was not discussed--I taught in the **Edmonds School District**. No conversation. There were kids I know would identify as gay, but not out loud.

“I think there’s been a cultural shift. I know that public schools are now, and thank God we’re in a state that’s accepting because I can only imagine. As you know, we go on the Washington, D.C. trip every year,

#### *The SGS Name*

Shannon O’Malley, a sixth-grade math and science teacher at SGS says, “we have kids all across the gender spectrum here at SGS. So we’re a girls’ school with a little asterisk.”

#### *Edmonds School District*

A school district northwest area of Seattle proper, once a less popular area due to Seattle’s smaller size.

and last year we were with kids from very conservative states. And they would say things in the group like 'I go by regular pronouns.' You know? Just harmful things--students were saying this. But these were kids from Florida, where they can't talk about it anyway, where their politician is saying horrific things. Hold on, how can I more directly answer your question?"

"Obviously, SGS could technically be considered more gender mixed now than when I went to school there [in 2011-2014] because we do have students of many different gender identities. That's a new thing--you're working at a single sex institution but have a gender mixed community. So I'm curious to hear about what someone's experience is with gender mixed programming, how they made the shift to the gender enclosed, how they see this new wave."

"I would say this, Stella. I never came because it's a girls' school. I came for the social justice anti-bias mission. That is why I came, that is why I left a co-ed school. [At the beginning] we got training on how girl brains think differently than boy brains and research around that. That girls are more cooperative, you know all these things. Just mainly so that we could gear our programming more towards our population. So that would be different than being in a co-ed school where it's not like we learned how to deal with co-ed kids--that was just the water we were swimming in. I will say that now I have much more appreciation for students having different ways of moving in the world. It's causing me, in very positive

ways, to differentiate what I do for different learning styles and whether those learning styles are about gender identity, or whether it's about you know, a learning issue or any number of things. *I think it can make all of us better educators if we are trying to meet the needs of a diverse population, because then it means that you're changing it up and offering more choice and you're keeping things active.*"

"Could you expand on the roadblocks you faced with the Washington D.C. trip last year?"

"When we got there for example, there were a few cases where a kid's dead name was on a nametag, so we would change them out. And where, our students might be the ones in their small group to say, 'Could we do pronoun introductions?' And of course that goes south when you have other kids saying 'I use my regular pronouns.' *They got a lot of pushback from other kids, but what we kept saying to them is that 'There are kids in that group who it is so powerful to meet you. You've got to believe there's some gender non-conforming kids in the 150 we [are] with. Of course there are. But they're not safe. So for you to be this example and for them to know they're not alone, how powerful is that?'*

"Even though there were a lot of painful moments for our kids, there were also--we're so in our liberal bubble and just to have that exposure in a way where we could process it with them at night, I think if it had to happen--it's unfortunate that it happened. It reflects what's happening in our nation, the sort of underbelly and what happens when you have

adults that are horrible role models especially in politics. So it is no surprise that kids are voicing what adults are voicing, but I think for many of our kids it was the first time they've heard that. But to be with each other and to have adults they trust, I think it went south, but I think we were there to hold them. And their classmates were there to hold them. I think if anything, it might've made kids stronger in their identity and more determined to maybe come out to a parent that they hadn't before. I think for some of them, it was like, 'If I came out to my study group, where there were intolerant kids--if I was able to come out to them--I can come home and come out to parents who love me.' I think some of that happened. It was a learning curve."

"How are you altering the trip or preparing for this year?"

"One, I'm pointing over here to my colleague [Rosetta](#), just this past Monday of this week, Rosetta helped us. We always do a [workshop] with difficult conversations, but in the past, those difficult conversations have usually been around conservative politics--preparing students for that. For example, a student who says, 'The Second Amendment is my favorite,' you know? So we would just do scenarios where you might not disagree, but you want to have a civil conversation. This year, we were way more intentional, and last year too, it just wasn't enough. We basically had a role play where 'what if a kid did this,' or 'what if an adult said this?' Giving them an idea of some of the stuff that actually might happen. Well Rosetta presented a lovely model of how you can interrupt in the moment

*Rosetta Lee*

Rosetta Lee is the Outreach Specialist at SGS and was also my sixth-grade science teacher. My most prominent memories of her though are her giving talks to the school on gender, race, and privilege and how those interact in society. Rosetta gave me the foundation to my social justice education.

in a productive way that might actually get someone thinking and down the road, actually change their behavior.”

*Rosetta Lee speaking (was present in the room at the time of this interview):* “So the three tools that I taught were to ask open ended questions. So if somebody’s like, ‘Being trans is weird,’ [and the response is] ‘Tell me more about that. Can you help me understand when you started to believe that? Or is there somebody that taught you that? What’s your experience with trans people?’ Those kinds of things.

“And then sometimes it’s actually about finding out the experience that’s motivating the comment because sometimes people actually speak with anger or with passion. I’m like ‘Wow, I can tell you feel really strongly about that. Can I ask why? Or how you came to arrive at this very passionate position?’ Or sometimes people are like ‘Well I don’t want people walking in on me who are the wrong gender in the bathroom.’ And I say, ‘I would imagine that [it] would be pretty startling to encounter somebody you didn’t expect in the bathroom for sure.’ But then after they talk about it and feel like they’re getting some empathy, then I can push a little. But I want to meet them with empathy first.

“The third way is [to] actually join the person and not make yourself superior because so many times we intervene with an air of superiority.

‘Oh my gosh, you are so ignorant. If you knew any better you wouldn’t feel this way.’ And this really makes people dig their heels in. So I say, ‘I used to think this too and I didn’t know about this either myself or the



thing I struggle with sometimes is understanding this or feeling this and not always knowing what to do about it.' Once I'm on the same level as folks, I find them much more receptive to being in conversation instead of digging their heels in so that they can be more superior to me in response."

"Do you think that single sex education works in a time where more and more folks redefine their gender identity in their middle and high school years? Does it make sense?"

"Well, I think part of the mission around this school is also around--and I would argue, it started out very much empowering women and girls. And I think about what **IMPuwe** is. We have a group here where some of our strongest members are trans kids, but the mission of that group is around empowering girls and women because in the world, they're more likely to be in poverty or be victims of domestic violence or victims of trafficking or child marriage. And there are more barriers to education for them.

"So, I still think there could be a place--if it's a school modeled like ours was--on empowering that population. **And we don't care who you are to empower that population, but let's think about feminine leadership and what that looks like so that it's not the masculine model. I think there's a place for that and I don't know what you would call it.** I wouldn't call it a girls' school anymore, but I think I would call it something around; in the same way you would want a school that's against white supremacy. You want a counter possibility. I think schools for a long time were very male

#### *Richard's Rwanda IMPuwe*

A previous student of SGS, at 11 years old, started an organization aimed to help girls have access to education in Rwanda after a Rwandan man stayed with her family and told stories of the Rwandan Genocide. This program has been a centerpiece at SGS for over a decade and is a good example of the efforts this institutions prioritizes.

oriented and a certain kind of leadership style. So, I think there's still a place that's different from the norm, I just don't know what you call it."

"What are some of the benefits of a more gender fluid population at your school?"

"I think that just like when you're in a group, and you want different strengths in that group so that you can accomplish more, I think the more the difference we have. You know how many group projects we do. Anytime there's a situation where different kids have different ways of seeing something, and different energy levels and different expression styles. And part of that's gender identity. I think the more of that, the richer the product is going to be and the more creative responses to it you would have."

"Let's say you have total control; how do you think single sex institutions should tackle this topic?"

"I think one thing I know we do, and think it's really important and it gets pushback from parents; we absolutely put the kid first. If a kid wants to have a name inside school, but not outside school because they're not telling their parents yet, we respect that privacy. Sometimes parents get very upset with that, but I think that's really important, and I wouldn't change it. You know there's a bill in Florida right now that might pass that would order schools to tell parents, and I just feel like students are allowed to have a private identity. They're allowed to come out when they

want to about a name change, or their gender pronouns--whatever it is. I think schools need to respect when students are ready to communicate that to their parents. So, I would absolutely recommend that.

"I also think SGS is thinking about the entering student and what... is the entering student someone who is a biological female or not? That has changed. Now there's conversation around 'Who says they have to be born [female]? What if they're trans right now?' So, I think being open to gender nonconforming kids is important. So then are you really a single sex school? I think that word is problematic then. So, then it's caused us to change a lot of our literature and have a lot of education for board members and more parent nights about an issue like that. I think you have to be intentional, **but I think schools need to be intentional rather than reactive. And put the kid first, absolutely put the kid first.**"

"With **Mock Trial**, what changes have you made to that program?"

"For example, it's still in two courtrooms--the whole thing--but I don't know if you remember, any witness could be any gender. Back in the day, I may have assumed that they would be he or she, but I absolutely change every word in the Mock Trial so that it either has the full name of the person or says they. And I let students know that they pick the pronoun of their witness."

"For someone who doesn't understand this topic or wants to increase their perspective, what's one thing you would want to leave them with?"

#### *Mock Trial*

A larger group project in where students enact every stage of the justice system in a court case example. Some are lawyers, some are witnesses, some are defendants. All take their own role and do all the research required about the justice system before enacting the case in front of a real judge.

“Get edumacated! I would say, if you don’t know much, learn. [Don’t leave it up to the kids to teach you.](#) You need to do some homework. Assign yourself some workshops by reputable people, get recommendations, read some books, watch some good panel discussions. I mean, do some education and don’t wait. [Don’t wait for them to have to tell you or correct you.](#)”

*April Lorenzo*

“Could you let me know your name, your pronouns, and your position at SGS?”

“My name is April Lorenzo, I use she/her pronouns, and I am the Athletics Director at SGS.”

“Are there currently students at your institution that identify other than the gender of female?”

“Yes.”

“What alternate identifications are present in your work and how does that impact the culture around it?”

“We have students who identify as girl, male, and non-binary... How do we create an inclusive place for students who may not fit in the options of boy and girl. That's an ongoing conversation that's in our league, and just thinking about how to create a safe space. Whether it be, does that change who we play during the season, or if students need a separate changing area--thinking about things that come up in that way. Being able to let them know that they are in a safe space to do and be their full self. And it's middle school where kids are in a place of developing and also discovering themselves and sometimes that means that pronouns can change, identities can change, and that is totally fine.

“That's something we support here at our school in particular and just making sure that this is a safe space for them to do so. We still will

compete with single gender schools and we've had competition against co-ed schools. We normally don't play a single gender boys team, just because the physicality is a little different, and it's not healthy competition for either [team]. So those are some things I think about when planning, but also in our league in particular, we have schools where sometimes the reason is just religious, so understanding and also respecting their situation. There's times I intentionally don't schedule with those schools because of that reason."

"How have athletics changed based on the gender fluidity at your school?"

"I wouldn't say it's changed. I think taking accountability--one of the things I do with the kids who are going by a different name or different pronouns, one thing I check when it comes to games is their permission to use their current name and current pronoun now or use their government name. Only because it's an issue if adults at home don't know. Is it okay for me to call this student this name out loud at a competition? And making sure that, if I'm not coaching, letting the coach know that this student uses this name and this pronoun. 'You can only use it during practice, you can't use it during games.' So there's a lot of communication to make sure that the people who are unaware don't become aware if we're not given permission. Being able to coach the kids and know the kids at school, there's an advantage for me as the AD.

“We’ve had a situation where we had to change at their location when we usually change beforehand, and as we’re going on and becoming a bigger team--we have some huge teams--making sure that the facilities are available for them. Even though the other school for example, might not cater to that. And then making sure we address the student by the name and pronoun they want to go by. And then there’s been a lot of educating other adults who are coming into our space who are new. It’s just a lot of educating, right? A lot of new folks who come into our space, pronouns and the idea that they can be any gender is new for them.

“Other programs that I run, such as [Wednesday Workshops](#), support those new teachers, whether it’s handout name badges with pronoun sections for them. So that every time they meet, making sure they acknowledge the student’s preferred pronoun and preferred name. Little things are for us a step that we’ve been doing for a long time here. And other schools, they’re not in that space yet and that’s fine. But I think making sure to educate people who come through our doors, whether they’re a first time visitor or whether they’re doing a community presentation. And it’s not to say ‘Hey, you’re calling us the wrong name,’ [but instead] ‘Hey, just wanted to let you know....’ And it comes off very... our kids advocate for themselves, the teachers advocate for the kids when needed, or advocate for other adults when needed.

“So I think that’s something special about our school and I think that we’re in an age where gender fluidity is all across the board. [The spectrum is bigger and it’s not new for a lot of folks here, but it is new for some](#)

#### *Wednesday Workshops*

These workshops occur every Wednesday afternoon at SGS and can be anything from fashion to cooking to welding to breakdancing. The idea is to expose the student to something they may not have been otherwise. Multiple different workshop opportunities happen during the school year and are also done with community partners.

walking through the door.”

“How are you changing the language on how you divide sports teams when you market it to students at the school?”

“Our sports philosophy--I use ‘students’ as much as possible, I don’t use ‘girls.’ The school is called Seattle Girls’ School, but we actually just say ‘SGS.’ We don’t separate students who identify as boys. All the kids who do, there’s not enough to make one team. The way our sports programming works is that the kids will register and their placement, depending on the sport and registration, it’ll go by grade. Regardless if we had three students that identified as boys, they’ll still be with the eighth grade team. Division 1 ideally is eighth grade, Division 2 is seventh grade, and Division 3 is fifth and sixth grade. But depending also on enrollment and numbers--for example this year’s basketball team, we had no eighth graders, but we only have five seventh graders, regardless of gender identity. They’re placed on the higher team, and then we end up pulling some of our fifth and sixth graders who are more experienced to play up with them.

“We’re not in a place where there’s enough students--who are either gender non-conforming or boys--to have their own team yet. I of course see that in the future, but I think right now we’re sticking to Division 1 to Division 3 and depending how many kids we have signed up, we may move some students based on experience. [We want to make sure it’s still healthy competition, and make sure the kids are having fun.](#) We also



have a lot of social dynamics in play, like kids won't play if they're not on the same team as their friends. Our kids right now are in a place where they just want to have fun and play with their friends. We're catering to that right now, and also a lot of our kids to a lot of other things outside of SGS. So when it comes to that, I don't think we're there yet, but in a few years things could change, especially if we get our gym, then that could definitely change."

"How do you make a gender fluid environment more safe and empathic?"

"I mean for me, verbiage. Referring to them as students, starting off with y'all--that's one I've transitioned to. And making sure that even when we talk about our bodies--what does that look like? I talk about in soccer or basketball your upper body, using your upper body. [There's no mention of boobs or butt, just using your bodies. \[Using language\] that's open and diverse and not specific.](#) Because some kids already have body dysmorphia. And making sure that the folks brought on to coach these students understand that.

"I think that if that's something that's happening--there'll definitely be a lot of educating. But they're in a place right now where students are growing into their bodies and every kid's body is different from another. A lot of it is educating the kids and educating the adults who are coming on board. I've learned that people will have their own thoughts about [gender fluidity], and I've seen that firsthand in some of the meetings I had years ago how far people are still behind in the times. And those are the

schools in the back of my head I won't schedule a game. That's where we are in the world today and at the end of the day, my main goal is to create a safe space for all of our students regardless of how they identify, but [also] making sure they know this is a safe space for them to be who they are."

"Do you think single sex education works in a time when more and more folks redefine their gender identity in middle and high school years? Does it make sense?

"Watching and witnessing the youth I've seen grow up, girls in particular, they're still able to use their voice as predominantly as boys are, or the ways boys I've seen interact, even at the playground--there's this empowering feeling that boys have. When girls are in a position where they have time to understand that they can grow and advocate into that space, and then carry that into high school--seeing as though most of our students go to public school or a non-single gender school.

"Seeing kids take what they've learned here in a single gender school and use it to their advantage. I've seen people advocate for things that they're super passionate about. And not to say that they would not have gotten those things at a co-ed school, but with how we do things here in particular... from the moment they start--whether in fifth or sixth grade--they're learning how to publicly speak in front of a whole school. That is one of the things they get to do, and it's empowering. I didn't get those

tools until I was in late high school, maybe early college. So it's still important I think.

"Gender fluidity is a new topic in a sense, but I think it's still important to have a single gender school, in particular for girls. And I know there are a lot of single gender boys schools that are up and coming and trying to build a well-rounded student. [Additionally at SGS], there's opportunities to have positive male role models. I think that's an important aspect for a school, but I think that single gender education is still very valid and important."

"If you wanted to drive home one big idea about this topic, what would you want folks to know about it?"

"Educating I think--attending conferences specific to supporting athletes who are not on the two-gender binary. I think educating and what does that mean. [Mentally, how does that affect a student or physically how is that affecting a student?](#) I think mental health, right now, among everyone is important. I think education--sometimes people who go in blind really need to be educated. Even myself as an AD, I'm always looking for workshops or talking to someone who does identify as non-gender conforming. Getting their take and also reaching out to them and asking what would've been great for [them] to have.

"So providing those people education and also having folks seek out education. There's a lot of organizations, not just in Washington, that's a [hot] topic right now. Especially AD's and coaches doing work. [Putting in](#)

Passing down that learned knowledge takes extra time and consideration, but is worth it for your participants. That passing of the knowledge is at times forgotten by employers, which can create disconnect in staffing.

the work to find resources and actually pass on what they've learned to the other coaches they're hiring and bringing in those practices that they're learning. You never stop learning, you're always learning. That's what makes working at a school fun, everyday is different. I love this school and I love the work that we do. It's a special place."