



What do you get if you put 1300 teenage boys together and try to educate them?

A macho hotbed of testosterone and poor behaviour in which only the sports stars are truly valued? An environment in which the arts are neglected? I visited Sandbach School to bust these popular myths. Worried parents, read on:

Deputy Head, Jonathan Cosgrove, is keen to show me the art department. Pupils are putting the final touches to their exam pieces and talk me through their inspiration. The corridors are lined with art – bold, statement art with strong lines and themes. Art that has most definitely been produced by boys; boys who are talented and interested in their subject.

We poke our heads into a music room where three lads are learning how to lay down a four part track in the recording studio. Yes, the *recording studio*. “You can even take Music Technology in sixth form if you like,” says Mr Cosgrove, suddenly making me wish that I was a 16 year old boy.

Next, I go to see the Performing Arts department in action. In one of the drama studios, Year 7 are having a dance lesson. “I didn’t think I’d like Dance when I first came here,” says one boy, “but it’s brilliant – loads of fun.” Then he runs off to join the group as they’re taught a new routine.

Nearby, a class is performing drama pieces that they’ve devised themselves, while the rest of the class assess them. I am struck by two things: 1. that the group of boys on stage suddenly burst into a rousing version of Take That’s Relight My Fire (with added dance routine), and 2. That nobody laughs at them for doing it. Nobody is mucking about at all, actually, and throughout my whole visit, there’s been no sign of the rowdy behaviour that I’d expected. I ask why this is, and when the answer comes it seems obvious: The macho, testosterone fuelled behaviour that I’d expected is notable in its absence because the boys have got nobody to show off to. Without girls in the classes, they’re less self-conscious, which frees them up to concentrate on what they’re learning and to enjoy their experiences.

“But what about at lunch time,” I ask. “Do you have much bullying?” Mr Cosgrove is reassuring: “The kids who need to let off steam can go and run off their energy on the field. The ones who are into music can go and play their instruments. Some like to sit in the library. Some like to chill out with their friends. Some even like to play Dungeons and Dragons in a classroom. There’s room for every tribe here.”

Most people know of Sandbach School because of its excellent sports provision, and rightly so. The Physical Education, facilities and extra-curricular sports here are second to none, and if your son is the sporty type, you can rest assured that he will shine. But from what I’ve witnessed, there are wonderful opportunities for creative boys here too, and you need have no fear that your son will be buried under an avalanche of rugby playing alpha males as every interest and talent is valued.

So, what do you get if you put 1400 teenage boys together and try to educate them? In this case, you get 1400 pupils who are engaged and motivated to learn. You get 1400 different personalities, 1400 kids with fantastic facilities and endless opportunities. 1400 pupils whose interests are valued and whose potential for achievement is enormous. It just so happens that they are all boys.

Lisa Jarmine
Times Educational Supplement Journalist