

# *St. Thomas Aquinas School* A New Generation... Gender, Grades & Goals

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Starting in the 2007-2008 school year, the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades at St. Thomas Aquinas School have been divided by gender. This decision followed a year of research, surveys, and many conversations. Research has shown that single gender classes have a positive effect on students, especially young women.



Above the east entrance of St. Thomas Aquinas School, located in the inner-city of Cleveland, you will see the word “Girls” carved in the marble lentil while the word “Boys” is above the west entrance. Had you visited the school back in the 30’s, you would have seen the girls on one playground and the boys on another. Today, though there’s only one playground, a visitor to St. Thomas Aquinas would find Middle School girls in one room and boys in another.

Women in their adolescent years need to feel safe in their classrooms; safe to speak their opinions, safe to risk being “the smart one,” safe to show leadership and initiative. A split gender environment provides that safety. Students are able to demonstrate more confidence in themselves and concentration on their class work. Brianne Gardner, a 2009 graduate of St. Thomas Aquinas, said, “Not having the boys in our classes made us pull together as girls. We still argue sometimes,

but there’s no doubt we’re there for each other, and that wasn’t the case when we were in classes with the guys.”

Since starting the split gender classes at St. Thomas Aquinas, academic achievement for both the boys and the girls has gone up an average of one letter grade in both Math and English, while the discipline referrals have decreased by about 30 percent. Maggie Schumacher, Middle School English teacher, says, “Split gender classrooms provide me with a unique opportunity to facilitate personal growth and positive attitudes among these young women. I see them gaining respect for one another, building self confidence and trust, and establishing a nurturing and safe environment within the classroom.”

Our goal in the upcoming school year is to continue researching the unique ways girls and boys learn and to adapt our teaching styles to best meet their needs.