

GSA Conference Time

Heads are often criticised for sitting in their ivory towers, detached from staff and students, seemingly out of touch with what is going on in the world. Those of you who have visited me in my office will know that I have a rather lovely 'ivory tower', but all too often circumstances do lead me to spending somewhat more time than I would choose to in there! Last week, however, I was allowed out for three days to attend the Girls' School Association annual conference in Bristol.

The theme of the conference was 'making a world of difference' and it was good to have time to pause for reflection on the success of this rather special education which we provide for our girls and to hear some of the experiences of some very successful products of girls' schools.



We hope, in partnership with parents, to steer our girls through the choppy waters of adolescence and my word how choppy they can be! Physical and hormonal changes can often lead to an unhealthy obsession with body image, fuelled by the media; self-esteem can be and frequently is knocked into a corner and then there are those all encompassing and distressing friendship issues. One speaker spoke of the 'casual misery they inflict on each other by forming and then re-forming friendships' but assured us that the friendship issues so prevalent in all schools amongst girls are a rite of passage preparing them for 'paired bonding in the future'. An interesting theory with which you may not agree but I would urge you to read 'Queen Bees and Wannabees' by Rosalind Wiseman which sheds considerable light on this very difficult time for girls - and their parents! If I ever doubt that we are going to reach the safety of port, I have only to go talk to our Sixth Form girls here at St. Mary's to realize how very successful we are in getting them through this particular journey.



A panel of speakers debated a subject which is dear to my heart - that of internet safety - and they sang my song loudly. Young people cannot legally have a Facebook page until the age of 13 and parents do need to monitor their daughter's use of the internet. Would you allow her to travel unaccompanied into the less desirable parts of London, not knowing where she was going or who she was going with? Of course you wouldn't. Do you know where and with whom she is travelling in the virtual world? Is she really doing her homework up there in her room or looking at something you would really rather she wouldn't on her laptop? Remember - there is no watershed on the internet. You **can** put controls on i-phones, you **can** have a 'clean' wireless feed into your home, you **can** take your daughter's phone and laptop away from her when she goes to bed so that she is not texting until two in the morning and too tired to perform effectively in school the next day.



I was horrified by some of the stories I heard about what is 'out there' and which can be accessed by our girls in just two clicks and I will arrange for someone to come and address parents on this difficult subject next term. In the meantime do visit www.thinkuknow.co.uk for some useful advice.

It was interesting to meet overseas colleagues and to hear of the work going on in girls' schools across the pond in America and closer to home in Spain. Their challenges are not so very different from ours, with a strong emphasis on helping girls to redress the rather distorted media image of young women. The work of an inspirational young woman called Jennifer Siebel Newsom has produced a very powerful documentary, some of which you can see on You Tube, called 'Miss Representation'. A 15+ certificate but food for thought for some of our older girls, although as one panelist pointed out, there is clearly an issue to be addressed with our sons also!



The conference closed with an address from a gentleman, who shall remain nameless, who launched a tirade against girls' schools. Why aren't we producing more female physicists, he demanded, more scientists, equipping them with skills in technology, teaching them to present, debate and argue, directing them to the traditional masculine domains of medicine, engineering and computing. I would love him to come and visit St. Mary's to see the wonderful work we do in all these areas. Our Science department in particular is thriving and our GCSE and A level results are excellent, due in no small part to the hard work, enthusiasm and support of our staff and the many additional activities and events they organise for the girls.

However, it is always so nice to come 'home' and to come back to the Frost Fair on Saturday was just such a treat. Thank you to everyone who made it possible and especially the SMA!

Jean Ross

Headmistress