

Rock and soul for the guys

Welham has probably become the first reputed boys boarding school in India to have a woman principal. But Gunmeet Bindra, who follows Ms Oliphant 74 years after the English lady started the institution, is unfazed



Shobha John | TNN

Forty-eight-year-old Gunmeet Bindra, who took over as headmistress of Welham recently, says that when it comes to loving children, gender isn't an issue. And, no, she isn't daunted at the prospect of managing an all-boys school. "The role of a principal is not just to maintain discipline, but to teach self-discipline to children. Care and compassion along with firmness can be inculcated by both genders," she says. The waters are still untested here, so all eyes will be on Bindra. But she's prepared for that.

Bindra's selection started some six months back. Ronesh Puri, MD of Executive Access, the headhunting firm instrumental in the process, says that just like many male turfs in the corporate world are being overtaken by women, this, too, was in the offing. "Men and women are wired differently and a woman's intuitiveness and motherly touch can work wonders in schools, especially for boys who are generally close to their mothers and are away at boarding," says Puri.

"Many schools have good infrastructure but little soul. Sad, considering the biggest stakeholders are children."

Some 35 candidates were zeroed in and four shortlisted. Initially, only male candidates were in the race. "When it was suggested that women be included, there was shell-shocked silence from the board

members, till one of them enthusiastically said, 'Why not?'" says Puri. "History is made only if you do things differently. A great nation needs great teachers. Unfortunately, few stakeholders see it that way."

Darshan Singh, chairman of Welham School Trust, says the board decided to go with the times. "At the end of the day, we wanted a good human being, a warm person with innate abilities to lead a school. And Bindra fitted the bill."

For Bindra, a career in academics was always top of the mind despite playing hockey at the state

level and taking part in dance shows in school. She did her MCom from Delhi School of Economics and wanted to do an MPhil and PhD too. But she started teaching

business studies in a school "by default" and there was no looking back. She set up Mayor World School and Delhi Public School (DPS) in Jalandhar and was founder headmistress with DPS Kanpur and principal of Vidya Devi Jindal School, a residential girls school in Hisar. Then there were the many assignments she did for CBSE and the British Council.

Male principals have appreciated the change at Welham. Kanti Bajpai, ex-principal of Doon School and visiting professor at Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, a part of National University, Singapore, asks, "Why should gender be an issue for a principal's job? Don't women head day schools for boys? Besides, more women than men are in teaching. How can we turn our

MARK OF EXCELLENCE

These women principals, too, made a difference

Jyotsna Brar | principal of Welham Girls School; excellent teacher, wonderful administrator

Abha Adams | former principal of Sri Ram School; was in media before joining academics; took the school to where it is now

Gauri Iswaran | ex-principal of Sanskriti School in Delhi. Her concern for kids was unparalleled; her school was her life

Meera Isaacs | principal of Cathedral and John Connon School, Mumbai. Fantastic professional, open-minded enough to ask others for ideas

back on so much talent?"

Bindra, on her part, says she felt an "instant connect" with the Welham boys. She intends to be a friend to them and will install a communication box in a discrete place so that boys can write to her on any subject that vexes them. "But no anonymous letters," she says firmly. "Children must have an opinion and be proud of it and not be wimps. Fear out of respect works better than fear itself. And students can walk into my room any time."

Students will be glad for that touch of soul.

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