

## Plan for all-boys school creating controversy

October 23, 2009

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EDUCATION REPORTER



Do boys really learn differently? Do they need male teachers?

Is there an achievement gap based on gender – or is poverty the issue?

The plan for an all-boys elementary school in Toronto is fuelling controversy both in education circles and political ones.

The benefits of single-sex schools are widely debated – even the Toronto District School Board's own researchers say so. One expert calls them "gimmicky" and "superficial" because all boys – and all girls – don't learn the same. And a few trustees have already said the notion of separating the sexes makes them uncomfortable.

But Chris Spence, director of education for the Toronto District School Board, has proposed a boys' school open in 2010 among other measures to help increase the lot of males, who lag on standardized test results and have higher rates of suspension and expulsion.

One expert says sex-segregated classes in public schools don't work because the underlying issue is socio-economic status, which determines academic success more so than sex.

Wayne Martino, a professor at the University of Western Ontario and co-author of the recently released book *Boys and Schooling: Beyond Structural Reform*, said "working-class boys do less well than working-class girls – but middle-class boys do better than working-class girls," so programs targeting boys overlook other needy groups. "We also have evidence in Toronto that the race gap is much larger than any gender gap," he added.

He said segregating boys can actually reinforce stereotypes that they are expected to think and act one way, and that so-called "boy-friendly" learning doesn't necessarily prepare them for the real world.

Spence acknowledged the mixed research, but said much of it has focused on older boys; he proposes a school starting at kindergarten.

"I think what we are trying to do is truly groundbreaking in terms of starting with a kindergarten to Grade 3 model and building as we grow," said Spence, who has authored two books on boys and learning.

Many classrooms are based on co-operation, "but boys thrive on competition," Spence said. "... When you've got a majority of teachers who are female, that might not be the natural inclination for them to bring competition into the classroom in a balanced kind of way."

Sam Hammond, president of the Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario, believes trained, certified teachers, male or female, can connect with students of either sex.

He said any changes to classes should be done for the benefit of all students, not just boys, adding this is yet another example of the obsession with standardized test scores and how they are being used to set the educational agenda.