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A school trial will separate the sexes

The private firm running FitzSimmons Middle School hopes to raise test scores.

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The education firm chosen to run a North Philadelphia middle school next fall plans to include a dramatic, visible approach to improve student achievement - separate classes for boys and girls.

The four-story building that houses FitzSimmons Middle School will be divided, with two floors for boys and two for girls, each having its own principal and operating as a separate school.

Victory Schools Inc., the for-profit firm hired to manage FitzSimmons under the district reform plan, announced its intentions to the staff and parents last week.

If the community supports the idea, FitzSimmons will become one of the few public separate-sex schools in the nation. There are now fewer than a dozen, with Philadelphia High School for Girls among them.

Efforts such as the FitzSimmons project started popping up around the country after the U.S. Department of Education announced earlier this year that it would encourage and provide funding to develop more single-sex schools.

Proponents say the schools can cater to learning differences between boys and girls, allow each sex to develop confidence in the classroom, and cut down on flirtatious distractions. They report better test scores and fewer disciplinary problems.

"We had tried all the best practices, extended school day, smaller group instruction, tutors coming every day, and we were not seeing any huge jumps" in test scores, said Benjamin Wright, principal of Thurgood Marshall Elementary in Seattle. "We saw the biggest gain when we split the classes."

But critics, including the American Association of University Women, say there is no conclusive research that shows the method in itself improves student achievement. They say that single-sex schooling often is accompanied by other measures that boost scores.

"Smaller classes, attention to core academics, more qualified teachers, greater discipline, creating a sense of community, and better parental involvement - those

are the elements that enable kids to do better, whether they're in single-sex schools or coed schools," said Nancy Zirkin, the association's director of government relations.

The association fears separation can hinder students. "In the gender context, in the race context, separate is never equal," she said.

Among its graduates, FitzSimmons counts Bill Cosby and two former presidents of the Philadelphia Board of Education - Floyd Alston and Herman Mattleman. But in recent years the school, like many in the city, has struggled amid change.

FitzSimmons, at 26th and Cumberland Streets, serves mostly black children from poor families. Test scores have been problematical for years. Last spring, more than 90 percent of the students scored below the basic level on the state's eighth-grade math test, while three-quarters performed below basic on the reading test.

Before the arrival of principal Sandra Pearson in September, bomb threats had disrupted classes more than 40 times the previous school year.

At Victory, officials believe splitting the sexes will calm the building and enable students to better focus on education.

"For the girls, it's a tremendous builder of self-confidence, and with the boys, the pressure is off in this culture, where sometimes it isn't cool to be smart," said Lynn Spampinato, a former Philadelphia district administrator now heading Victory's education efforts.

Spampinato split the sexes in a Denver elementary school where she was a principal before coming to Philadelphia. She also has been visiting other single-sex institutions, including a Harlem school for girls.

Spampinato emphasized that single-sex classes would be offered in the context of a much larger achievement plan.

Increased time on literacy instruction, character and leadership development, and a restructuring of the

school day, with classes offered in longer blocks over 10 weeks, are planned. Technology, school-to-career programs, wellness and the arts also will be emphasized and infused with the core academics. Students will stay with the same teacher for more than a year. Spampinato also hopes to have a full-time teacher coach in the building.

The single-sex class plan has met with mixed reaction so far.

"I'm willing to try anything within reason, and that's definitely reasonable," said parent Sharron Durham, who has a son in seventh grade at FitzSimons. "It probably would be more conducive to learning, a lot less distracting."

Teachers are on the fence. "It might not be too bad of an idea," Peggy Outing, a 32-year teaching veteran, said before hearing Victory's presentation on Tuesday.

But she cautioned that special attention would have to be paid so that the classes do not discriminate. She also questioned whether the separation would hinder students' preparation for coed high school. And she wondered whether students would fight the change.

"Is it going to be more of a battle to separate them than it is to educate them?"

Some said they doubted separate-sex classes would make any difference in academics.

Dolores Millender, a 35-year teacher, said they were tried before on a smaller scale at FitzSimons but soon disbanded. Still, she's willing to try it again.

Girls liked the idea, but boys didn't.

"Certain boys touch girls," said seventh grader Anita Williams. Added Azsherae Gary: "Sometimes the boys just get distracted by the girls and girls get distracted by the boys."

But seventh grader Kaleem Smalls predicted more fights if boys were set apart. Eighth grader Ernest

Freely also saw drawbacks: "Boys try to impress the girls. They work harder with the girls."

Around the country, experiences with single-sex education have varied. Although even critics say that current law allows such schools as long as equal opportunities are provided for both genders, some public school officials have faced challenges.

In Irvington, N.J., now-retired principal Anthony Pilone said the state Department of Education forced him to stop separating the sexes at Myrtle Middle School in late 1995, saying the program violated the the federal law barring sex discrimination.

"It's the only thing I ever did in 39 years of education where the parents agreed with me, the teachers agreed with me, and the students agreed with me," he said. "Kids literally cried when they had to go back into the coed classroom."

In Seattle, principal Wright separated classes for fourth graders in 2000, largely because of discipline problems. Now, all classes but kindergarten are single sex. "I was seeing 35 or 40 kids a day for discipline referrals, mostly boys," said Wright, whose school serves a largely poor and minority student population.

After the split, the problems all but disappeared. "It calmed the whole building," he said.

And then came a welcome byproduct: improved test scores.

"The boys that had never done well before outperformed the girls," he said.

Girls' scores remained about the same, but more participated in computer and physical-education classes. "They stopped sitting along the wall and saying they can't do it," Wright said.

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