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High school reworked as boys-only

A second will be all-girls. The goal: Appeal to different learning styles.

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As part of growing experimentation with single-sex education in the city, the Philadelphia School District in September will open its first all-boys high school since 1983, when litigation forced prestigious Central High to go coed.

For-profit Victory Schools, which manages six schools in the city, is converting FitzSimons High - a traditional, albeit underachieving, school in North Philadelphia - to a 750-student boys school, to be known as the Young Men's Leadership Academy, for grades 6 through 11. A 12th grade is to be added in the fall of 2006.

The plan would make FitzSimons one of fewer than a handful of public high schools for boys nationally, experts say.

Victory sees its approach with FitzSimons - at 2601 Cumberland St. just outside Strawberry Mansion and with a student population that is nearly all black - as giving much-needed attention to a segment of the student population that has performed below average.

"We'll be able to personalize our education to that population. Everything we do, everything we walk, talk, sleep and drink is all about African American boys, to save a nation of kids who are being lost," said Benjamin Wright, who runs Victory's Philadelphia operation.

Also in September, the company will convert nearby Rhodes High to a girls' school, Young Women's Leadership Academy, offering a similar intensive focus. It will be the city's second girls school, along with Philadelphia High School for Girls, a magnet school. Victory also will run single-sex classes in two of its three elementary schools and its middle school.

Victory isn't the only group eyeing "gender-separate" education as a way to improve academics and cut distractions.

David Hardy, who is affiliated with Community Academy charter school in North Philadelphia, plans to submit an application in November for an all-boys' charter high school. If approved, the 400-student school would open in September 2006 at an undetermined location.

And Paul Vallas, the school district's chief executive officer, says other city schools are

considering experimenting with single-sex classrooms - a philosophy he said he would support if proposed by a school staff.

"The research generally has been supportive of the single-gender concept," said Vallas, whose administration is exploring obtaining federal grants for gender-separate programs. "But it has to be done right. It's no substitute for quality curriculum, quality instruction, and effective school management."

Advocates of single-sex schooling say it can lead to improved academic performance and a broader learning experience as boys and girls try things that defy stereotypes.

"The problem with a coed school is that you favor one sex at the expense of another. Boys and girls learn differently," said Leonard Sax, executive director of the National Association For Single Sex Public Education.

For example, research shows that boys schools work best at improving test scores in elementary school, while scores improve the most at the middle and high schools for girls, said Sax, who will address Victory teachers at a training session Aug. 22 in Philadelphia.

But most studies in the United States focused on private schools, Sax said.

To be effective, teachers must gear instruction toward the different learning styles, he said.

Boys' schools should offer active learning with loud, firm instruction from a teacher who moves about the room.

"Treat them as men, and they're more likely to behave as men," Sax said.

Girls learn best in a quiet, comfortable room, free of distraction, he said.

Boys learn best at a room temperature of 68 degrees; for girls, it's 74 degrees.

But talk of separating the sexes to adapt to different learning styles is hogwash to some groups, including the American Civil Liberties Union. The ACLU argues that gender-separate education in itself does not mean better learning, and can reinforce stereotypes.

"It simply isn't true that all girls learn one way and all boys learn a different way," said Mary Catherine Roper, a staff lawyer for the ACLU of Pennsylvania.

The group also asserts that students in such schools are deprived of the chance to interact and compete with the opposite sex.

Decades ago, many single-sex schools were phased out because they shortchanged girls.

The ACLU was one of the groups that successfully challenged the all-boys status of Central High, suing in Common Pleas Court on behalf of several female students who wanted to be admitted. The court ruled in 1983 that Central, a magnet school, was clearly superior to Girls High, and therefore violated the equal-protection clause of the

14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution and the Equal Rights Amendment to the Pennsylvania Constitution.

Roper said the ACLU had not received complaints about the Victory schools. "It is something we're interested in looking into," she said.

Victory first created gender-separate classes at FitzSimons in 2002-03, and announced plans to make FitzSimons and Rhodes completely gender-separate more than a year ago. Some community members opposed it, largely concerned about student safety, including longer traveling distances. Some even raised the issue of homosexuality, Victory's Wright said.

"A lady stood up at one of the community meetings and said all the girls were going to become lesbians and there were going to be fights of 'dykes' in the halls," Wright recalled.

Experts say that that fear is not grounded in fact. Homosexuality, Sax said, is not more prevalent in single-sex schools.

The Rev. Diane Fauntleroy, whose son will attend FitzSimons, said concerns dissipated once Wright presented the benefits at 20 community meetings.

"Everybody's pretty much for it now," she said. Victory's "goal is for all the kids to leave here and go to college."

Some students, however, have complained.

"I know without girls probably it will help us learn better, but it seems like it's more fun with them," said 10th grader Sylvester Rice, 16, who was taking a break from a summer job at FitzSimons.

He also predicted that fighting would occur between Rhodes' and FitzSimons' factions.

"That's like putting two piranhas in a fish tank," Rice said.

"Or putting a mouse in a snake tank," said Amir Johnson, 16.

Another parent, Sandra Purvis, said she would likely transfer her son, Christian, because she was concerned about an all-boys environment.

"I'm scared they might get to fighting," she said.

Most of FitzSimons' staff from last year transferred out, many to Rhodes to work with the girls.

Teacher Kenya Carter stayed.

"Working with the boys is a whole lot easier," she said. "Boys tend to not be as catty."

She said boys told her they could concentrate better. One said he started raising his hand in class because he didn't feel he had to put on a tough act.

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