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An all-boys public school for Toronto?

By Anthony Reinhart
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New director of education proposes 'Male Leadership Academy,' which would be the city's only single-sex public school

Boys left behind by Toronto's public schools are about to feel a firm new hand pulling them forward - the meaty hand of Chris Spence, the Toronto District School Board's new education director, who is calling for an all-male school and more "boy-friendly" classrooms to address male underachievement.

If adopted, Dr. Spence's "Male Leadership Academy" would be Toronto's only gender-specific public school.

Boys' disengagement at school not only leads to poor grades and unproductive lives, but also can lead to the kind of violence Toronto schools have struggled to control in recent years, Dr. Spence told reporters before presenting a sweeping vision document, his first since becoming director this year, to the board's planning and priorities committee last night.

The document, called the Director's Vision of Hope, also calls for more parental engagement in education, "full-service schools" with facilities to support students' families, better digital technology in classrooms, green energy initiatives and a renewed effort to stem declining enrolment by hiring a marketing director.

As for the plight of young males, "The real objective is to cast a critical eye on how we reach and teach our boys," said Dr. Spence, whose 2008 book, *The Joys of Teaching Boys*, makes the case that boys learn differently from girls and have suffered under a "unisex model for child rearing and teaching."

In Toronto public schools last year, boys were 3.5 times more likely than girls to be suspended. They underperform compared to girls regardless of age, socioeconomic class or ethnicity, and are more likely to need learning support programs.

Dr. Spence, a former football player who studied education, taught and administered schools in Toronto and Hamilton before taking up his current post, has long advocated for strong role models for boys, to offset what he calls a "fatherless world" for too many youngsters. A decade ago, he pioneered a mentoring program called Boys 2 Men, which remains popular among Toronto and Hamilton students.

His new vision calls for a significant extension beyond that, to include a boys-only "Male Leadership Academy" that would open to kindergarten to Grade 3 students next September and add a grade with each successive year.

It would operate as a "school of choice" for interested families.

Within existing co-ed schools, Dr. Spence also wants to set up "demonstration classrooms," some all-male and others using "boy-friendly" teaching techniques that recognize their different learning style.

He said he hopes these initiatives serve as an incentive for more male teachers to work in elementary schools, where they are underrepresented.

"Boys really thrive in environments that are hands-on; they thrive in environments in which there is structure, but also where they're empowered" to move about the classroom, he said. Under the traditional unisex approach, "When every bone in a boy's body is telling him to get up and move around, we're usually telling him to sit down and be quiet."

Catering to the specific learning needs of boys need not take away from similar efforts to help girls, said Dr. Spence, a 47-year-old father of a boy and a girl who attend public elementary schools.

"I think that if you embrace equity, then you understand that equity is equal access to the system, and that may require differentiated treatment," he said. "There's a lot to be done in terms of girls . . . but when you look at the data [regarding boys], to me it's just so compelling, so we have to do something about it."

"This is just an example of differentiating our treatment to better support our boys."

In taking the helm at Canada's largest school board, Dr. Spence inherited a large bureaucracy and a fractious board of trustees who have struggled with issues ranging from school safety to the pressure to close schools due to falling enrolment.

His vision document calls for a "less is more" approach to goal-setting, and lists just three overall priorities for the board: student achievement, parent and community engagement and financial stability.

In addition to several underused schools already under review, Dr. Spence wants to launch eight new reviews in November, and look into conducting four more early next year.

On the enrolment front, he hopes to hire a marketing director to extol the virtues of public school education and stanch recent losses of 4,000 students a year. Mr. Spence also wants to boost the ranks of international students, who pay to attend Toronto schools.

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