**In a class of their own**

John Lorinc  Toronto — Globe and Mail Update Published on Wednesday, Jul. 07, 2010

When Westview Centennial Secondary School introduced two “single-gender” life skills/leadership courses for 300 Grade 9 students last fall, many of the boys initially balked. “When they came in and saw no girls, they said, ‘Are you crazy?'” recalled social sciences teacher Peter Banhan, 39, who championed the pilot program.

By year-end, he said, the kids were so sold on spending part of an otherwise co-ed school day in an all-boy or all-girl class that they wanted to do it again. Westview’s incoming principal Patrick Knight said the results bolster that feedback: the students’ marks rose, attendance improved and suspensions fell.

Westview is thinking of expanding the program to math and science.

The concept of single-gender classes within co-ed schools was a hot topic at the Toronto District School Board’s first-ever “summer institute on boys learning” this week. About 400 teachers and administrators attended the two-day conference, which ended Wednesday at Earl Haig Collegiate Institute in North York.

The lagging achievement of some, but not all, boys is a concern in most developed nations. Countries like Australia and Britain have tried various measures to counter the trend. In the United States, there’s a burgeoning movement to establish all-boy public schools. In Ontario, school districts in Hamilton and Halton Region have been experimenting with single-gender classes within co-ed schools, but the concept hasn’t yet taken hold elsewhere in Canada.

About 50 Toronto public schools now offer single-gender classes and others are studying the idea, said Karen Grose, the superintendent chairing the TDSB’s “boys education steering committee” (BESC). It was established last fall by director of education Christopher Spence with a mandate to close the “achievement gap” between boys and girls.

“Maybe we need to have single-gender learning environments because that’s where some boys thrive,” Ms. Grose said.

The TDSB’s experiences with single-gender classes are quite new, and have been overshadowed by Dr. Spence’s bid to establish an all-boys academy; a feasibility study will be presented to trustees in September, said Ms. Grose.

It is also controversial, as was apparent during a panel discussion involving several male students, some of who had participated in various single-gender programs.

Mandeep Bamwait, 13, said he gained more confidence and motivation in his all-male Grade 8 class at Humberwood Downs Junior Middle Academy because he wasn’t afraid of embarrassing himself when speaking in front of the other students. But Fan Wu, an 18-year-old graduate of Don Mills Collegiate Institute, opposed the idea, saying he’s gained valuable study skills from friends who are girls.

A few teachers who posed questions to the panel expressed concerns that all-boy classes could reinforce stereotypical male behaviour. But as Lukrica Prugo, a Grade 7 teacher at Humberwood Downs who taught an all-boy class this year, observed, “We don’t have all-boys classes to promote that stereotype. [This approach] helps to break them down.”

Attempts to engage boys aren’t new. Many Toronto schools run boys’ reading clubs and offer mentoring programs. Some educators also try to make their classes more “boy friendly” by incorporating technology or making lessons fast-paced and activity oriented, with opportunities for movement, known as “kinesthetic learning.”

But Dr. Spence said many educators still routinely punish fidgety male students by taking away recess or phys-ed. At graduation ceremonies, the symptoms of the lack of engagement become apparent when awards are handed out. “I can tell you that boys are under-represented.”

Part of the solution, he said, lies in more effective teaching styles geared to the specific and often distinct learning styles of boys and girls.

Male students like instant feedback, and prefer to have a measure of control over what they study. “Boys are more likely to demonstrate what they can do if you give them a choice in their activities,” said Avis Glaze, a veteran educator who set up Ontario’s numeracy and literacy secretariat. “If I were a teacher today, I would ask the boys what they’d like to read.”

But several speakers, as well as the students on the panel, warned that as the board presses ahead with its strategy, teachers should avoid pigeonholing male students as mainly interested in subjects such as sports and cars. The system “has to pay attention to boys who stray outside standard gender roles,” Mr. Wu said.