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Tailoring classes capitalizes on learning differences, school says

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When recess time rolled around one day earlier this month, first-grade teacher Della Keck gave her class a choice between free time and watching a princess movie.

Her students raised their hands to vote, and the decision was nearly unanimous: princess movie.

The decision might not be too surprising, though, since her students are all girls.

They're part of a same-sex classroom program Windemere Park Charter Academy in Lansing Township rolled out last year to capitalize on the learning differences between boys and girls.

"Boys and girls learn differently. If they're not learning, we have to teach them the way that they learn," Assistant Principal Shameka McPherson said.

Windemere Park started with one first-grade boys class and one first-grade girls class last year. It expanded this year to second grade and third grade may be added next year, McPherson said.

Each of the same-sex classes has about 25 students, she said. The boys and girls occasionally intermingle during class parties, joint assignments, recess and lunch, she said.

Examples of gender-specific instruction include competitive activities for boys and writing and theatrical opportunities for girls. The boys end up feeling a sense of pride, and the girls feel like they're part of a girl's club, McPherson said.

"It helps them feel good about who they are," she said. "We were trying to create a comfortable environment for them so they could feel like they could be themselves and feel safe enough to take risks."

Second-grader Tiegan Thomas, 7, of Lansing, said he likes it when his teacher shows his all-boys class how to draw monsters and when they play quiet ball - the teacher throws a ball to the quietest child.

"It's really fun because you get to play catch in school," Tiegan said. "When there's no girls, we get to play really fun boy games."

First-grade teacher Tena Walacavage plays a freeze game with her all-boys class to see who can stay frozen the longest. She breaks up academic lessons with that game and other stimulation activities, such as squeezing stress balls or drawing while lying under the desks.

"I try to keep them moving because they learn better than when they're sitting still," she said. "They're still held to the same standards as any other student, but we just try to keep them actively engaged."

Growing presence

During the last seven years, the prevalence of same-sex education has grown dramatically, according to the National Association for Single Sex Public Education, an Exton, Pa.-based nonprofit.

In 2002, 11 public schools nationwide offered single-gender classrooms, according to the association. Today, at least 545 public schools offer single-sex education, the group said. At least 91 of those are single-sex schools, meaning all activities occur in same-sex settings.

The association counts 13 public schools in Michigan that offer same-sex education, but founder and Executive Director Dr. Leonard Sax said that number is likely low because it's difficult to track all schools.

"We're not saying single-sex education is best for every child - every child is different," he said. "We recommend that school districts offer a choice."

Sax emphasized that proper training is essential to creating successful same-sex environments.

Windemere Park has sent about 15 teachers to Colorado Springs for training in gender-specific learning through the Gurian Institute, using the school's professional development funds, McPherson said. She said she did not know the cost of the training, but according to the Gurian Institute's Web site, the 2009 summer training in Colorado cost about \$695 a person.

McPherson said she also plans to bring trainers to the school to train the entire staff this summer.

Gender differences

"It's the best thing that I have ever seen a school do," said Watertown Township resident Margie Jacobs, 36, whose second-grader, Catie, 7, is in the all-girls class. "Girls are more visual - they have to see it, they have to touch it to fully understand and absorb all that information."

Because Keck's students are girls, the teacher said she's able to spend longer amounts of time focusing on each assignment or subject. For instance, her girls can spend 35 to 40 minutes sitting on the floor, listening to and practicing reading; whereas boys can spend only about 15 to 20 minutes before getting restless, she said.

They also write and illustrate stories, read and write poetry, act out or do puppet shows to illustrate books and dance to songs about topics such as the ABCs and the names of the months.

"It enables them to see that story - to make reading real, to make reading fun. It's not a chore," Keck said.

And, of course, there are the really girlish activities, too: tea parties that teach social skills and manners, pink- and purple-themed days and princess dress-up day.

"We always get to do girly stuff, and we get to do it without boys saying, 'Eww,'" said second-grader Brooklyn Niravong, 7, of Lansing.

Additional Facts

By the numbers

545

approximate number of public schools nationwide that offer single-sex education

91

approximate number of public schools nationwide that are single-sex schools

13

approximate number of public schools in Michigan that offer single-sex education

Source: National Association for Single Sex Public Education
