

New York Times, August 23, 1996, P. 1B

Rights Groups Seek to Bar A Girls-Only Public School

By JACQUES STEINBERG

The battle over the new all-girls public school in East Harlem shifted yesterday from the New York City Board of Education to the United States Department of Education, as three civil rights groups filed a joint complaint charging the school with discriminating against boys.

The organizations — the New York Civil Liberties Union, the New York chapter of the National Organization for Women and the New York Civil Rights Coalition — conceded that they were unlikely to block the opening of the school on Sept. 4. Federal education officials said that the formal response to such filings usually takes four to six months.

But the opponents said they felt it was important to register their immediate objection to a vote on Wednesday night by the Board of Education, which endorsed the all-girls junior high school and committed the board to expanding it into a high school in the next few years. Officials in District 4, which is administering the school, said they had already enrolled a full class of 50 seventh-grade girls for the coming school year.

Norman Siegel, the executive director of the civil liberties union, said that the only hope of preventing the school from opening would be to seek a temporary injunction from the courts. But to do so, he said, would require a boy to come forward saying he had attempted to apply to the school and had been rejected.

"We don't have that yet," he said.

Federal education officials said that they would first seek to mediate the dispute. Barring a resolution, they said they would likely mount an investigation to determine whether the school should be allowed to exclude boys.

In justifying the school, district

An effort to raise girls' achievement is attacked as isolating them from the world.

officials have cited research showing that some girls perform worse, and participate less, when boys are around, particularly in math and science classes.

The civil rights advocates who filed the complaint did not dispute that there was a discrepancy in girls' achievement. But they said that the solution was not to sequester 50 girls in an environment that did not mirror the real world.

"This is a Band-Aid approach to equality for girls," said Anne Connors, president of the NOW chapter.

The advocates center their complaint on the education amendments to Title IX of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibit educational programs receiving Federal money from discriminating on the basis of sex.

In June, the Supreme Court ruled that the State of Virginia could not support barring women from the state-sponsored Virginia Military Institute. Writing for the majority, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg said that the state had not demonstrated an "exceedingly persuasive justification" for keeping girls out of V.M.I.

Officials at the Board of Education said yesterday that they were confident they could meet that test.

"Girls of this age do not flourish in math and science the way they do in a single-sex school," said Sandra E. Lerner, the board member representing the Bronx.

NEWSDAY, Aug. 25, 1996 p. 2

ALL-GIRLS SCHOOL: GIVE IT A TRY

LOOK AT IT this way. At least New York City has improved the quality of its education wars. Not long ago, parents, administrators and politicians were single-mindedly fighting about condoms and multiculturalism. Today, in East Harlem's District 4, educational innovators are fighting the civil liberties crowd for the right to establish a junior high school aimed at honing the academic skills of teenage girls only.

This is progress.

There are two questions to ask about the Young Women's Leadership School - which will open its doors to an initial class of 50 seventh graders on Sept. 4.

-- Will it do what its founders promise and improve the proficiency of adolescent girls in math and science while molding them into confident women?

-- Can it withstand a legal challenge - backed by the New York Civil Liberties Union, National Organization for Women and New York Civil Rights Coalition - which argues that it illegally segregates public-school students by gender?

In truth, the school is a useful experiment. Studies show that many young women lose their assertiveness - along with skill in math and science - as they reach adolescence. Perhaps a public-school environment free of coeducational pressures can help teenage girls build confidence and maintain a clear focus on their studies as they struggle through a difficult stage.

Yet this high-profile controversy shouldn't divert us from the No. 1 challenge facing the city's schools - which is providing a quality education for more than 1 million girls and boys. Ideas like single-gender schools are popular and easy to grasp. But they are no substitute for rigorous teaching and high expectations or for stable and loving families. This project will not solve the basic problems.

Meanwhile, the legal questions are arguable but real. Last week the civil liberties groups filed a complaint with the U.S. Department of Education, contending that the school is discriminatory because it won't admit boys. Foes contend that its premise serves to stigmatize teenage boys - and in East Harlem, minority boys in particular.

Moreover, if it's legally permissible to set up a girls-only school because girls do better without boys, won't it just be a matter of time before whites, somewhere in the country, set up a whites-only school on grounds that white students perform better academically when blacks aren't around? Proponents of the East Harlem school say their idea isn't unfair, because boys have access to similar programs at another school in the district. Unfortunately, this is an argument that the separate-but-equal segregationists of the 1940s South might recognize all too well.

No, no, no - we're not equating the educators of District 4 with yesterday's Dixiecrats. In fact, District 4 has a laudable track record of successful innovation. And the motives underlying the Young Women's Leadership School are idealistic and decent. But the legal underpinnings need a thorough vetting.

Attempts to establish similar public schools elsewhere have

failed. If this one succeeds, the federal government or the courts must be careful to explain exactly why it should. And they must rule narrowly enough so that this experiment cannot be used later as a disreputable precedent for turning back the clock to the days of racial segregation.

All-Girls' Public School to Open Despite Objections

By JACQUES STEINBERG

Over the objections of civil rights advocates, the first single-sex public school in New York City in a decade is planning to open its doors to 50 seventh-grade girls when the school year begins in September, a Board of Education official said yesterday.

When plans for the school, known as the Young Women's Leadership School, were disclosed last month, questions were immediately raised about whether it would violate Federal and city discrimination laws by excluding boys.

While still bracing for a possible lawsuit, school planners, including the East Harlem school district of which it is part, have taken several steps in recent weeks to assure the school's legality. Those steps, which include allowing boys to apply if they choose, have

largely satisfied Schools Chancellor Rudy Crew, who does not intend to block its opening, said Dr. Judith Rizzo, the Deputy Chancellor for Curriculum.

"I want to see this system be flexible enough to accommodate a whole variety of options," said Dr. Rizzo, herself a graduate of an all-girls' Catholic school. "It behooves us to explore this."

The school, conceived by Andrew Tisch, the chairman of the Loews Corporation, and his wife, Ann Rubenstein Tisch, is inspired by a simple premise: studies have shown that girls, particularly in poor neighborhoods like East Harlem, perform better when boys are not in the classroom.

But critics of the school, including the New York Civil Liberties Union and the New York Civil Rights Coalition, say that the changes planners have made in an attempt

to make the school pass legal scrutiny are largely cosmetic. They say they will hope to prevent the school from opening, through the courts or by appeal to Federal and state education officials.

"If they are not going to do any affirmative outreach to boys," said Norman Siegel, the executive director of the New York Civil Liberties Union, "then that is not acceptable."

While officials in District 4 say they have decided to permit boys to apply to the school and be interviewed for admission, they concede that they have not actively recruited boys and that none have come forward. The incoming fall class, they add, is now virtually full.

And even if a boy did apply, school offi-

cials said, they are not sure whether they would accept him, considering that the interview process is geared toward finding young girls interested in learning to be leaders.

Then there is the question of whether the school, which will occupy the top three floors of a commercial building on East 106th Street near Park Avenue, is technically a free-standing school after all. To the Board of Education, it will be officially designated as a "program" that is a division of nearby Junior High School 13, which is co-ed.

Under the 27-year-old law desegregating the city's schools, community school districts may start new programs without the consent of the Board of Education or the Chancellor, Dr. Rizzo said. Under that provision, districts have opened dozens of alternative academies in recent years by calling them programs.

The legal distinction is important, because it allows the school to open without any action by the Chancellor, Dr. Rizzo said.

But a district official, who insisted on anonymity, said that the designa-

tion was largely one of semantics. Girls who attend the Young Women's Leadership School, the official said, will have no reason to enter the junior high school building that they theoretically attend.

To Michael Meyers, the executive director of the Civil Rights Coalition,

calling the girls' school a program is a form of subterfuge that allows the Chancellor "not to intervene" and "not to enforce the law."

While the school is expected to open on Sept. 4, its future remains very much unresolved. The district board passed a resolution on May 15 calling for the school to expand to grades 9 through 12 in the coming years, making it a junior high school and high school.

But only the Board of Education has the authority to open a high school, and Dr. Rizzo said that the Chancellor's office would carefully study the legal ramifications — and the school's performance this year — before allowing it to expand.

The Board of Education is to have a preliminary discussion of the matter with lawyers from the city and planners of the school in an executive session on Aug. 21.

Meanwhile, plans for the school are moving ahead. The leased space, which once housed an arts high school, is ready for the students to move in. A director and three teachers have been hired. And there is talk of designing an optional school uniform, perhaps plaid skirts with white blouses, that would give the school the feel of the private all-girls' academy it aspires to emulate.

There is also planning to combat the legal challenge that is expected.

"We are all law-abiding citizens," said Seymour Fliegel, a senior fellow at the Center for Educational Innovation, which took the Tisches' idea to District 4. "We have faith in the United States Constitution and the courts. We are not renegades."

Where the Boys Aren't, Schoolgirls Both

By JACQUES STEINBERG

Having shared a classroom with a boy or two over the course of her 11 years, Kara Benson has come to an important conclusion:

"Most of them," she says, "are jerks."
 "They haven't really grown up yet," she explains. "I definitely think that at age 12, or around there, the girls act more mature than the boys."

For Kara, that will not be a problem this school year. The Upper West Side resident is one of 50 seventh-grade pioneers who have enrolled in the Young Women's Leadership School in East Harlem, which will be the first single-sex public school in New York City in a decade and one of only three in the United States.

The new school, which has been criticized by civil rights advocates who contend that it discriminates against boys and wrongly segregates girls, cleared an important hurdle last week when Schools Chancellor Rudy Crew signaled that he would not block its opening.

Barring a late-hour legal challenge, the Chancellor has effectively assured the school's planners that the school will begin classes as scheduled, on Sept. 4.

The news has come as sweet relief to the girls in the school's first class. While the grown-ups have argued over the school's fate, the girls have spent the last two months poring over the books on a recommended reading list of "Summer Delights" (from James Herriot's "All Things Bright and

Beautiful" to Langston Hughes's poetry), getting measured for their new uniforms (navy blazers and pleated skirts, with ivory T-shirts) and imagining what life will be like without boys around.

"You feel uncomfortable sometimes around boys," said Albeliza Perez, 12, of Washington Heights, who eagerly applied to the school last month after her mother read about it in the newspaper. "You feel more insecure about yourself. You feel like you have to look nice for them."

"I don't want to go to school to be a model," she added. "I want to go to school to learn."

But interviews with Albeliza, Kara and six of their prospective classmates — as well as their parents — make clear that not all the girls are looking forward to being sequestered on the top three floors of a commercial building on East 106th Street, in a leased space modeled on an all-girls private preparatory school.

Elizabeth Berdecia, a counselor at the Department of Homeless Services, said she directed her 11-year-old daughter, Cynthia Lopez, to apply to the school because she believes Cynthia has been too "boy crazy" to focus fully on her studies. "I didn't really want to go," said Cynthia, who had already committed to the innovative Central Park East School, an alternative public academy nearby. "I wanted to be with boys and girls, not just girls. It's

just fun to hang out with boys, to talk to them and stuff."

The founding premise of the school, which was conceived by Ann Rubenstein Tisch, a former television reporter, and her husband, Andrew, the chairman of the Loews Corporation, is fairly simple: studies have shown that girls are less likely to participate, and to be called on, if there are boys in the room.

Many of the girls interviewed said they had experienced that treatment firsthand.

"In some of my science and math classes, I noticed that the boys were the ones picked to answer most of the questions," said Albeliza, who last attended Intermediate School 118 in the northwest Bronx. "And if they answered wrong, the teacher would go to another boy. By the end of the period, once all the boys had stopped paying attention, then the teacher started talking to the girls."

The Young Women's Leadership School will make every effort to compensate, not just with concentrated attention but with special flourishes.

Chemistry laboratory periods will last as long as 80 minutes, twice as long as in many other schools, with lab tables arrayed at angles, rather than straight lines, to allow the teacher to move around the room

more freely. A women's studies class will teach the girls about gender issues. And internships are planned for the girls to introduce them to women working in various fields.

"I have met a few of the girls and talk to them a lot on the phone," said Dania McDermott, 11, who lives in the Williamsbridge section of the Bronx and is hoping to arrange an internship at a nursing home. "We talk about how excited we are and can't wait for the school year to begin."

Eager and Not So

Since plans for the school were first disclosed last month, school organizers, including District 4 in East Harlem, have made several changes intended to assure its legality. They now say they would take an application from a boy (none have yet applied). They also will consider the school a program, meaning it is technically part of a nearby junior high school, which is coeducational.

But district officials have raised the ire of organizations like the New York Civil Rights Coalition by conceding that the fall class is largely full and that the program will have no contact with the coed junior high school. Michael Meyers, the executive director of the coalition, says he is contemplating asking state or Federal education officials to intervene.

There is also the practical matter of those pleated skirts.

While not required, the girls were strongly encouraged to buy the uniforms. Parents have spent upward of \$100 at a Bronx shop for a skirt, a blazer, a T-shirt and, for alternate days, a pair of navy slacks.

Amy Lopez, 12, who lives in Spanish Harlem, says that she will reluctantly wear her uniform, but would rather wear "anything denim."

Cynthia Lopez (who is not related to Amy) says she loves her uniform because she will no longer be "dissed" for wearing "ugly clothes," since everyone will be dressed the same.

Using a formula set by District 4, the school has drawn 80 percent of its students from the neighborhood, which is predominantly black and Hispanic. Kara will be one of the exceptions. She is white and living on the Upper West Side. Her parents once took her out of a private school and placed her in a bilingual program at a public elementary school, even though she spoke no Spanish.

"I think life is best when it is interesting," said her father, Terry Benson, a stage manager at WNET-Channel 13, the public television station. "We don't, as a family, tend to shy away from things that are complicated. We thought, 'This ought to be fun.'"