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No boys? No problem, says all-girls school

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NEW YORK—

Celenia Chevre has no apologies about her all-girls public school in the heart of one of New York's poorest neighborhoods. The proof, she says, is in the voices.

"When [the girls] first came here, this was a very quiet environment, and the girls had very few questions to ask or they didn't know what kind of questions to ask," says Ms. Chevre. "Now you hear their voices. They certainly have no problem sharing their opinions."

Neither does Chevre, who has worked with the New York Board of Education in teacher and principal development for more than 25 years. And it's a good thing. The Young Women's Leadership School, of which she is principal, has stirred up plenty of controversy since its high-profile beginning in 1996.

The East Harlem school, with its sparkling lavender and green walls and tidy classrooms, is an unlikely candidate to raise a firestorm of criticism. The students - all neatly outfitted in blue and gray uniforms - fill the halls with teenage chatter as they move between classes.

But there aren't any boys. And that, in some people's view, is a problem.

The past decade has given voice to experts who say girls learn differently and to advocates of separate-sex schooling. Some even argue that such schools can boost girls struggling against the tide of poverty. To the Leadership School's founder, Ann Rubenstein Tisch, that was reason enough to make single-sex education accessible through the public school system.

"Poverty is becoming more and more of a women's issue," says Ms. Tisch. "And research shows that the unraveling comes at seventh grade for girls. We used the logic of 'If it works for children in affluent communities, why not here?' "

Despite the research in favor of single-sex environments, barring boys is discriminatory, say the New York chapters of the American Civil Liberties Union and the National Organization for Women. A complaint filed with the federal Department of Education is still pending.

Three years after its controversial start, however, The Young Women's Leadership school is flourishing.

The school, which started with only seventh through ninth grades, added 10th this year and will expand to 11th next year and 12th the year after. Its numbers have quadrupled from 50 to about 200 students.

With the rapid expansion, frequent media attention, and daily administrative duties, Chevre is finding it's not an easy job keeping up.

"I have to deal not only with the education, but the media," she says, eyeing the lunch that's been preempted by yet another meeting. "We're in a fishbowl constantly, so there is no moment when you can sit back and relax."

The heightened attention might be attributable to another of the school's distinctions - its well-connected founder.

Ann Rubenstein was climbing the ranks as a television reporter when she met and married Andrew Tisch, heir to the Loews Corp. family fortune.

Her status has given rise to a common misconception - that the institution is getting extra support from Tisch family connections, giving the school an unfair advantage.

At first blush, it's an easy assumption to make. Stepping off the elevator, visitors are greeted by a spit-and-polish shine. Classes are small, the girls wear uniforms, equipment and books are new, and students are required to go through an admissions process.

It resembles an affluent private school in many ways, sans the tuition fee.

In a city where significant differences in quality exist between schools, skepticism is natural. But accusations of advantages are simply not true, say Chevre and Tisch. "There are no extras," says Chevre. "It's regular funding.

"I think it's what you do with what you get," she adds. "I've been in the system, so I know how to work with money creatively. You have to make it work for you."

It's also one of the reasons Chevre has so much work to do. There's no room in the budget for extra staff. She's flying solo on many fronts.

She doesn't have the discipline problems common to large urban co-ed schools, though, and there hasn't been a single case of teen pregnancy. The girls here are motivated and focused on learning.

Ninth-grader Leslie Cortez has noticed a change in herself since enrolling as a seventh grader.

"The all-girls environment makes me feel so much more comfortable," she says. "Since I've been here, I've really opened up and become more independent. I don't miss co-ed schools."

Classmates agree that the absence of boys helps them focus.

What they mean is also evidenced in the classroom. In teacher Cindy Jackson's 10th-grade chemistry class, the energy - and decibel - levels are high.

Ms. Jackson, who came from a co-ed school in the Midwest, says she's been able to see firsthand the advantages of the single-sex environment.

"It's so fundamentally sound for the girls," she says. "It's a solid environment for learning, where they're allowed to develop confidence and independence."

Chevre says there have been a few cases where students decided the academics were too rigorous or they wanted to be around boys. Even so, the school has a waiting list.

The school's success raises the obvious question: Are single-sex schools the answer to public education's shortcomings?

Chevre and Tisch are clear on that point: No. But they believe the option should exist.

"It's a choice," says Chevre. "This is an opportunity for those girls who would benefit from this type of setting to have it. There are some wonderful private single-sex schools, but not everyone can afford \$16,000 to \$20,000 a year. So here we have it, and why not?"

She's quick to praise the New York school district for supporting such concept schools.

"We have all kinds of different schools here," she says. "So this is just another choice for those girls who would like to be here."