

Catholic board considers single-gender schools

Declining enrolment prompts board to examine boys-only, girls-only policy for St. Robert and St. Elizabeth high schools

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Staff Writer

To prevent student enrolment from dropping, Catholic officials are looking at converting their Thornhill high schools to all-girls and all-boys institutions.

Senior staff at the York Catholic District School Board are examining a proposal to convert St. Elizabeth High School to a girls school and St. Robert to a boys school.

Officials are taking a hard look at the idea because they expect significantly fewer students will attend both schools in the next few years.

The schools would retain Ministry of Education curriculum under the plan, but would also bring in the International Baccalaureate (IB) program, a universal style of education.

"Many parents resist this because they have already established bonds in their schools. I will be the first to tell you, single-gender schools are not for everybody," Jack Cronin, associate director of instructional services, said.

"This is not a done deal. We want to have a consultation process, which we already did."

Officials have held at least five public meetings on the issue, but have not scheduled any additional ones. They vow to nix or modify the proposal if droves of community members oppose it.

Single-gender schools have experienced a modest rebirth in the U.S. and Cronin said they offer various advantages. Their courses are structured to meet the needs of a particular gender and research shows they cut the number of "distractions" in school, he noted.

The IB program, he added, will open up a more rigorous learning environment in key subject areas and give students an advantage when applying to universities. Formed for the children of diplomats and monitored by officials in Geneva, an IB education is accepted at post-secondary institutions around the world.

But at least one parent isn't keen on the board's idea and is debating whether to switch his daughter, slated to attend St. Robert, to the public system.

"I was thinking maybe if they insist on switching to a single-gender system, maybe we'll switch to a public school," 47-

year-old Thornhill resident Joseph Leung said. "There's no single-gender society. Why do we have to provide single-gender schools?"

The board's ultimate goal is to have enrolment at each school hover steadily around 1,000 students.

Projections put the population of St. Elizabeth, which has about 1,400 students, at less than 800 over the next five to 10 years. St. Robert, with approximately 1,500 students, is to fall to less than 850.

The drops are likely because a Richmond Hill high school, St. Therese, is scheduled to open in September 2001 and draw on elementary students who would ordinarily attend St.

Elizabeth and St. Robert.

The board, which ruled out converting the two schools to arts or technology institutions in arriving at the proposal, doesn't expect to make its decision before the summer. It's hoping changes will be in place for September 2001.

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