

BOYS LAG IN SCHOOL: EXPERTS

New curriculum, resources could address problem

BY STEFANIA RIZZI
Staff Writer

Teaching methods and practices in schools put boys at risk of under-achieving, experts agree. "We have to question whether the curriculum and assessments and educational resources are biased and whether, as some (theorists) feel, are favourable to the female learning style," David Dibbon, a lecturer and education professor at Memorial University in Newfoundland, told 400 educators in Richmond Hill Jan. 9.

Educators at the conference, organized by the York Catholic District School Board, were told national and international research shows girls outperform boys on open-ended and essay-type tests, whereas boys do better at multiple-choice questions.

"It's incumbent on administrators to provide an eclectic amount of resources that appeal to both (boys and girls)," Mr. Dibbon said.

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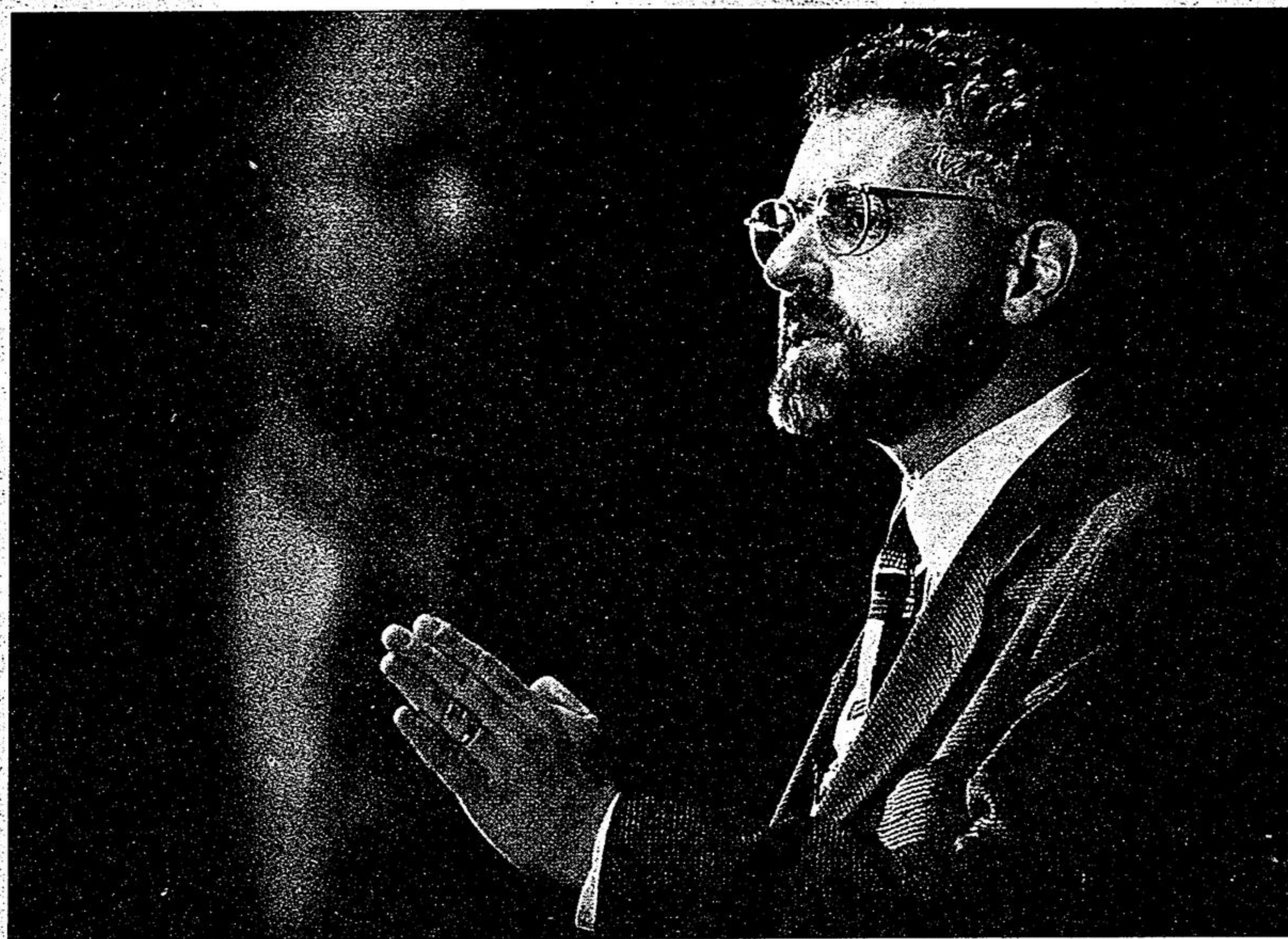
Featured speakers and panelists included local, national and international educators, researchers and administrators.

They discussed the international conundrum of why girls continually outperform their male counterparts academically and what can narrow the gap.

According to 1998-1999 provincewide Grade 3 and 6 tests, boys lag behind girls in almost every core subject.

The standardized tests, conducted annually by the Education Quality and Accountability Office, show that among Grade 3 students, 10 per cent more girls than boys scored at the provincial level in reading, 15 per cent more girls than boys met the provincial standard in writing, while 3 per cent more girls than boys performed at the provincial standard in math.

Among Grade 6 students, 16 per cent more girls than boys met provincial levels in reading, 21 per cent more girls than boys scored at



STAFF PHOTO/MIKE BARRETT

Speaker Michael Gurian shared controversial theories on why boys learn differently than girls.

the provincial level in writing and 2 per cent more girls than boys performed at the provincial standard in math.

Students' thoughts on reading, writing and math could help educators understand the gender gap, said Catholic school board curriculum and assessment superintendent Barbara Bodkin.

"That would definitely help," said Ms Bodkin, who helped organize the region's first conference on boys' achievement.

"We've known (what students' attitudes were) for some time, so we'll work with that to ensure more broad-based resources are used to help our boys."

Although three-quarters of the board's schools show a gender gap in academic performance, Ms Bodkin is confident that will decrease over time.

"It is said by some the gap has always been there," she said.

Ms Bodkin explained the board is implementing some of the strategies discussed at the conference, including having teacher-librarians compile lists of "boy friendly" reading material and examining the balance of fiction and non-fiction books in the curriculum, learning how to cater to the needs of visual learners and ways to incorporate a "stretch break" during lessons to help restless students.

"We're working on strategies. All we can do is collect information

and see what works and what doesn't," she said. "With some (strategies), you'll see immediate improvements. With others, it may take longer."

The most controversial part of the day-long event was when keynote speaker Michael Gurian discussed biological reasons why boys underachieve.

'It's their learning, not ours, and somehow they've been kept out of the loop.'

The American author, educator, neuroscience researcher and family therapist said it takes boys 60 seconds to switch from one task to another and boys are more impulsive and disruptive than girls because they have higher levels of testosterone and lower levels of serotonin.

"My profound belief is that every child is smart. Once everyone gets a better working knowledge about the human brain, we'll innovate teaching methods," he said.

However, at least one educator called Mr. Gurian's beliefs "dangerous and simplistic".

Toronto District School Board equity co-ordinator Terezia Zoric said Gurian's biological theories do

more harm than good.

"All it does is predispose boys' learning capacity," she said. "A lot has to do with self-esteem, not biological reasons," said Zoric, who believes cultural and socio-economic factors influence a child's learning more than biology.

"He's trying to make a causation out of an apparent correlation."

Regardless of the factors contributing to boys' academic underachievement, Jon Pickering of the Institute of Education in England said strategies are needed to correct the age-old problem.

The lecturer is a strong believer in allowing students to take part in setting educational targets.

"It's their learning, not ours, and somehow they've been kept out of the loop," said Mr. Pickering, adding strategies that have improved boys' achievement are groupings (classroom seating arrangements where stronger students are placed with weaker ones), creating different sets of tests for boys and girls, a more elective-based curriculum, altering expectations and implementing a reward system.

"Connecting with students and involving them is very central and key to moving forward," he explained.

"But all this can't be at the expense of girls or else the system becomes polarized. If that does happen ... it's a detriment to both boys and girls."

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www.rabbie-burns.com

The renowned Scottish bard's Jan. 25 birthday has been celebrated for more than 200 years with Burns suppers and other activities. Check out this website for the story of Burns' life and times, a selection of his poems, as well some quick facts about Burns and his acquaintances. There are guidelines for preparing a Burns supper and an ode to the haggis, which is described in all its splendour. Send e-cards to fellow Burns enthusiasts.

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