

The Star-Ledger

October 19, 2012; Circulation: 278,940

Newark debuts N.J.'s only all-boys public school amid high hopes, criticism

Standing in the middle of his school auditorium with 80-some other boys, 11-year-old Amir Chance grinned nervously and shifted from foot to foot, waiting for his turn to get a gray necktie draped around his neck and knotted.

The brand new neckwear was more than an adornment for the boys' powder blue and navy uniforms. It was an award students at the Eagle Academy for Young Men of Newark earned through class participation and attendance. The tie meant Amir and the other boys were now "Eagles."

"I wanted one for a long time," said Amir, who has attended the academy since it opened last month.

The academy is one of Newark's newest public schools, and part of the district's plans to re-imagine itself from the ground up. Over the past year-and-a-half, the district has closed schools, replaced many of its principals and opened new schools with innovative programs.

Eagle Academy's new approach is to teach only boys, making it the only public, non-charter in New Jersey that allows entrance to a single sex, according to state Department of Education officials. While single-sex schools are usually private schools, the concept is gaining steam among public schools. According to the National Association for Single-Sex Public Education, nearly 500 public schools nationwide have launched some single-sex programs over the past 10 years.

Yet, there is still resistance to segregating boys from girls in the classroom, and the American Civil Liberties Union of New Jersey is concerned girls don't have the same opportunities to attend a single-sex school.

Eyebrows also are being raised about the Eagle Academy's principal, Vaughn Thompson, who resigned from the Young Scholars Academy in the Bronx after issues arose about unauthorized spending.

But school officials say they have no doubt about the Eagle Academy's success. "The idea of having a single-sex school, focused on our young men — I knew it had ingredients of greatness," Newark Mayor Cory Booker said during a speech at the school last month.

The Eagle Academy is operated by the Newark district but its educational program is supported by a New York City organization called the Eagle Academy Foundation, which provides educational resources and community programs to the Newark school

and three all-boys institutions in New York. Schools run by the foundation had a high school graduation rate of 87 percent in 2010, compared to Newark's 61 percent in 2011, according to the state Department of Education.

But what is an all-boys school like? Joelle Tutela, director of teacher education at Rutgers-Newark's Urban Teacher Education Program and a former consultant for Eagle Academy, said oftentimes students in single-sex schools are more motivated to focus on their studies and not other things.

"There's a sense of seriousness among the students," Tutela said, noting her time with an Eagle Academy school in New York. "There wasn't a need to show off. Showing off was more about what you knew than joking."

But Kathryn Herr, a professor at Montclair State University who studied a California public school that became a single-sex academy, said the research on same-sex education has been mixed.

The school has longer days and weeks — students are there 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., and attend four hours of classes on Saturdays

"Most of the research says it can work and (some says) it can't work as well," Herr said. "People were hoping it would be a magic bullet and the research doesn't show that so far. The jury's still out on it," Herr said.

Herr said some downsides in separating classrooms by sex were that teachers found it more challenging to teach just one sex, and at times reinforced gender stereotypes and homophobia. She also said teachers reported that if there was a boy who usually got into fights in a co-ed classroom, that same boy had more fights and more behavior problems in a same-sex classroom.

Thompson hopes the rigorous curriculum at Eagle Academy will end the historic cycle of males under performing in inner-city public schools. He says kids in same-sex schools like to participate more because they're surrounded by classmates who are their "band of brothers" and elements of lesson plans — such as comic book-inspired literature — are geared toward them.

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If this approach has such promise, the ACLU of New Jersey is questioning why Newark would open a single-sex school for just one sex.

"We're concerned," said Jeanne LoCicero, deputy legal director at the ACLU. "We don't oppose the idea of Newark providing a school that has a rigorous academic program, but we think all children should be able to participate in that kind of program. Boys and girls."

Renee Harper, a Newark public schools spokeswoman, said the district plans to open an all-girls school in September, adding that the staff needs another year to plan.

And there are questions about Principal Thompson, who helped design and lead one of New York City's innovative new schools for five years before he resigned on Jan. 5, 2010.

Vaughn Thompson, the principle at the Eagle Academy for Young Men of Newark, gives sixth grader Ibn Easterling a good morning handshake. Robert Sciarrino/The Star-Ledger
After an investigation that determined he had an affair with a female subordinate and inappropriately used a city-issued credit card, he was ordered to pay back the education department \$9,000 for the unauthorized charges, said David Pena, a New York City Department of Education spokesman.

Newark school officials, who said they were aware of Thompson's past troubles, said he used the credit card to buy school supplies, including paper and books, and not for any personal expenses.

Harper said the district hired him after a rigorous selection process because he is "an outstanding instructional leader."

He has repeatedly declined to discuss the situation at his old school.

Thompson said he understands same-sex education isn't for the masses, but said the parents who applied to Eagle Academy listed it as their No. 1 choice for middle school, and many seem pleased with the experience their sons are having.

"I'm so proud of what he's doing. He's matured so much that he even helps his sister with her homework," said Leah Wolfe, a 37-year-old single mom of seven, after snapping pictures of her son, Chance, getting his necktie during last month's ceremony. "I think this helps him concentrate on his schooling, and the more he's in school, the less he's out on the streets so I know he's safe."

School officials say there are high expectations for students at the academy, which will eventually include grades 6-12. That's why, officials said, they named the institution after a majestic bird.

"An Eagle soars above all others. Eagles don't travel in packs or anything like that," said David Banks, president of the Eagle Academy Foundation. "And that whole notion of the Eagle eye: being able to have that very serious, determined, focused discipline, strength, (a) leader. All the things that are embodied in the power and the majesty of the eagle, that's what we want for our young men."

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