Academy explores new future

From left, Neasha Jones, BreAnna Thompson and Shee Svendsen, first-graders at the Academy of the Sacred Heart in Grand Coteau, play recently with rain sticks during class.

182 years ago, wish was for both girls and boys schools

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GRAND COTEAU — During a recent trip to Washington, D.C., the headmistress of the Academy of the Sacred Heart girls school heard a voice talk to her from another century. 

It spoke in a footnote in the journal of Mrs. Charles Smith, the widow of an affluent planter, who donated the land where the school stands in Grand Coteau today. After headmistress Mary Burns read the translated document, originally written in French, she discovered that Smith wanted the land to serve a dual purpose as the site of an all-girls school and an all-boys school, too.

"I had not been aware of this,"

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Sacred Heart began as an institute for young women.

Burns said, "This was desired in 1821. Are we now going to realize that desire? It suddenly put it into a whole 'other realm.'"

The girls school obviously became a reality. And maybe, 182 years after Smith wrote that footnote, a committee could decide to open an all-boys school in 2003.

The advantages of separating boys and girls to educate them has been studied for years.

Experts say that girls at single-sex schools are more likely to explore non-traditional subjects, and are encouraged to be daring, try things that they might not otherwise try.

Sheila Kurtz, who serves as the head of the high school, has 30 years of experience at the Academy.

"She's sold on separating the boys from the girls. The curriculum is crafted to teach them in a way that is easier to learn. Kurtz said. Girls, for instance, are usually not as competitive as boys.

"They work well in groups and cooperatively," she said. "I taught in a co-ed class, and boys demand your attention, whether it is to control behavior or because they are outspoken."

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Girls do well with hands-on activities in math and sciences.

"They are not afraid to speak up in class, and they don't have to dumb down because boys are in the class," Kirts said.

The National Association for Single Sex Public Education said there are at least 31 public schools in the United States offering some form of single-sex education, but Louisiana has more than 40 grades-specific private schools in and around New Orleans.

But there is no school serving boys in Acadiana, according to Dr. George Smith, chair of the boys division committee. Schools like Catholic High in Lafayette use single-sex schools for all girls and all-boys schools, and Catholic High of New Orleans was an all-boys one.

"It's an idea that was brought up before, but it just didn't work," Smith said.

"All the boys here have more team sports," Smith said. "A boys-only school is a different kind of education for their sons."

Lacey Laffaye serves on a committee trying to decide if the area's desire for a boys school matches the desire of that long-ago-wealthy widow.

The small classes, individual attention and emphasis on academic, spiritual and social goals have convinced Laffaye that a single-sex environment is necessary for her son's education.

"My daughter is in third grade," said Laffaye, who also has a 13-year-old son. "It is just a real neat spot." Laffaye hopes her son will attend the new school.

Boys and girls are different," she said. "Sure I want one of each, that is why I am interested in a boys school."

Some parents worry that the boys school would create a drain on the girls division, Smith said.

"It has to be enough difference to make it worth while," he said. "It has to cater to their unique needs and interests."