



Flexible & creative
educators help turn
failure into
SUCCESS...

How do we engage boys who have gotten off track and are on a collision course with failure?

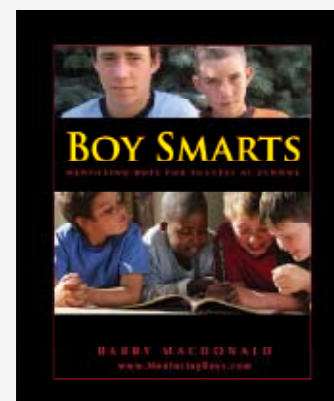
How do we help lead these boys from a site of risk to a site of resilience?

In my visits to school communities to learn how teachers, support staff, and administrators encourage resiliency among youth, I have heard heartfelt stories about the creative ways that passionate and caring adults can help re-engage those who have bucked the system. They have adapted to young people's non-traditional styles of learning and helped guide them to develop their unique resourcefulness.

The following parental story highlights one boy's distinctive path to learning and how school staff initiated a turnaround experience for a boy who had been derailed in his schooling, isolating himself from the support he so urgently needed.

Barry MacDonald
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*From a
site of risk
to a site of
resilience...*



I felt frustrated with my own sense of failure as a parent...

Hello Barry,

MY son Josh, with activity levels that would leave most heads spinning, would tell me that school was not on his *radar*. With each passing year his spotty grades and attendance grew worse, until Grade 8 when he stopped trying altogether. I felt helpless to get him back on track. Sadly, so did the school.

WHENEVER I'd meet with school staff, they'd tell me they couldn't help him if he didn't want to help himself. I wondered how my wayward son would *help himself* when he seemed more concerned with impressing peers with his latest skateboard *Airwalk* than with his academic achievements. I felt frustrated with their lack of interest, ingenuity, and professionalism. Mostly, though, I felt frustrated with my own sense of failure as a parent.

I had almost lost hope when, in my son's final months of Grade 9, something shifted. A few very caring and knowledgeable staff introduced a new approach to Josh's education, suggesting a way to capitalize on his strengths and talents. Dreading false hope, I was cautiously buoyed by their interest, encouraged by the talk about how to make school fit Josh's *skateboarder* outlook on life.

OVER the years I had come to believe that school only works for some kids, but during that turnaround fall in Grade 10, it became clear that this staff was onto something good.

AS I read your recent article about cultivating resiliency, I considered how caring staff and their flexible learning designs helped make Josh's success possible in Grade 10. Teachers took the time to figure out his learning style, and then helped him understand why his kinesthetic approach to learning had failed him in the past. Instead of hinting that he might need medical intervention (as numerous previous teachers had over the years) for his high activity levels, they took it upon themselves to ramp up activity themselves. They designed lively and appealing assignments, and spoke to Josh in a way that acknowledged his unique style of learning. As they clarified not only what he needed to do, but also what they needed to do to spark and grow his learning, Josh finally began to listen. After taking the time to notice that Josh's brain didn't seem to kick in until 11am, they ensured that his academic courses were in the later part of the school day. They worked with his personality and slowly connected with



For those of you unfamiliar with skateboarding, a skater **Airwalks** when he makes an airborne walking motion with his legs after he grabs the nose of his skateboard as he negotiates himself off a ramp or a halfpipe.

They gave Josh room to be Josh...

the real Josh. They learned that my son thinks with his hands and has to be doing something physical to engage his brain. They even helped him to film a few of his skateboarder moves and upload them to *Youtube*. It wasn't until a couple of months later that I discovered the thoughtfulness and sense of their approach when he continued to complete many of his assignments through the movie clips he so carefully produced.

WHILE caring connections with staff initially got Josh's attention, it was their flexibility that really held his interest in the long run. He became part of a unique school program along with 20 other Grade 10 students who spent the first half their day (2 of 4 blocks) with a teacher, learning support teacher, and a youth worker and the remaining time in regular classes where he focused on essential learning only: English 10 and Social Studies 10. It also made sense that the same teacher taught him both of these courses and was in regular communication with his learning support team. It was the kind of assistance that surrounded him with support, but did not restrict him. They gave Josh room to be Josh.

AS you pointed out in your article, Josh's growing resilience was more complicated than a *bounce back* from adversity. There was no single event that turned him around, but a series of daily encounters with learning that, step-by-step, taught him that he was capable. He was no longer lost in the shuffle. During his morning support blocks, the teachers and youth worker took time to review his English and Social Studies assignments, gently challenging him to complete them while also giving him the real help that he needed. They recognized that Josh often needed them to scribe for him while they engaged him in deeper discussion about assignments and how to make on-going alterations that tailored assignments to fit him. I doubt that he will ever become a keen writer, but I trust that he will learn to write for the times when he really needs to.

OVER the years Josh's newfound glimmer of hope has paid off in more regular attendance and real achievement. The first couple of times he skipped or arrived to school smelling of pot, I feared that he was doomed, but school personnel took his behaviour in stride and never over-reacted. They did not corner him by laying down the law or threatening him with contracts or suspensions. Instead, they focused on him as a person, and redirected him with dialogue about future goals. I'll not forget the day he announced to me during a late night pizza snack that he wanted to become a carpenter. I still get tears of gratitude and pride as I recall that moment when he explained that soon in Grade 11 he'd be in a co-op program where he would spend two weeks at school followed by two weeks in a carpentry-training apprentice. It was a perfect fit. As a younger boy he was drawn to building things with whatever he could get his hands



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Josh now sees himself as someone with something to offer...

on. It only made sense that he would do the same as an adult.

A key part of Josh's success was due to the wise decision made by school staff to accelerate Josh through Grades 8 and 9 and moving him into age-appropriate learning in Grade 10. I know they would have lost him if they tried to make him to complete English 8 when he was supposed to be in English 10. I wondered about how he'd make up for the gaps in his learning, but teachers assured me that this was the focus of their support in the morning.

YOU might also be interested to know that at home I noticed small changes over the year too. Josh began keeping his room above toxic waste dump levels. He began appearing in the kitchen to eat with me on a more regular basis. Late one Saturday night, when Josh and his buddies returned home reeking of the concert mosh-pit's hallucinogenic haze, I overheard a comment that made me realize that Josh was beginning to turn toward learning. As his buddies were discussing plans for skipping school Monday, my son muttered that he couldn't skip that week as his carpentry project was due.

WITH all this talk about cutbacks in education, I do have fears that funding for apprenticeship programs will be eliminated. While I know that his learning success has grown in leaps and bounds over the past year, I also know that Josh will continue to need support. I hope that those officials who have the power to make funding decisions listen to success stories like my sons. School has made the difference between Josh seeing himself as a drop-out to a person who sees himself as someone with something genuinely good to offer.

THANK you to the wonderful teachers who made learning work for Josh.

Yvonne
Toronto, Ontario

• • • email your story to info@mentoringboys.com

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