

THE SUNDAY TRI-CITY NEWS

FEB. 5, 2006

www.tricitynews.com

Black Press

Boys will be boys

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Boys will learn if they're safe to make mistakes, says MacDonald

Respecting differences between boys and girls, and creating classroom environments that draw on their strengths will improve achievement for both genders, says an educator and school counsellor who recently spoke to local teachers.

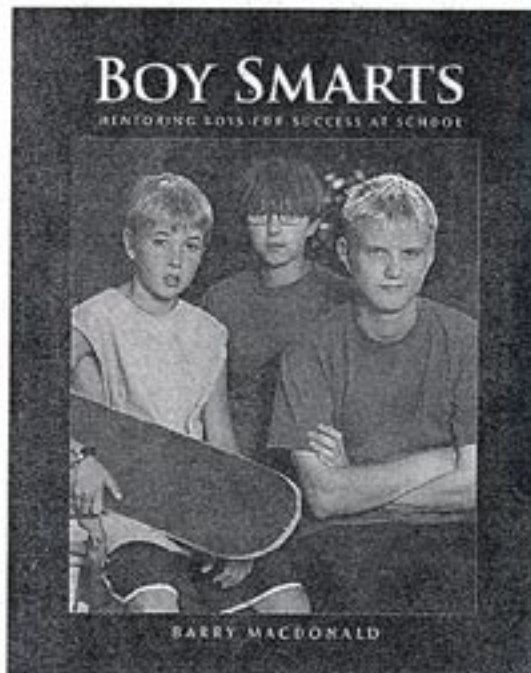
In his book *Boy Smarts, Mentoring Boys for Success at School* (www.mentoringboys.com), Barry MacDonald warns against a media-led backlash against efforts to help girls in math and said improving boys' achievement in school deserves more thoughtful analysis.

Nevertheless, he says boys' learning problems are increasingly hard to ignore, with a list of red flags such as boys' higher rate of absenteeism and suspension, behaviour problems, and higher drop-out and suicide rates.

He recommends studying boys' unique gifts and talents to figure out ways to engage them in school and to encourage a lifelong interest for learning.

Understanding boys' need for hierarchy, structure, movement and listening beyond their bravado are some first steps toward making a plan for teaching boys, MacDonald said. Tips in his book include:

- using discussions rather than lectures to help boys achieve insights;
- encouraging peer mentoring;
- making physical adjustments to the classroom to help boys learn, including having more subdued lighting, more room around desks, opening a window, and encouraging boys to drink lots of water and eat nutritious snacks to keep their brains functioning; as well, classroom seating should be arranged to minimize peer pressure, bullying and isolation;



- promoting inquiry in the classroom, rather than rote note-taking, and providing transition time to help hyper-focused boys to move out of complete concentration;

- using humour or something unexpected to create stimulating breaks and reinvigorate the class;

- encouraging making mistakes and taking calculated risks.

"Boys learn best when they are free to make mistakes without fear of being humiliated," MacDonald said. "Criticism, especially in a group setting, challenges a boy's status within the group and invites behaviour or attitudes such as a show of anger or indifference that will help him regain status. When boys are afraid to try, learning stops in its tracks."

He also said teachers should keep goals up-front as boys easily lose interest when they don't know where they are going. Giving set, explicit time frames for tasks focuses boys' work and reduces time-wasting that they are often prone to, especially during group work, MacDonald states.