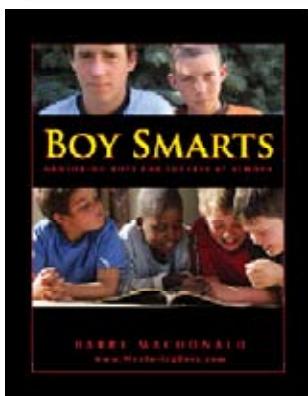


Success is Boys' Business at Cheyne Middle School



Frequently, parents ask me to recommend a good school for their son to attend. Softly pushing away the impulse to suggest their local community school, I investigate further to discover that their concerns run deep, and are as varied as their sons themselves. While some simply question whether it is the school or their son who has the problem, others worry that external pressures for higher test scores may be killing natural curiosity and joy in learning. Still others complain that their sons' needs are misunderstood or plainly ignored at school—that energetic boys are expected to behave in quieter, more compliant ways than developmentally possible. The following comments highlight a range of parental apprehensions:

“My son is kept in for recess to motivate him to do his work, despite the fact that he needs the physical activity during recess the most.”

“The rough-and-tumble nature of boyhood is not accepted at our school. The NO tag and NO touching policy are not what most boys need.”

“My son got suspended for farting in class for making other kids laugh. Have schools become so sterile and uptight that they overreact to common childhood misbehaviours?”

“Technology at our school consists of doing what the teacher directs my son to do—nothing more. He is bored and discouraged from exploring, experimenting, and discovering. I can't help but think that he knows more about navigating online resources and digital programs than his teacher.”

Although it was once commonly assumed that boys would grow out of their troubles, many parents and teachers now recognize that statistics tell an alarming tale. According to the *National Center for Educational Statistics*:

- Boys are 30% more likely than girls to drop out of school
- Boys are 4 to 5 times more likely than girls to be diagnosed with ADHD
- Boys make up two-thirds of the students in special education

Of course, we must be careful to not over-generalize about boys, stereotype their needs, or pit their needs against the needs of girls. I particularly want to avoid exaggerating gender differences and gender expectations that can lead boys themselves to believe stereotypes about masculinity.

However, like the parents who inquire about boy-friendly schools, I am always alert for stories about schools that are successful with boys.

You can perhaps imagine then, how thrilled I was, after many years of advocating for the recognition of boys’ varied needs in the school system, to learn about a school in Ontario that has had marked success with boys after adopting and implementing *Boy Smarts* ideas.

I am hoping that evidence from the narrative and interview below will encourage other schools to commit to the challenge of making their schools more boy-friendly places.



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Two years ago, after giving the keynote speech at the *National Safe Schools Conference*, I was signing books for delegates. I looked up to see a smiling teacher approach me with multiple copies of *Boys on Target* in her arms for me to sign. She told me that her school had been using *Boy Smarts* ideas and that they were making a BIG difference for boys. Despite my eagerness to learn more, I had to attend to others lining up at the table. I hoped to find out more later about the school’s successes with boys, but unsurprisingly, I lost track of this friendly woman for a time.

Last fall, however, she contacted my office, asking me to work with administrators in the Peel District School Board. While drawing up the contract I discovered that she—Julia Breen—was the principal at Cheyne Middle School in Brampton, Ontario where the gender reading achievement gap closed from 15% in 2008-2009 to 1% in 2011, a short 3 year period, and writing achievement gap closed from 29% in 2006-2007 to 10% in 2010-2011. As the achievement gap between boys and girls is not on the agenda of many central office school administrators in many parts of Canada, I was most impressed to learn that these significant results were celebrated throughout the Peel School District.

I was delighted to hear that Julia Breen had gathered together over 150 school administrators from across her region to host a *Boy Smarts* PD day, and that Superintendent Hazel Mason spoke publicly and eloquently about the educational needs of boys: “Yes, we know that there are more similarities between boys and girls, but let us not lose sight of who is most likely to underachieve in our schools. Boys! We need to address the needs of all children, and today we are here to better understand the needs of boys.”

A couple of months later I contacted Julia Breen by telephone to learn more about her school’s success with boys. I am grateful that the school’s gathering of data about boys’ school achievements points to what could be possible in other districts as well.



Interview with Julia Breen, Principal

Barry: “Tell me a little about your students and Cheyne Middle School.”

Julia: “They are much like 11 to 14 year-old students that I imagine you’d find at any middle school, but to me they are each remarkable in every way. Our students care deeply about learning, each other, our school, and are constantly challenging me to be a better principal. It’s really hard to talk about them as a group of students as each one is so unique and so precious.

Barry: “And your school?”

Julia: “We are a young school, only 7 years old, in a multicultural community that has its fair share of ‘high needs’ students, poverty, and gang activity. Cheyne has approximately 750 students and 50 staff. Our community income levels are lower to middle class. I am pleased to say that many of our parents see us as true partners helping to mentor their kids. While we don’t have many doctors, lawyers or other professionals living in the community yet, I know that many of our students are going to become professionals and make meaningful contributions down the road.”

Barry: “Cheyne’s recent *EQAO* results indicates success on many levels, but I am particularly intrigued by your success with boys. What do your results mean?”

[For those of you unfamiliar with *EQAO*, the *Education Quality and Accountability Office* is an independent provincial agency funded by the Government of Ontario. It conducts province-wide tests at key points in students’ primary, junior, and secondary education, and reports the results to educators, parents, and the public.]

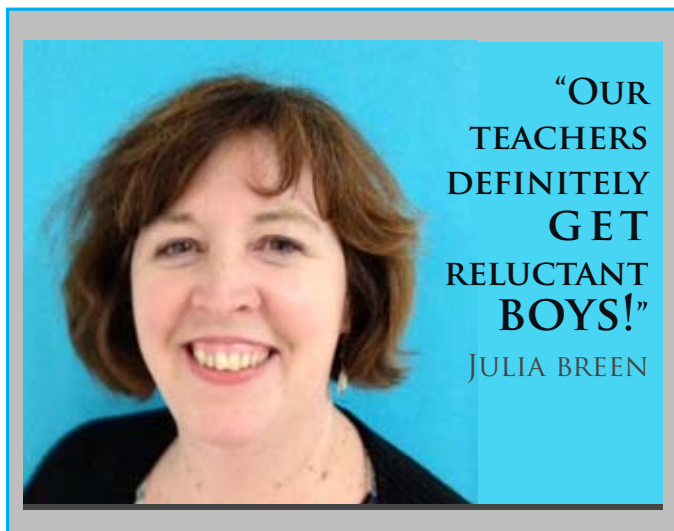
Julia: “That we are making headway! While we use formative assessment to track student achievement and know that on a daily basis we are reaching boys more effectively, it is nice to have an additional indicator to help us measure that our gender gap is rapidly closing. The *EQAO* reading gap is now only 1% and the writing gap has closed from almost 30% to 10% over the past 5 years. I should point out the gender gap is not decreasing because girls are achieving less and therefore making it easier for boys to reach them. Our girls are improving too! Their writing scores have increased by 13% over the year previous. Both our boys and girls are doing better and the boys are catching up. It is really remarkable.”

[Formative assessment is part of everyday learning and the instructional process. Both teachers and students engage in formative assessment to provide ongoing information about what is needed next. In this way it helps teachers plan and students set goals for where they need to focus their attention.]

Barry: “Can you describe a boy who was previously struggling at school and may have been labelled as a trouble-maker but found success at Cheyne?”

Julia: “There are quite a few, but one boy comes to mind. I’ll call him ‘Diego’. During his elementary years, Diego frequented behaviour programs. He lacked social skills, and was labelled as oppositional and aggressive. His elementary teachers had glimmers of his capability, but misbehaviour kept him stuck in a whirlwind of trouble. When he arrived here in Grade 6, he was bigger and taller than most and was really disruptive in class. He would openly bait staff with rude language.”

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[Readers should note that ‘*Diego*’ is a fictitious name and that his story has been altered to protect his identity.]

Barry: “Knowing that many school principals would rather suspend a boy like Diego rather than take the time to understand his unmet needs, how did you and the staff respond?”

Julia: “We rarely send misbehaving students home. I know that suspensions are at times necessary, but our suspension rates are very low. Mostly, we met Diego with compassion and respect. Collectively, we quietly refused to react to his aggressive obstinacy. Slowly he started to get that we cared. Staff also did not send Diego out into the hallway, but they would de-escalate his aggression in the classroom and keep focussed on the learning activity.

In a relatively short timeframe we discovered Diego’s need for frequent breaks, along with his love of digital learning. Most boys like the fact that we have standing desks in every classroom, but Diego’s need for movement exceeded even our most exuberant boys. Diego learned to use a *Chill Card* to get out of class and satisfy his need for activity appropriately. Later, when we discovered that money was tight at home and he wasn’t able to go online, we knew that we didn’t want him roaming the streets, so we provided him with lots opportunity to go online at school.

Our **S.O.S.** program also helped staff to identify an adult mentor for Diego. This staff member was key for us to help read Diego on days that he was closed to us. His mentor also helped us assess when we should increase our expectations. As Diego’s principal I observed that we needed to be in tune with him before we could successfully raise our expectations of him. As Diego slowly relaxed his aggressive posturing, we gradually challenged him more with technology as the incentive for assignment completion. It was months before we even considered asking him to write anything down, knowing that he preferred to show what he was learning through Powerpoint and other online presentation media. By Christmas his behaviour improved considerably, but still with daily outbursts, but by the end of his first year here he was getting along with others 90% of the time and was showing us what he was really capable of. Along the way we also learned he had significant learning gaps and established a plan to provide the academic support he needed. Today, two years later I am pleased to report that Diego is really a bright and capable boy. I will miss him when he graduates.”

[Julia later explained that **S.O.S.** stands for **Save One Student**. It is an informally organized and volunteer way for staff to meet, often over lunch, to discuss students and generate ideas to help them be successful.]

Barry: “It takes remarkable teachers to side-step power struggles with a boy like Diego. Tell me a little about the Cheyne staff and how they respond to troubled boys who don’t fit the typical scholastic mold.”

Julia: “Very few of our boys fit the traditional academic mold. You know that, and by the way, that’s one thing I really appreciate about your work and why we use **Boy Smarts** ideas so frequently at our school. Each

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boy is unique and while we need to be aware of trends and what the research says about boys and learning, we never lose sight that our students are not statistics. They are each distinctive. At Cheyne we know that a traditional one-size-fit-all approach to learning does not reach one-of-a-kind kids. Cheyne staff members each bring to school their own gifts and talents. These teachers don’t just go the extra mile—they run marathons with our students, and they definitely ‘get’ reluctant boys.”

Barry: “Have you noticed anything that particularly makes a difference with boys reluctant to embrace reading and writing, or what we understand to be multiple literacies? How do teachers encourage boys to read, write, listen, speak, view, and represent communication in ways that are complex and multidimensional?”

Julia: “Technology sure gets attention from our boys. Our teachers tell me that many boys are clamoring for opportunities to demonstrate their learning with the aid of technology. But technology is only one piece of the puzzle. Since you told me in advance that you would be asking me about what staff did to shrink our gender literacy gaps I took the liberty to ask staff on your behalf. I asked teachers who could afford the time to pick one key area to provide you with insight about their success. You are welcome to use their feedback in your article.”

[See below for teacher feedback.]

Barry: “In **Boy Smarts** I highlight how learning and caring are inextricably related; that students won’t care how much teachers have to teach until they know how much they care about them. What have you discovered in your work with boys?”



Julia: “While it’s not my style to overpower anyone, strong-willed and aggressive boys have taught me that

learning stops when adults yell or attempt to overpower them. The same goes for peer relationships: bullying blocks learning. At Cheyne we work hard to create learning opportunities that are interesting and intrinsically motivating while we also attend to the emotional climate of everyday interactions. School has to be safe before students will learn.”

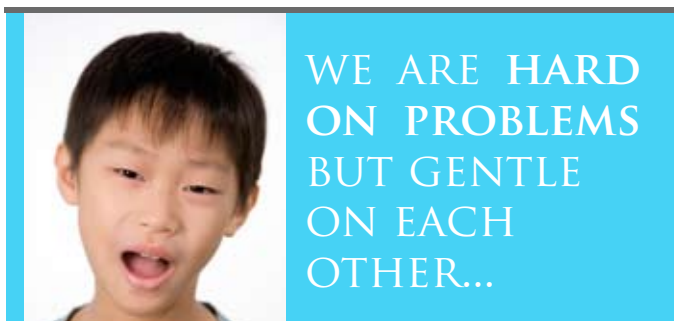
Barry: “Much has been said about teachers feeling overwhelmed by so many different kinds of student needs and different levels of preparedness. How do staff manage so many diverse needs among students to create personalized learning or what is commonly referred to as differentiated instruction—the practice of accommodating and building on students’ diverse learning needs?”

Julia: “It’s a common assumption that rambunctious boys benefit from sitting in rows with clearly defined rules and in highly structured classrooms. At Cheyne Middle School we have discovered quite the opposite. Here, teachers avoid expecting everyone in the class to do exactly the same things; they embrace student differentness with different kinds of instruction. This does not mean that they run around the classroom teaching the same lesson differently to each student. That would be impractical. Cheyne teachers represent a new style of teaching that organizes learning activities in creative ways to ensure that students have a variety of ways to learn, and have a say in what they are learning and doing. Providing options and choices is especially critical for middle school students who are just beginning to experiment with their individuality in new ways.”

[School bell rings in background.]

Barry: “I know that you have another meeting after school today. I want to thank you for taking time to talk with me about what you and the staff at Cheyne Middle School are doing to make a difference for boys. Your learning community is fortunate to have your passionate teachers and your visionary leadership and enthusiasm.”

Julia: “It has been a pleasure. Please come and visit our school and see us in action the next time you are in the Toronto area. We love your message, your books, and appreciate all that you do for boys too!”



From the feedback and comments that Principal Julia Breen solicited from Cheyne Middle School teachers, I have selected several that highlight key areas of the school-wide initiative to close the gender achievement gap and improve educational outcomes for all students.

Learning is Safe

Teachers work to create a safe emotional climate in their classrooms where students are treated fairly, bullying is not permitted, and student concerns are taken seriously.

• *“I love my students and really bond with them. I strive to communicate on their level and to be compassionate with them when they are troubled and to celebrate with them when they are up. Bullying isn’t tolerated. We are hard on problems but gentle on each other.”*

• *“In my class I take time to talk in our “community circle” about issues that matter. As students come to trust me, they also challenge me to make learning more real for them. Saying “Because I said so” doesn’t cut it. I constantly check in with them to ensure that we are on the same wavelength. When I sense motivation is waning, I tell them what I noticed. I don’t always like their answers (mostly they complain that I go on a bit too long discussing a topic that I think they need me to emphasize), but we work together and the end result is always positive (usually I talk less).”*

• *“I don’t have double standards. I know that when I yell I am giving permission for my students to also yell. As I treat them with respect they in turn treat each other with respect. I take a stand against put downs and never let a student get away with commenting, “That’s so gay.” Students also like it when I take risks, try something new, and divulge my personal apprehension. I like to try things that can fail. If there is no chance of failure, then success is meaningless.”*

Learning is Flexible

Teachers appeal to different learning styles, let themselves be real with their students, and encourage laughter and play in the classroom.

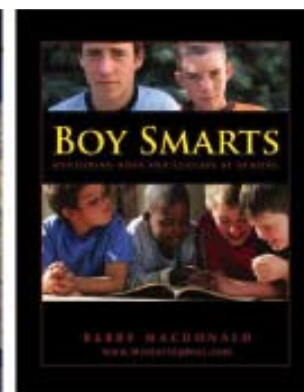
• *“I try hard to respond to the energy and enthusiasm of boys. This may sound a little ridiculous, but each day I build in opportunities to have fun, be spontaneous, and even silly (we dance during morning music). I work hard to make our classroom engaging and even edgy. I also firmly believe in allowing students to impersonate me to show them that I take myself lightly but learning seriously. As I laugh about how they portray my idiosyncratic ways, students invite me into their hearts and minds. They allow me to point out how their own distinctive personalities and learning styles can help them grow into better people.”*

• *“We have a couple of single gender classes that students volunteer for or we sometimes recommend. The boys who sign up for this class are definitely more rambunctious than most and really enjoy their teachers and the extra technology they have access to.”*

• *“I let kids be kids. I encourage them to pay attention to their different ways of learning and challenge them to experiment with approaches that don’t come easy to them. In our class they know they can stand, fidget, and even wander the classroom if need be.”*

• *“I try to work out assignment due dates with other teachers so that students don’t get overloaded with assignments on different subjects all at the same time. I also work on my presentation skills, knowing that some students are more visual, more auditory or more kinesthetic.”*

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Learning is Differentiated

Just as teachers learn to appeal to different learning styles, they also learn that assignments and ways of learning can be adapted for different students with different needs.

• *“My students know that there are many ways to show what they’ve learned and that they can personalize criteria for assignments. I know that the more input they have, the greater their motivation and achievement will be.”*

• *“Some students work better with music but since not everyone has the same musical taste, my students use their own devices and headphones when they are working on an individual project. They respect that their music should not be loud or bother others nearby. They also pull out their ear buds as soon as they need to listen to me or another student speak.”*

• *“**Boy Smarts** helped me to understand just how visual some boys are. Whether boys are designing storyboards, producing docudramas, or creating mind maps, they know that they have been taught a wide range of tools to present their learning and that they can let their intelligence and creativity out.”*



SOME
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THINK
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THEY
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LEARNING SHOULD REFLECT
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Learning Reflects Real World Practices

Rather than regarding the students as passive receivers of information, teachers work with students on creative thinking and problem-solving in ways that mimic real world practices.

• “Most middle school kids know that listening to us teachers and studying for our tests has little to do with life or the real world of work. In workplaces everywhere people are creating, managing, evaluating, communicating, and collaborating. I work hard to make our classroom like the real world.”

• “My students want a flexible and democratic learning environment that mimics the real world. They want me to teach them how to learn, not just what to learn.”

• “Basically, I am a construction worker: I construct unique ways for students to excavate problems and discover how to get inside a problem so they can obtain what they need to know. I disagree with the notion that students must do the boring stuff before they can do the fun stuff. In our school students are most likely to achieve deep learning and long-term mastery of the basic knowledge when they have options to direct their own learning with us at their sides.”
more auditory or more kinesthetic.”

Technology is Integrated into Learning

In dynamic, twenty-first century classrooms, technology and new media are not just add-ons, but are integrated into all stages of the learning process.

• “Each of us ISSP teachers have been given an iPad to help us with our work. We all strive to have a lot of technology everywhere (the iPad cart is very popular!) and students are allowed to access their personal devices to complete research and record important data. I take time to teach students how to use alerts and reminders on their personal devices so they can manage time more effectively. It is surprising how many boys use their personal devices to take pictures of notes, assignment criteria, and the homework board.”

• “Graphic organizers are a great way to show how ideas are related. Maps and charts help those boys who don’t like to

talk to elaborate and record their ideas, clarify their thoughts, and focus on what’s really essential. They also help those reluctant to write to organize their thoughts in more creative ways before putting it on to the page. I am often amazed to see how hesitant writers will combine images from different websites with text to demonstrate their understanding. One grade 6 class is even using iPads to produce documentaries for their unit on Canadian explorers.”

• “Without involvement and attention, learning is limited for middle school kids. Thankfully, technology offers so many interactive activities that engage students in the kind of learning I only dreamed of as a child. On a daily basis we utilize YouTube, movie production software, online presentation tools, and document digital cameras to develop our thinking. Our class website helps students to keep organized and parents involved in our daily learning activities. Students upload their notes, powerpoints, images, and tips to manage difficult aspects of assignments. Parents like having easy access to their child’s posted grades.”



Ignoring the media furor about just what educational strategies can best support underachieving boys, the staff at Cheyne Middle School quietly got on with the business of responding to boys and girls with empathy and thoughtfulness. They have not let the externals such as poverty, labels, and ethno-cultural differences deter them from reaching out to each student, one by one.

I honour all educators who give of themselves so generously.

As you are reading about this remarkable school, I can’t help but wonder whether you might find yourself thinking about the extraordinary things that are happening at your son’s school. Perhaps you have a son who has experienced a turnaround school year, or you are a teacher who is trying something new, or you know about a school who is helping boys to be more who they are and realize their full potential.

In an upcoming *Boy Smarts* newsletter, I will be celebrating the amazing things, small or big, that are happening in our schools to support the varied needs of boys and girls. I would appreciate your input. Your comments can be in point form, in the form of a story, or simply a brief email about what is working. Your input can join with that of others across the country, and help to clarify the focus of what it looks like—this hard-to-define idea—success for boys that is also success for girls, for families, and for educators. • • •

Barry MacDonald
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