



10 Essential Strategies for Teaching Boys Effectively

Michael Gurian and Kathy Stevens

A middle school teacher told us recently, "Boys in a classroom should be one of the most fun things in life. Boy energy can be contagious, after all. But in my school, we talk mostly about difficulties we're having with boys. We need help understanding and teaching them. We've got to stop losing that boy energy from our schools."

Everywhere around us, boys want to learn, but they aren't learning as well as girls are. Teachers know or sense the statistics: boys get the majority of *Ds* and *Fs* and the minority of *As*; they are behind on state tests in all 50 states; and they drop out of high school at higher rates than girls. Many boys feel that they are inherently defective in today's education world.

Over the last two decades, we have developed professional development systems for solving boys' low achievement in school. We first tested these solutions in a successful two-year pilot study in six Missouri school districts. Over the last decade, we've trained teachers in more than 2,000 schools and districts, developing a Logic Model for teaching boys effectively. This "boy-friendly" model focuses on improving learning for boys so that they no longer feel defective as learners, which increases motivation and diminishes rates of acting out and failure; the model increases girls' achievement and performance, as well.

A number of schools in our research base have closed gender gaps, raised student performance, and made adequate yearly progress within a year of instituting the Teaching Boys Effectively Logic Model. Among the practical strategies in which their teachers have been trained and coached, these 10 constitute both a research and performance baseline for success.

1. **Teachers increase the use of graphics, pictures, and storyboards in literacy-related classes and assignments.** When teachers use pictures and graphics more often (even well into high school), boys write with more detail, retain more information, and get better grades on written work across the curriculum.
2. **Classroom methodology includes project-based education in which the teacher facilitates hands-on, kinesthetic learning.** The more learning is project-driven and kinesthetic, the more boys' bodies will be engaged in learning—causing more information to be retained, remembered, and displayed on tests and assignments.
3. **Teachers provide competitive learning opportunities, even while holding to cooperative learning frameworks.** Competitive learning includes classroom debates, content-related games, and goal-oriented activities; these are often essential for boy-learning and highly useful for the life success of girls, too.
4. **Classroom curricula include skills training in time, homework, and classroom management.** In order to feel competent, engaged, and motivated, many boys need help learning how to do homework, follow directions, and succeed in school and life; classrooms are the primary place these boys come for that training.
5. **Approximately 50 percent of reading and writing choices in a classroom are left up to the students themselves.** Regularly including nontraditional materials, such as graphic novels, magazines, and comic books, increases boys' engagement in reading and improves both creative and expository writing.
6. **Teachers move around their classrooms as they teach.** Instructors' physical movement increases boys' engagement, and includes the teacher leading students in physical "brain breaks"—quick, one-minute brain-awakening activities—that keep boys' minds engaged.
7. **Students are allowed to move around as needed in classrooms, and they are taught how to practice self-discipline in their movement.** This strategy is especially useful when male students are reading or writing—when certain boys twitch, tap their feet, stand up, or pace, they are often learning better than if they sit still, but teachers are often not trained in innovating *toward* more movement in classrooms.
8. **Male mentoring systems permeate the school culture, including use of parent-mentors, male teachers, vertical mentoring (e.g., high school students mentoring elementary students), and male peer mentoring.** By 16, vocationally oriented boys (and girls) need schools and communities to provide access to jobs and mentors through which students can master a trade.
9. **Teachers use boys-only (and girls-only) group work and discussion groups in core classes such as language arts, math, science, and technology.** Some boys and girls who do not flourish in the busyness or social distraction of coed classes get a chance to flourish in new ways in single-sex groupings.
10. **Teachers and counselors provide skill building for sensitive boys (approximately 20 percent of males fall somewhere on the "sensitive boy" spectrum), and special education classes are taught by teachers trained in how to teach boys specifically.** This is crucial because approximately 70 percent of learning-disabled students nationwide are boys.

In all gender initiatives in which we and our team are involved, we encourage schools and districts to conduct parent involvement sessions so that parents can work together with teachers. Research-driven, science-based, and strategies-focused innovations need teamwork from everyone, including the students themselves. The alienation of boys in our classrooms is not a one-teacher issue: it is a problem in education culture as a whole, and a problem for which there are specific solutions.

Boys are wonderful learners and can learn as well as girls. Through the disruptions they cause in classrooms and the low grades they get on report cards, through their glazed eyes and tapping feet, through their aggression or confusion on the playground, they are pleading: "We need a lot of help. We need teachers to understand how to teach us effectively, so that we succeed. We need schools to harness and challenge our powerful energy. We need everyone to remember: we're not just 'kids' or 'students'—we are boys."

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