

CITY

# How to unlock boys' brains in the classroom



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To better educate young boys, schools should put the writing on the wall. Writeable walls are just one example of classroom innovations that encourage collaboration. With different coloured pens, students can exchange and elaborate on each other's ideas. The visibility of the work also allows teachers to assess their progress, keeps the kids on task and encourages them to further develop their critical thinking.

This kind of three-way collaboration is a key component of relational learning, a new approach being adopted by schools to help students—boys in particular—learn better during their formative years.

“Boys at the elementary ages are problem solvers. They want to be hands-on in constructing and exploring their own learning and work together to find solutions,” says Rick Parsons, principal at The Sterling Hall School, a private independent boys' school in

Toronto. “Above all, they are relational learners, and we need to provide them with a stimulating setting to collaborate with their teachers and one another.”

Research supports this thinking. Renowned educational researchers Richard Hawley and Michael Reichert conducted an extensive worldwide study on how boys learn and presented their findings in their book *Reaching Boys, Teaching Boys*. They found that a relational and active classroom approach, incorporating things like movement, teamwork, competition and risk-taking, are more likely to energize and engage young boys.

As writing walls would indicate, the shift away from the “sage on a stage” style of teaching is now becoming a part of classroom design. Sterling Hall is taking it beyond the classroom, representing relational learning in the building of a whole new wing of the school. Designed by Toronto-based CS&P Architects, the \$5 million Building Leaders project, to be completed in September, will include innovative spaces for learning, gathering and physical education.

“The classroom isn’t so much a classroom as it is a studio for the sharing of activities, and we’re trying to make those spaces into places for doing all kinds of things that lead to other interconnected learning throughout the facility,” says Craig Goodman, principal at CS&P Architects.

The “active classrooms” will feature writable walls, shiftable partitions and moveable furniture that can be adapted to different configurations as needed. Alcove or resource spaces will be situated outside classrooms, for quiet breakout spaces. As a whole, the wing will act as a sort of collaborative community library, says Goodman. “It’s not just classrooms and corridors but actually a whole series of different scaled spaces that relate to each other.”



Another key part of Sterling Hall's rebuilding project is a new indoor athletic centre that features a climbing wall made up of horizontally and vertically adjustable planes. This multi-use, cross-fit space relates directly to a new outdoor concourse for athletic activities and physical education, which also provides a central meeting place for community gatherings and Sterling Hall events. A new green space extends outdoor learning and provides a safe space to play for students. Together, it all becomes one giant classroom.



“Boys need to be engaged, empowered and actively involved in their learning,” says Parsons. “They need to see their education as a partnership with their teachers, one another and their school community. More than anything, they need to feel valued in that partnership.”

And these days, that's happening inside and outside the classroom, and even on the walls.

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