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Edmonds school district studies how boys and girls learn differently

By Linda Thomas

Lisa Hagar seldom dims the lights in her second-grade classroom. She knows as soon as the lights go off the boys' brains go into rest mode and it will be difficult for her to get their attention.

She also lets some students get up and move around a designated area of the room, while others squeeze nerf balls because 80 percent of boys need to be in motion in order to optimize learning.

While her class at Edmonds Elementary School seems like any other, Hagar is using a few simple techniques that stimulate boys' brains and have a positive effect on girls too. She is among the many educators in the Edmonds School District who are studying new ways to help both genders perform better in the classroom.

"Something as basic as a water bottle makes a difference and you'll find one on almost every student's desk," Hagar explained. "Most brains aren't hydrated enough for learning, so we're always encouraging the students to drink water."

Inside boys' minds

The interest in gender differences began last fall when Superintendent Nick Brossoit picked up the book, "The Minds of Boys: Saving our Sons from Falling Behind in School and Life" by Michael Gurian and Kathy Stevens.

The book, published August of 2005, cites brain research on the ways male and female brains function. It concludes that boys' learning styles are often at odds with the way schools have been teaching and assessing students.

"School can be so frustrating for boys. They're used to learning by exploring, touching, running, jumping, and all the stuff they do naturally," said co-author and educator Kathy Stevens. "When they get to school we tell them to sit down, be still, and pick up a pencil and write."

Although there are exceptions, most boys need to move in order to learn because their body is an extension of their brain. That's one way boys and girls are simply different. But school systems reward the behaviors girls excel at, Stevens said, such as turning in homework and being quiet.

Stevens has trained teachers in Edmonds and across the country. Educators everywhere have the same challenges with boys as learners.

"It's hard to read their handwriting, they can't sit still, they don't turn in their homework, they're not very organized, and they're not verbal," she said. "Turns out those are all things that schools evaluate students on."

The qualities teachers enjoy most about boys in the classroom aren't assessed, including: their willingness to take risks, their sense of humor, their energy, and their ability to challenge what they don't understand.

"Boys aren't dumb. They're very smart and capable. Unfortunately, they have to function within a system that is a

design flaw for them," said Stevens.

Teachers learn brain science

The Edmonds School District, which Stevens called one of the most "sophisticated" in America, is evaluating how it can improve learning opportunities for boys.

"All kids are important and have unique learning styles, so this is not strictly a gender issue," said Dr. Brossoit. "We've found if the boys are learning more effectively in the classroom that helps girls too."

Last month the district used a staff training day to increase teachers' understanding of brain development research, and held a meeting for parents to explain some of the theories from "The Minds of Boys."

Brossoit said teachers have been "pretty positive" about the information. Some have already been using techniques in the classroom to keep boys' interested in lessons. Other teachers admit they never thought of gender differences in the class and didn't realize there were things they could do to help boys.

Teacher Mike Wentzel, who was recently named dean of students at Edmonds Woodway High School, said it's also important to understand different learning styles when it comes to discipline.

When there's conflict and a principal asks a girl to explain what happened, she usually "opens up and relieves stress through talking about a situation." Boys, because they're generally not as verbal as girls, become more anxious when they have to talk about a problem.

Females have six parts of their brain that are active during language, according to brain research. With males, only one part of their brain shows activity during language.

"For a boy who's been acting out or is upset, you'd be better off taking him for a quick walk around the school," Wentzel said. "As he starts moving, he becomes less frustrated and it's easier for him to talk."

Teachers in the Edmonds School District -- with about 21,000 students and 36 schools -- will continue learning about gender differences throughout the school year.

"I don't think we've discovered sliced bread," Brossoit added. "It's just another tool in the teachers' toolbox that will hopefully let us be more effective in working with kids."

A report card on boys

Authors Michael Gurian and Kathy Stevens presented research in their book "The Minds of Boys" which indicates boys are falling behind in schools across the nation. Key among their findings:

- * Three out of four learning disabled students are boys.
- * Boys receive up to 70% of the Ds and Fs given in classrooms.
- * Boys create 90% of classroom discipline problems.
- * The majority, 80%, of high school dropouts are boys.
- * Less than 45% of college students are male.

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