

Chapter 6

The Ground Game: Setting up classrooms that help boys succeed

Prohibited from the physical activity they need and criticized for the content of their minds, it is not surprising that some of these boys get off to a bad start, giving up before they have even begun.

Jane Katch, Kindergarten Teacher, Author of *Under Deadman's Skin*

Let's face it – teaching boys can be fun. The very things that are maddening about boys – their energy, out-of-the-box thinking, their sense of humor – are the very things that crack us up and make us love them. No one makes me appreciate the joy of teaching boys more than Mrs. Gina Rea, the Religion teacher at an all-boys school in San Antonio, Texas. Laughter is commonplace in Gina's classroom and the energy of the teacher matches the energy of the students. She's just as quick with a comeback as are the young men seated in front of her. Instead of trying to control her male students' behavior, she expertly rides the contours of it, while getting what she needs to get done done. Gina shares:

The other day I had a pile of empty cardboard boxes in my classroom. The boys entered the class and one of them picked up a box, took a pencil, slammed two holes in it, plopped it on his head and sat down. All the boys looked at me - "What would Miss do?" I told him that he looked great, and that the best thing about cardboard was that you could dress it up or dress it down - Cardboard goes with anything!

The rest of the class insisted that he put on all the boxes and he did - head, feet and body. They then said, "He should go somewhere Miss"... so we sent him down to the office to tell them that I needed a cardboard box. He left and I began my lesson. He came back about 10 minutes later with another cardboard box. Mind you, he literally jumped out of the boxes, we all applauded, and then we all went immediately back to work.

The boys have been coming into class happy and ready to work since then. By embracing, rather than rebuffing, their goofy boy-energy, we all reaped the reward. It was the best ten minutes of craziness I have invested all year.

So, with appreciation for Gina's boys – and all those boys in our lives who challenge us - the following classroom characteristics and practices are particularly well-suited to helping those fidgety, energetic, humorous, risk-taking, and spirited boys survive and thrive in our classrooms. Use this chapter to conduct a thorough inventory of current classroom practice. What is in place? What needs to be added or re-worked? What should be schoolwide and what should be at teacher discretion? What materials, resources or teacher characteristics/skills are needed?

At the beginning of the year, this chapter can serve as the basis for a combined day of professional learning time (for reading and discussion), followed by teacher work-time (for classroom set-up). Throughout the year, this chapter can be used to help teachers develop and monitor professional goals and as the discussion content for PLC meetings. Finally, these lists can be an invaluable tool during Response to Intervention (student support) meetings to help

interdisciplinary teams identify new ways to support struggling students (most of which, let's not forget, are boys!).

BEGIN INSET:

Try this....

Have grade-level or departmental teams become “experts” on the implementation of one or more recommendations from this chapter by doing more research and trying it out in their own classrooms. Have them make a staff presentation that explains how the strategy has worked for their students, along with recommended variations or adaptations, and sources for any teacher-made or purchased materials.

END INSET

Physical Arrangement of the Classroom

- ✓ **Seating arrangements:** Creating a brain-based, boy-friendly (and girl-friendly!) classroom means dispensing with the chairs-in-rows set-up. Make sure classrooms are conducive for student movement, collaboration and projects.
 - Boys tend to need a little more physical space in a classroom. A table setting that works well for four girls may be too crowded for four boys. Put two to three boys at the table, if space allows.
 - Space desks apart adequately, especially at the younger grades. Boys often have a hard time keeping their hands to themselves, so this can help reduce the problem.
 - Boys, especially, benefit by exposure to natural outdoor light, as well as more brightly lit indoor conditions. To the extent possible, consider seating some of your higher-need boys closer to windows (assuming that things outside the windows don't pose an additional distraction) or where artificial lighting is the brightest in the room.
 - Boys have more difficulty hearing the higher register and softer tone of the female voice. With a female teacher, especially, some boys may need to be seated closer to the front of the classroom.
 - Boys are more alert when they are standing than sitting. Provide “standing stations” in the room where students can stand and work. A podium or a classroom surface of appropriate height can serve this purpose, or a specially-built standing desk can be purchased. During lectures, designate spots in the room where students have the option to stand while listening. During one-on-one assessments or conferences with students, allow the boy the option to stand up. Many teachers have reported to me that boys' performance on literacy assessments improves when they are allowed to stand.
 - Provide a variety of non-traditional seating options in the room where students can take a clipboard and work. This can include a carpeted area, a bean bag chair, or a few stadium seats placed on the floor.
 - It can be helpful to create same-sex groupings of students at desks or tables, especially for boys in literacy/language arts and for girls in math/science. See more about this strategy in Chapter 7.
 - Provide modifications to traditional chairs that allow boys to have some movement while sitting. The idea is to provide students with an outlet for movement, instead of trying to squelch it. Examples include:

- Therapy bands (those colorful stretchy lengths of rubbery material used in physical therapy) can be tied between the front two legs of a chair. Students can push down or back on the therapy band with their heels to get some movement.
- Wedge or gel seats. These are often recommended and provided by occupational therapists, so ask if you can borrow a few. They allow students to wiggle and shift more in their seats.
- Some chairs are structured with a base that allows for some backward rocking motion without risk of tipping.
- One-legged stools, sometimes called “focus stools.” These are similar to core fitness balls in that they allow some rocking. These can be purchased or handmade by a willing volunteer.

INSERT FIGURE 6.1 EXACTLY HERE

BEGIN SIDEBAR

On average, girls can handle a sedentary school day, although it is not good for them. But, boys need movement to survive. - Dr. Kenneth Ginsburg, professor of pediatrics at the University of Pennsylvania’s School of Medicine, excerpted from *The Trouble with Boys: A Surprising Report Card on Our Boys, Their Problems at School, and What Parents and Educators Must Do* (Tyre, 2006).

END SIDEBAR

- ✓ **Classroom Decoration:** Visual resources are helpful for boys in the classroom; however, it’s not good to create an overly cluttered visual environment. Here are some recommendations:
 - Relevant information that is displayed with clean lines and strong contrast is most helpful. A lot of extraneous information and decoration can be distracting.
 - Primary colors work well for boys since they see those colors better. Subtle color variations, such as the variation between pastels, are more difficult for boys to discern.
 - Make sure you designate a visible place in the room that lists homework. On this same wall, it can be helpful to have hanging folders or slots where handouts from lessons are kept. That way, if a student misses class, he is able to get the handouts easily (without asking for help...remember who is less likely to ask for what they need? The boys!).

BEGIN SIDEBAR

A classroom full of boys is a noisy place indeed! They push each other, find things to throw, trip over whatever they have left in the aisle and need to be gathered in, in a way that girls do not. They come to class ready to play and are up for any adventure. When material is taught you will hear pencils tapping and you'll see legs bouncing up and down.

Gina Rea, teacher, Central Catholic High School

END SIDEBAR

- ✓ **Lighting:** Healthy brain development, school success and mood are all enhanced through exposure to outdoor natural light. Further, sunlight increases serotonin levels which helps inhibit many symptoms of attention deficit disorder.
 - Get students outdoors for learning as much as possible. This is also a case for recess and outdoor breaks!
 - There's a correlation between student achievement and the quality of the physical environment – including lighting. Mimicking real, natural light (such as full-spectrum lighting) is better than standard fluorescent lighting (National Clearing House for Educational Facilities). Further, boys perform better (problem-solving, long-term recall and mood) under cooler 4000K lights, while girls perform better under warmer 3000K lighting (Knez, 1995).
- ✓ **Classroom and school libraries:** If you are an elementary classroom teacher or a secondary language arts teacher, it is absolutely essential to have a classroom library that is appropriately balanced to suit the interests of boys and girls. Oftentimes, classroom libraries are out-of-balance with more books that girls find appealing.
 - Take an inventory of your current selection of books to see where your classroom library stands.
 - Be sure to include plenty of books that are non-fiction, action-oriented, and that feature men as positive role models. Also, include books that are gross, edgy and funny, as well as those that address your particular students' interests and passions.
 - Classrooms should also offer non-traditional texts, such as graphic novels, game strategy manuals, magazines (cars, snowboarding, videogaming, etc),
 - The next time you are placing a book order, have boys help select the books.
 - Explore the Guys Read website at www.guysread.com. In addition to book reviews and recommendations (by guys and for guys), there are fun things like stickers that boys can adhere to the spines of books that they recommend for other boys.
 - Print off bookmarks and stickers at www.guysread.com. Distribute these to boys so that they can flag the books they recommend for other boys.
 - Look for graphic novel adaptations of a literary classics.
 - Invite older boys to visit your classroom and discuss books that they really enjoyed at your students' ages. Have them do a book talk and make sure to order the book for your classroom library.

BEGIN SIDEBAR

In order to be successful, boys seem to thrive in an active, dynamic and even somewhat seemingly chaotic classroom. The stereotypical, quiet classroom with everyone seated at desks busily working away doesn't tend to keep boys motivated, engaged, or achieving high levels. The key with boys is to make sure that they are “doing” as often as possible.

Jonathan Wright, middle school Language Arts teacher

END SIDEBAR

- ✓ **Fidgets:** Offer busy boys and young men something to hold while they listen or otherwise need to be sedentary. The squeezing/fiddling action provides an outlet for fidgety energy and can help boys stay more alert.

- For younger children, it may be a squeezey toy with a wrist strap (so they don't drop it). For older boys, it can be a hacky-sack. I've seen teachers use toys called "tangles," a nut and bolt that boys can screw on and off, pipe-cleaners, and yarn for finger-knitting. Many options can be found online, including this helpful website: <http://www.trainerswarehouse.com/>.
- Good teachers anticipate classroom management issues before they occur. Explain to boys how the "fidget" helps their brain stay focused (increased blood flow and oxygen). Then explain parameters for their use, such as "It can't leave your hands" and "You can squeeze it in your lap or below the level of the table so that you don't distract others."
- Explain to boys that a hand fidget is a "tool," not a "toy." That means it should be used to help learning, not distract from it. As with anything in the classroom, if it becomes a distraction, it goes away (until they're ready to try it again).
- Only the teacher can best determine where and when boys are able to use their fidgets. Some teachers allow it in circle time and reading groups. Other teachers confine the use of fidgets to independent seatwork.
- Some teachers provide individual fidgets to be kept in backpacks or desks. Other teachers provide a bucket of fidgets and allow students to get up and get one as they feel it is needed.
- At first, everyone wants to try something "new." The new-ness will wear off and, at that time, you can encourage the students who need the fidget the most to continue using it.
- ✓ **Water station:** Water helps the brain learn and grow! Most people are chronically dehydrated. Don't let this happen to your learners.
 - Provide students with regular access to drinking water throughout the day. A middle school teacher I know refills a large water jug and has students put their names on plastic cups with permanent markers for reuse. This eliminates the issue of students bringing in their own "clear liquids." Elementary schools often allow students to bring their own water bottles.
 - During more stressful situations, such as during testing or during a behavioral incident, water is especially critical to improving student performance.
- ✓ **Technology:** Technology can increase student interest and motivation, as well as expanding opportunities for students to collaborate with others and share their work with a larger audience.
 - Equip computers in your classroom with Skype, FaceTime, or other videoconferencing software. Allow students to work with remote peers or experts on their work. Additionally, videoconferencing can provide students with a larger audience for sharing their work – especially critical for boys for whom motivation is a challenge.
 - Create a few Power Point slideshows that contain pictures depicting students' interests. When students can't think of anything to write about, they can open the slideshow for some ideas. Pictures – especially action-filled ones – can stimulate the thinking of highly visual-spatial learners.
 - Set up a Listening Center with mp3 players and headphones:

- Create playlists on mp4 players of background music suitable for different types of activities. Students can choose to listen during independent seat work. See chapter 7 for music resources.
 - Load mp3s with teacher- or student-created podcasts. These podcasts can be a review of prior lessons, or could be a student's report on a topic or a book report. These can be used to help students review old information, learn new information, or catch up on content if they missed school.
 - Create a Wiki where students can post their writing and other students can read and respond to it. This is simply a more tech-savvy way of having students engage in peer editing and it can be done anytime, anywhere, as long as students have the ability to log-on.
 - Create a folder on your Promethean Board (if you are fortunate enough to have one) that contains a variety of multi-media files for "Brain Boosters" (read more about Brain Boosters in Chapter 7). These Brain Booster files might be as simple as a picture to cue a quick movement activity, or they could contain a picture and music.
- ✓ **Learning Centers:** Learning Centers are NOT just for primary classrooms. Learning Centers offer students the opportunity to move around the classroom, collaborate with others, and review/reinforce the concepts in many different formats.
 - Learning Centers also provide a break from lecture and can serve as a formative assessment tool.
 - Create some Learning Centers that use a game-format and are competitive.
 - It is possible to find some teacher blogs with helpful resources regarding Learning Centers in the middle and high schools, such as this one:
<http://forcuriousteachers.blogspot.com/2010/05/using-learning-centers-in-high-school.html>.
 - For Learning Centers at the primary level, be sure to include centers that offer fine-motor activities, such as threading small items, finger-knitting, playing Jacks, picking up items with tweezers or chopsticks, pushing coins through a slot, etc. The goal is to enhance fine-motor and eye-hand coordination. Your school's occupational therapist can offer more suggestions.
 - Offer limited choices so that boys can't spend all their time in one center or only the few centers that they choose.
 -

BEGIN INSET

If you happen to be involved in new building construction or capital improvements in an existing building, be sure to check out the resources and recommendations at National Clearing House for Educational Facilities, www.ncef.org.

END INSET

Classroom Procedures

- ✓ **Schedule considerations (elementary):** Structuring the school day in a brain-friendly way goes a long way to accomplishing your goals.
 - Conduct morning meetings. These provide an opportunity for relationship-building through personal stories and "check-ins." Play music during morning meetings because it wakes up both hemispheres of the brain.

- Literacy blocks should be structured so that students have the opportunity for variety and movement. Long periods of sitting are deadly, especially for boys.
- Many teachers report to me that the popular “Daily Five” routine for literacy/language arts time works wonderfully to meet the needs of boys for variety and movement during an extended instructional block.
- It’s good to study math in the morning when testosterone levels are higher.
- Don’t forget recess. The exposure to fresh air, sunlight, and physical activity help students process and retain what they have just learned. They will have greater readiness for learning once they return to the classroom.
- ✓ **Schedule considerations (secondary):** A few brain-friendly scheduling considerations can help keep boys alert and engaged throughout the day.
 - Block scheduling has become more common; however, teaching practices must change if block scheduling is to work. Teachers must incorporate more social interaction, more project-based learning, and more kinesthetic learning experiences. Lecturing for ninety minutes will ensure that block scheduling is disastrous to boys’ engagement and learning.
 - Block scheduling reduces the number of transitions in a boy’s day which is helpful for the male neurological system.
 - Weekly advisory periods help keep students on track and keep them connected with a caring adult outside of the academic settings. Single-sex advisory periods allow for some wonderful mentoring and coming-of-age conversations.
 - For young men who struggle with math, it is preferable to schedule math in the morning when their testosterone levels are higher. Higher testosterone levels help us perform better in math – and that applies to both boys and girls!
 - Build in a 15-minute break in the morning, if possible. Having a little mental down-time helps students store what they have just learned, and be more alert for the next class.
- ✓ **Goal-setting:** Part of being competitive (as many boys are) is being focused on achieving a goal. Use that to your benefit by collaboratively setting short and long term goals for your boys.
 - Goals can be organizational, behavioral, or academic in nature.
 - Have boys chart their goals visually, as well as their progress towards their goals.
 - Incorporate individual goals into team goals for the purpose of creating some friendly competition in class.
 - Provide regular feedback to students to reinforce their efforts and create excitement around achieving their goals.
 -

BEGIN INSET

Boys also need clear goals set for them so that they know how to achieve at high levels and what high achievement looks like. Making rubrics as a class, developing goals together with students, and showing the big picture before teaching the smaller parts can help boys feel successful and responsible for their learning.

Stephanie Van Horne, 5th grade teacher, Douglass Elementary School.

END INSET

- ✓ **Creating & enforcing rules:** Collaborate with students on the development of a few basic rules. Boys especially need to feel buy-in.
 - If a rule needs to be re-visited, be open to that. Boys do not respond well to teachers who they perceive as “up-tight” or unresponsive.
 - Anticipate trouble-spots for boys and spend sufficient time practicing/reviewing the procedures.
 - Redirect disruptions with a little humor. A laugh can often diffuse a student. Don’t confuse humor with sarcasm though.
 - Boys need to know who is the “alpha.” On the other hand, statements such as “I don’t want to hear your excuse” can lead to resentment. Be flexible, but firm.
 - Avoid confrontations with boys in front of other students.
 - No matter how well you plan for a movement or other fun activity, there will be a few boys who can’t manage themselves. Follow-through with consequences, then invite them to join in next time.
 - Set aside team or department time to discuss classroom management strategies

BEGIN INSET

Helpful Classroom Management Web Resources:

<http://www.theteachersguide.com/ClassManagement.htm>

http://www.educationworld.com/a_curr/archives/classroom_management.shtml

<http://www.teachervision.fen.com/classroom-management/resource/5776.html>

<http://www.nea.org/tools/ClassroomManagement.html>

<http://www.loveandlogic.com/>

<http://www.responsiveclassroom.org>

END INSET

BEGIN SIDEBAR

You must be direct with the boys. Hints and references do not work.

Louis Ullrich, ROTC Instructor, Central Catholic High School

END SIDEBAR

- ✓ **Routines vs. Novelty:** Predictability and routine help the brain know what to expect and reduce stress. On the other hand, too much predictability decreases alertness, so it is important to find the right balance between predictability and unpredictability.
 - Novelty, especially for the adolescent, wakes up the brain. Novelty is something new, unique or unexpected that presents itself as being fun and interesting to students, not threatening.
 - Some classrooms offer a variety of familiar learning activities (project-based activities, labs, lectures, centers, games, etc), but not always in the same order or

on any given day. Students benefit from the variety, but enjoy the familiarity of the activities they know.

- Some classes have the routine of a weekly quiz on Fridays and standardized study packets to help them prepare. Knowing what to study and how to study for a test is an example of something that should be very predictable and routine. This is especially critical for boys who frequently don't know "how" to study. Make test content and format as predictable as possible – no surprises in this area.
- Changing the arrangement of desks is a way to create novelty that one middle school teacher shared with me. He wanted to keep his students on their toes by occasionally surprising them with a change of scenery, so to speak.
- Take students outside for learning. The change of surroundings will shake the doldrums.
-

BEGIN SIDEBAR

Humor is an essential element - they need to have fun. Structure is also essential. For that "fun" to be meaningful, it has to be in the context and the structure of a learning environment. That means a clear line is drawn that applies to every boy. Once they understand how far they can go, they relax and enjoy.

8th grade teacher of an all-boys class

END SIDEBAR

- ✓ **Time, place and manner:** Many of the things that boys do, while challenging at times, are not inherently "bad." Nor is the boy "bad." Oftentimes, the boy's behavior is simply executed at the wrong time or place or in the wrong manner. Sometimes a behavior that a boy gets in trouble for at school is perfectly acceptable in another setting.
 - Teach boys to understand how time, place and manner works. For example, relieving oneself outside is okay on a camping trip, but not on a playground. Rough-housing is okay in the backyard with a willing playmate, but not in the lunch line. Can the boy think of other examples?
 - Time, place and manner applies to high school boys, as well. For example, older boys can be prone to horseplay. The difference? The 15-year-old is more likely to be suspended than the 5-year-old. Talk to adolescent males about how time, place and manner applies to their decisions as well – both in and out of school.
 - Post the words, "Time, Place, Manner" in the classroom. When boys run afoul of a school rule, ask them, "Is there a better time, place or manner for this activity?"
 - Help boys apply time, place and manner to writing topics as well, by considering their audience. Some types of writing are appropriate in one setting and with one audience, but not in another setting with another audience.
 - For more information on this topic, see chapter 4.
- ✓ **Managing transitions:** It can be more difficult – neurologically-speaking - for boys to change gears and make transitions. Accommodating this helps things go more smoothly.
 - Boys tend to have greater single-task focus due to the compartmentalization and lateralization of mental processing. Therefore, they can become more "lost" in a task and have a harder time breaking away when it is time to stop.
 - Give boys advance notice of a change in routine. Give both an auditory and verbal cue (ie. flick lights). Sometimes it helps to touch a boy on the shoulder as you

speak. Speaking into a boy's right ear helps his left brain process the factual information that you are giving him.

- Block scheduling allows for fewer transitions in a boy's day, and thus a greater ability to focus more deeply and with extended time on one task.
- ✓ **Giving instructions:** Female teachers, in particular, need to understand the implications for vocal quality and oral instructions in the classroom.
 - Boys hear better when the speaker's voice is lower and louder.
 - Avoid sing-songy vocal patterns with sentences that end on an up-note or higher pitch.
 - Be more to the point. The male mind appreciates brevity.
 - It's okay to speak louder, but use a dynamic range in your voice to provide the listener with "ear candy" for the brain.
 - Write instructions on the board and explain the first one or two steps. Keep the auditory information brief and then let the boys get busy with the task.
 - Move around the room to check for understanding and to provide information about the next steps.
 -

BEGIN SIDEBAR

Directions should be available as a resource but should not be gone through in detail. In general, men don't like to stop for or read directions, and boys are pretty much the same. The key is to monitor progress and offer suggestions if missteps are made.

Jonathan Wright, middle school Language Arts teacher

END SIDEBAR

- ✓ **Activity & noise levels:** Brain-friendly boys' classrooms are generally busier and noisier, due to more hands-on, collaborative and movement-oriented activities. If you are a teacher who prefers a quiet environment, this can take some getting used to.
 - Busy, active classrooms aren't necessarily poorly managed classrooms. The key to a well-managed classroom is how engaged students are in their learning – not whether or not they are sitting quietly in rows.
 - It is important that parents and classroom supervisors understand the components of a brain-friendly, boy-friendly classroom. Communicate early and often about how learning takes place in your classroom and provide the research to substantiate it.
 - As a teacher of boys, you will want to be more dynamic in your presentation style. Move around, be expressive with your body, vary your tempo and inflection, be dramatic and animated.
 - At times, some students will need a quieter work environment. Provide a quieter work area and a bucket of headphones that students can access when needed.
 -

BEGIN SIDEBAR

Boys like loud dramatic readings from literature.

Bob Bain, teacher, Central Catholic High School

END SIDEBAR

- ✓ **Handling learning materials:** Oftentimes, teachers create procedures to reduce student movement – when, in fact, we should be doing the opposite. Boys are better served by getting up to get their own supplies, instead of staying seated during these transitions.
 - Regularly, or as often as you can, ask students to get up and go collect their own supplies instead of utilizing “Paper Passers.” Have students turn in their own work instead of having a group member collect it. Just walking across the classroom helps wake up a sleepy brain.
 - In an art classroom or other similar setting, set up the materials in one area instead of at the student work stations. Have students get up to get what they need as they need it. Some students will collect what they need in one trip. Others will take the opportunity to make multiple trips for supplies. This is a great way for students to differentiate the amount of movement they get in class. This is also a way to reduce unnecessary trips to the bathroom for kids who simply need a reason to get up and walk.
- ✓ **Organizational strategies:** Don’t make this an afterthought. Plan on systematically and sequentially teaching organization, just as you do the curriculum.
 - Boys must use a planner. Period. Provide them. Insist on them. Don’t let boys slack off on the use of them. This habit starts early. Provide time in class for students to update their planners.
 - Paper day-planners are going the way of the dinosaur. Be open to how technology can help in this area. If you have the discretion to allow cell phones in class for specific learning activities, consider allowing students to take a picture of the assignment board. Allow them to type notes in the notepad application of their phone. Tweet assignments. Update your class website weekly or nightly with homework assignments, as well as the downloadable worksheets or slideshow presentation that goes with the lesson.
 - Consider recording class lectures on an mp3 player. These audio files can easily be uploaded to a website for students who were absent, or those who wish to hear the lesson again. It is also helpful for support teachers and tutors to be able to hear the lesson.
 - Be specific about how a boy is to organize his class binder. Tabs? Pocket folders? Sections? Don’t leave this to chance.
 - Make it a homework assignment one night per week that boys organize their binders or folders. Provide students with a laminated “rubric” for what constitutes an organized binder. Have peers check assignment notebooks and binders the next day in class. Stick to this routine. Routines are a part of being an organized person, so you are both modeling and teaching helpful practices for academic success.
 - A boy’s organizational ability is directly correlated to his grades. Time spent on teaching boys how to effectively use a planner, organize a binder, organize a backpack and maintain a clean desk or locker is time well-spent on his academic well-being.
- ✓ **Competition:** Boys’ natural desire to compete can be a great motivator. Use it. Healthy competition helps keep boys engaged, while helping girls to build confidence.
 - Incorporate game formats regularly. I observed a class of high school boys who were divided into two “football teams.” They moved the ball up and down the

field (it was drawn on the whiteboard) by answering the teacher's questions. I've seen other teachers play the Jeopardy game with students, complete with music and a downloadable, interactive Jeopardy game template. Simple or complex, games work.

- Similar to a game, but with a more extended format, are simulations. I am always amazed at the incredible simulations that are available for purchase at www.teachinteract.com. Simulations can be found in every content area and at every grade level. They bring together all of the positive elements of competition, relevancy, collaboration, and project-based learning.
- If your students struggle with being good sports, then this is all the more reason to create opportunities for competition in your classroom. It's a skill that needs to be taught and reinforced.
- Don't offer anything of value for winning (such as extra credit points). A team cheer or high-fives all around can suffice. The real prize is simply the fun of playing the game - and that can be enjoyed by everyone.
-

BEGIN SIDEBAR

Competition itself lends purpose to an activity. When we think about it, nearly all sports are pretty pointless in terms of what's actually being accomplished; it's the thrill of the competition that makes the activity meaningful.

Jonathan Wright, middle school Language Arts teacher

END SIDEBAR

BEGIN SIDEBAR

Competition is a good motivator. If the guys are in teams, they will strive to do their best to be victorious, no matter what they are learning about.

8th grade teacher of an all-boys class

END SIDEBAR

- ✓ **Student collaboration:** "Pro-social" environments literally enhance neurogenesis (brain cell production). These new cells support learning, memory and mood regulation.
 - A desire for social interaction is natural. Don't suppress it. Incorporate it into the classroom activities.
 - Don't allow random social grouping more than 10-20% of the time. Instead, use more intentional partnering and grouping of students.
 - Students should spend about 50% of every school day interacting with one another.
 - Simple ways of increasing social interaction include, explaining what you heard to a partner, a walk-and-talk review, or playing a partner review game.
 - Setting up a buddy system with another class is commonly done at the elementary level. These vertical mentors (older students paired with younger students) is a great way to foster collaboration, build relationships, and capitalize on the power of "pecking order" (see chapter 5).

BEGIN SIDEBAR

Something that I like about school is how you are there with your friends. It makes it much more enjoyable and not as stressful when you study with a friend or can get help from a friend.

Sam, age 15

END SIDEBAR

- ✓ **Get male role models into classrooms:** For both biological and sociological reasons, boys respond well to respected, older males. Find ways to increase your boys' access to them (check out chapter 5 for an expanded discussion of this topic).
 - Extend invitations to students' fathers to visit the classroom to read-aloud a favorite picture book, to share a piece of their own writing, or to talk about how they use literacy in their line of work.
 - Invite older males (former students, members of a service club, college athletes, etc) to your classroom to do book talks on their favorite books.
 - Encourage respected males at your school, such as coaches, to find opportunities to talk with the boys they come in contact with about books they like.
 - Pair up with another classroom so that students can have a class buddy (ie. first graders buddy with fifth graders, etc).

The Final Buzzer

A productive school year starts before students even enter the classroom. As principals, instructional coaches and teachers, invest time and resources to create the optimal brain-friendly classroom right from the start for boys – and girls! Here are a few things that you might consider doing in the spring or fall to operationalize the best practices we've discussed here:

- Revisit school policies that may interfere with desired classroom practices. For example, school policy may prohibit taking students outside during class time (I've heard of this!), student use of cell phones for educational purposes during the school day, or web-filtering that interferes with technology use. How can you better align school policies with classroom best practices?
- Provide grade-level or departmental teams time to evaluate what teachers are already doing and not doing from this chapter. Have teams report at least three changes they can make that they believe will have the most impact on student engagement and achievement. Follow-up to ensure implementation.
- Have teachers take the staff on a classroom walk-through to show something that they have done to create a more boy-friendly learning environment.
- Have teachers share their best ideas for classroom practice at faculty meetings. I always call this part of the meeting "GIFTS" – Great Ideas From Teachers. Make it a regular part of every meeting.
- Set professional goals with individual teachers that identify strategies from this chapter.
- Prioritize a small amount of funding per classroom, or identify grant sources, to acquire the needed classroom resources, such as fidgets, alternative seating, high-interest books, etc.
- Stock the professional library with recommended books for staff.
- In staff newsletters/communiques, include ideas and "tips" from this chapter.

An excellent teacher is interesting when they talk. They make you laugh and they make you think hard.

Gary, age 14