

Bored by school, boys turn violent

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JIM COYLE

A man does something for 34 years, he gets to know a thing or two.

Clyde Chamberlain is a Toronto native, a high-school teacher. He's the curriculum leader of sciences at Marc Garneau Collegiate Institute. He's seen a lot of kids come and go since obtaining his own master's degree in chemistry and bachelor of education in the '70s.

He's become increasingly worried by escalating youth violence in the city and in the ways the education system is letting kids down. A lot of it, he thinks, has got to do with the way some students – especially boys – learn.

"I believe that many of these troubled youths have few options of interest offered by the school system," Chamberlain said.

When he went to high school, Chamberlain took a five-year science, technology and trades program. Since then, the province has dismantled most of the tech-school programs in the province, he says.

"Most shops lie dormant or have been changed to classrooms. Hands-on activities are downplayed by parents and schools at the high-school level. How many kids nowadays have hobbies that involve design and construction in their teenage years?"

Increasingly, the education system is geared to academics, he said. Parents push many children to university "where they don't belong." Meanwhile, trade programs are less available, even though they feed co-op and apprenticeship programs and Ontario has a shortage of skilled workers.

Technology courses should mean more than just computers, he said. There should be drafting, machine shop, automotive, welding, electronics, sheet metal, carpentry and such. Many of the students he's taught, who might have been attracted to gangs and crime, became involved in trades and now own their own businesses because they had an opportunity to take industrial arts and shop, he said.

There is a growing body of research that supports Chamberlain's observations.

In his book, *Boys Adrift*, the psychologist Leonard Sax recalled the drawing, painting, singing, dancing – in short, the tactile experience – that used to mark kindergarten.

"Nowadays, it's all about learning to read and write," he said.

Kids are expected to sit still and be quiet. But the male brain develops at a different speed than the female, he said. Boys lack the capacity for the sedentary. The young male brain tends toward spatial-mechanical learning.

Boredom and frustration are no small problem. Research shows that girls will generally do homework because the teacher asked them. Boys will do it only if it interests them.

In *The Minds of Boys: Saving Our Sons from Falling Behind in School and Life*, Michael Gurian concurs about the mismatch in how boys learn and how schools are set up.

"Boys who were once schooled in various bonding and instructional methods – apprenticeships, tutoring, action and practice through works of the hand – are now learning through one primary method (verbal learning groups) and without physical movement (sitting in chairs.)"

Daily experiential learning on farms or in marketplaces has nearly disappeared, he said. While fidgeting and physical movement – once a show of energy and vitality – have become liabilities.

As for Chamberlain, he says, "trades must be an option not only because they provide the students with lifelong occupations, but also they enrich their personal lives."

He asked for comments about his proposal. But what's to say? A man does something for 34 years, he gets to know a thing or two.

Jim Coyle usually appears Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday.