

# St-Lazare school takes bold, innovative approach to learning



*BRIANA TOMKINSON, SPECIAL TO THE MONTREAL GAZETTE*

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Forest Hill Senior Elementary School has adopted new teaching methods into its curriculum that allow students to sit on bean-bag chairs instead of using desks. (Dave Sidaway / MONTREAL GAZETTE)  
*DAVE SIDAWAY / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

In the hallway at Forest Hill Senior, two Grade 4 girls are playing hockey with miniature sticks and a bouncy ball. They laugh quietly and trade whispered jibes as they take turns whacking the ball past the imaginary goal line, sending it ricocheting through the halls of the St-Lazare elementary school. Around the corner, two boys from another class are playing catch with a wiffle ball. Further down the hall, a girl reads a book while pumping her legs on an exercise bike. Throughout the hallways, children sit on bean bag chairs in small groups and perch on the wide windowsills, heads bent down as they work on their class assignments.

It should feel chaotic with so much activity in the halls, but the children all seem calm and happy, and manage to keep their voices down even in the midst of friendly games of catch and shinny. They enjoy the 10- to 15-minute breaks granted by their teachers to run off some steam in the school's unique Club Energy program. They know it's a privilege they get only if they behave.





Students have access to computers and other electronic devices during class time.  
(Dave Sidaway / MONTREAL GAZETTE) *DAVE SIDAWAY / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

Three years ago, the principal of Forest Hill, Sylvie Monette, was approached by a group of teachers who were fired up with enthusiasm about innovative approaches to classroom design in Finland that they had read about in a magazine article. The teachers proposed a plan to provide a way for children who had trouble sitting still to run off steam and get more exercise during the day. Monette and Forest Hill's Home & School Association responded with their full support, approving the creation of 10 Club Energy stations throughout the school.

The benefits of the program were apparent almost immediately.

"It worked really well," said Monette. "We saw a big difference."

Teachers reported that kids seemed less fidgety and more focused. Monette no longer had to deal with a queue of restless kids sent to the principal's office. It has been two years since they have had to deal with graffiti in the school washrooms. Student surveys at Forest Hill also revealed a significant decrease in anxiety among boys.

There have been surprisingly few incidences of children abusing the Club Energy system. The few who tested limits by being too noisy, "forgetting" to return on time too often or attempting to con substitute teachers into giving them extra breaks soon learned that their coveted energy breaks were a privilege that would be taken away if they didn't follow the rules.

After seeing such dramatic changes in children's behaviour and ability to learn, Monette and the teachers at Forest Hill began researching other ways they could reshape the school to improve behaviour and learning. They discovered two concepts that would dramatically change the culture at Forest Hill: Future-Ready Schools, intended to prepare children for an uncertain and technology-driven future, and Universal Design for Learning, reshaping the classroom to make learning easier for children with physical or psychological challenges, including ADHD.

While several schools in the Lester B. Pearson School Board – including St. Anthony in Pierrefonds, **St. Patrick in Pincourt** and Christmas Park in Beaconsfield – are experimenting with pilot projects in Universal Design for Learning and Future-Ready Schools, Forest Hill has been able to move rapidly to embrace transformative school-wide change.



Students can read in bean-bag chairs. (Dave Sidaway / MONTREAL GAZETTE)  
*DAVE SIDAWAY / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

“It’s not cookie-cutter learning. It can be tailored for every kid,” said Tanja Minifini, who has had four of her children attend Forest Hill.

Minifini, who is also a longtime parent member of the school’s governing board, said Forest Hill was able to embrace the Future Ready concept more quickly because of financial support from its Home & School Association.

Over the years, the Home & School Association at Forest Hill has raised funds to buy iPads, smart boards, Lego robotics kits and Chromebooks, as well as providing an allowance for teachers to buy extras, like books, bean bag chairs and other resources for the classrooms.

“It can be a pilot project for us because we have the financial resources to do it,” said Minifini. “Forest Hill is like a private school in the public sector. You go in there and you see it right away. It’s different.”

Based on feedback from last year’s Grade 6 students, teacher Jennifer Murray moved most of the desks out of her classroom and created a “focus area” in front of her electronic whiteboard with movable plastic crates topped with cushions made by her students out of favourite old T-shirts. Tables at different heights accommodate children with shorter legs, or who prefer to stand. She added fidget stools, bean bags and floor cushions to allow children to change position during the day and to encourage working in groups. After a few of her students said they preferred to do their work on their own, sitting at traditional desks, she brought a few back in her classroom and created a “quiet corner.”

“My students helped create the classroom,” Murray said.

In Angela Davison’s Grade 4 classroom, she created a small library nook with a whiteboard for students to doodle on as they brainstorm, and pillows and blankets to help readers feel cozy. She has weighted toys for antsy kids to drape over their shoulders to

help them calm down, and a box full of fidget toys: squishy stress balls, tiny skateboards, hacky sacks, Rubik's Cubes.



Nine-year-old Wesley catches up on some reading in one of the flat mats. (Dave Sidaway / MONTREAL GAZETTE) *DAVE SIDAWAY / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

“Not all kids want to sit at a desk all day. I don’t want to sit at a desk all day,” said Davison. “I see the kids are happier. They are able to focus when we ask them to focus.”

Murray, Davison and their colleagues keep classroom doors open and allow kids to complete schoolwork in the hallway, at the teacher’s desk – even lying down on the floor if that is how they feel most comfortable.

This year, Monette tore down the wall that once divided the library from the computer lab, creating a new “maker space” dubbed The Studio. Colourful kites hang from the ceiling above soft chairs for reading. In addition to the expected bookshelves, there is a Lego wall that displays students’ most recent creations. A brightly lit art table invites students to paint. Computers line one wall, and there

are additional Chromebooks available for students to borrow if they need more machines. A long craft table provides space for making puppets or costumes for classroom plays, spreading out photos for the yearbook, building with Lego, or any other project the teachers and students can dream up.

“Everything is all tied together, the technology is part of the learning,” said Minifini. “Forest Hill is really at the forefront of this whole movement in the Lester B. Pearson School Board. Other schools are now trying to model themselves on us.”

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