



52 NIGHT HERON - CHAPEL HILL, NC 27517 - P: 800-874-1100 - E: PHIL@LEARNINGFORLIVING.COM

Sounding Off On School Culture |

Five takeaways from this week's School Culture By Design Podcast

Judo Math: A creative way to teach in the classroom

Guest: Dan Thoene, math teacher, High Tech High International, San Diego, CA + CEO of Judo Math

- 1) **Kids need to learn at their own pace.** A big thing I try to communicate to my kids at the beginning of the year is that it is okay to fail or be slower than other students. I tell my kids: "when you learn to ride a bike, no one asks you how long it took you to learn to ride it." It's the same concept here – the point is you learned it! As an example, at the beginning of the week, I show my kids a slip-knot and ask them to make one themselves. Some kids immediately know how to do it, but most others say, "I can't do it!" So I show them once and the kids that know how to do it help their peers. We work on it 10 minutes a day the first week, and at the end of the week I ask: "If you knew how to do it the first day, stand up. If you knew how after the second day, stand up. Etc." I explain that's the same way we're going to operate in learning math for the year. It won't matter if you don't know it at the same time as other kids, but we're all eventually going to get it together.
- 2) **We have problem-solving play-offs as a class to build classroom culture.** For example – we play a human knot game where we all grab hands in a circle and twist into a knot. Then we have to work together to untangle ourselves without letting go. Or another example is we have a student think of a word and the rest of the students have to think of songs with that word in them, and sing a small part of the song that shows that word. We do things like that every day the first two weeks and then regularly throughout the year. It only takes a couple minutes, but it really builds community in your class – and it keeps kids excited about what we're going to do next. I have examples of other problem-solving playoffs at www.judomath.com.
- 3) **Don't underestimate the power of confidence.** If you can build a child's confidence, it will transform the way they learn. We have students who come into class thinking, "I always fail my math classes. I'm just dumb in math." If we give them the time to learn at their own pace, they'll eventually get it and when they do, they feel so accomplished and excited.
- 4) **Celebrate the little milestones along the way.** We use my "judo math" approach where kids get "belts" as they progress through the various math levels. Each time they finish a level, we call them to the front of the classroom and present their "belt" and the entire class cheers for them. Some of these kids even call their parents and put it on speaker so they can hear the cheers. The goal is to get every student in class to get their black belt by the end of the year, so they all work together to get there. I even hold mentoring workshops where I can teach kids to mentor one another – and we let every kid be a mentor because they can always find someone at their level that they can work with.
- 5) **Embrace differentiation with collaboration by getting your strong students to be the teachers.** There are different types of learners – and that's okay. So instead of pulling the stronger students apart from their peers, I let them help teach their friends. Kids like learning from their peers, and most students enjoy being mini-teachers. It still helps the strong students because it's reinforcing their learning, but it's also helping them learn to work as a team. Mentors are always so proud to see someone they helped achieve their next belt.

