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Extreme Math Class Captures Student Interest

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Poplar Bluff, Missouri - Six graders were issued surgical masks and latex gloves upon entering math class on Thursday, Dec. 6, at the Poplar Bluff Middle School.

A scenario about a zombie outbreak was detailed over the SMART Board using the online tool Flippity, and students had to problem solve in groups in order to unlock the cure.

While it appeared to be a game upon first glance, the purpose of the activity was to prepare students for an exam the following day that would involve unit rates, proportions and measurement conversions.

“They’re reviewing without realizing they’re reviewing for the test,” teacher James Hunt explained. “I try to help them study without making them feel like they’re studying.”

Hunt, a third-year faculty member, goes over the top transforming his classroom the day before each chapter test. Other classroom themes this semester have included Legoland to review ratios and the ‘decimal diner’ in which Hunt dressed as a chef wearing an inflatable suit with self-contained ventilation. He said he is willing to “look ridiculous” if it means improved outcomes.

Student Elerik Stotts’ favorite activity was when he got to be an agent of the FBI and catch a diamond thief in a makeshift jewelry store, he said, noting he did very well on that unit.

“I don’t like boring classrooms because I can’t sit still long enough,” the 12-year-old said. “It’s probably one of the best math classes around.”

The parent of sixth grader Kassidy, Tori Russell, commented how she likes hearing about the creative learning techniques after her daughter returns home from school.

“Kassidy has told me several times how much more she enjoys school this year and her grades have shown improvement,” Russell said. “Thank you, Mr. Hunt, for finding ways to keep our kids engaged and wanting to learn!”

Having the appropriate administrative support is also key for an unconventional teacher. As luck would have it, Hunt’s boss, Dr. Brad Owings, could recently be spotted greeting students in the morning while wearing a red and white Christmas suit that illuminates, and the principal is known to swap the color of his neon shoelaces to coincide with the seasons.

“Rita Pierson, notable educator, says ‘Kids don’t learn from people they don’t like,’” Owings said. “Mr. Hunt does a great job in engaging students and making them like school.”

A time commitment that goes above and beyond is also necessary to maintain Hunt’s teaching style as well as out-of-pocket expenses, but the young educator has a number of online sources such as Teachers Connect and We Are Teachers that he frequents to secure materials. He has had iPads and Kindle Fires crowdfunded in the past through the channel Donors Choose. To avoid “teacher burnout,” he said he networks with other instructors across the country and shares lesson plans through social media platforms like Instagram and Twitter. “It’s about following the right people,” Hunt suggested.

Besides the changing ambiance, Hunt’s classroom features flexible seating – video game chairs and miniature barstools. He and colleague Krystal Dover, a fourth-grade teacher, are experimenting this school year with self-paced learning. Students take pre and post-tests, and advance in small groups only after they have obtained a given skillset.

“I feel like when the students are engaged and expectations are set high, students will reach their fullest potentials,” Hunt stated.

Pictured: Middle School students complete an online scavenger hunt using Google Chromebooks on Thursday, Dec. 6, in James Hunt’s math class.

Article and photo submitted by Tim Krakowiak, Communications/Marketing Director,
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