

## Pre-Law Unveiled as a New Elective for Middle School Students

University School seventh and eighth grade students can now choose law as an elective. According to USchool teacher, Michael Kelly, this is the time when students are ready to move from concrete to abstract thinking, “an important skill to learn for high school”. The difference is that Mr. Kelly knows how to make the transition fun. He previously took a one-class start-up and turned it into that school’s most successful elective with hundreds of participants. Now at University School he is ready to build upon Ms. Cheri Rothschild’s successful mock trial experience with full-format electives.

Mr. Kelly best describes the process, and his approach to teaching law in Middle School:

“We are going to structure the program so that at first, law is a one-semester course. Then we are going to build it into a sequence of Law Studies 101, Law Studies 102 and perhaps Advanced Research.

“I start with Survivor Island. The students are stranded on a deserted island. They cannot get off. The goal is not to get off. They cannot communicate with the outside world. Now they have to develop a society with laws, government and job duties. How do they decide who does what? Students naturally outlaw the most violent crimes. Then they select leaders.

“Their job is to take chaos and produce order, which is what law does. And from that day on they’re sold, because it is all experiential learning. So later when I ask students to memorize stuff, it’s easy because they are using some frame of reference that they did. The kids love it.

“I have a theory that the reason we stop learning or enjoying school is because it stops being fun. What you have to do is ignite the fire to find out about [a subject]. All of my quizzes have online games that they play like a web quest. [Class lessons take] a very hands-on approach. And students are proud to be taking an academic course.

“After Survivor Island, we go into the foundations of laws and how early leaders came up with legal systems because without laws people were chaotic. When they get those basics, we go into [Law 102] -- the constitution, criminal law, and civil law. It really prepares students to be ready for ninth grade work.”

Mr. Kelly describes further how law studies electives help facilitate critical thinking:

“The way I introduce [critical thinking] is I say ‘ok, you’re in seventh (or eighth) grade. We have been lying to you for 12 years. The stove is not always really hot. But we had to tell you it was because if we didn’t you’d burn yourself. You only need to learn the word ‘hot’ once. It’s black and white. Good and bad. Yes and no. ‘It’s hot.’ But really, 99 percent of the time, the stove is off, and it’s not hot. But we didn’t trust your ability to think then. Ninety-nine percent of life is in the grey part. And so you have to understand how to process that.

“Initially when we tell students that everything we’ve told them is kind of grey, the light bulb goes on. And it’s the first real movement from concrete to abstract thinking.

“That light bulb. That’s what I’m excited about.”