

6 - No Excuses University

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Purpose: The purpose of the transcripts is to provide readers and listeners with a written version of each episode of the UAGC Center for Early Childhood Education's Early Childhood Chatter Podcast so they can follow along with the audio content. www.uagc.edu/ece-center/chatter-podcast

Audience: Current Active & Enrolled Students

Episode Transcript

Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: Hello, everyone, and welcome to Early Childhood Chatter with Dr. Shipley and Dr. Hield. We will upload a new episode every other week on Wednesdays.

Dr. Stephanie Heald Speaker: Twice a month, we come to you with a 10-minute professional development inspiration that you can quickly listen to for new ideas to use today. Don't forget to subscribe to this podcast to get notifications about future episodes. Today, we are honored to have here with us Damon Lopez. Damon is the founder of No Excuses University Network of Schools, a network of 200 schools across the nation who work to promote college and career readiness for all students beginning in preschool.

Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: So, Damon, I've had the privilege to attend many of your No Excuses events and even present a couple of times. I'm always in awe of what you and the schools that are in your network are doing. So today, we're going to talk about why it's never too early to promote college and career readiness for students. And I have to 100% agree with this, and it is something that I even did when I taught pre-K. So, I want you just to tell us your story, how you started this, and then all your goodies in between.

Damen Lopez Speaker: Thank you.

Thank you guys both for having me. That introduction is so nice. It's---I'm not worthy of it much of the time.

I try to think of myself as just a down-to-earth guy who just loves kids. And I think that probably if somebody asked me the biggest reason that I am focused on getting kids to college and career at the earliest age possible and developing that in them, it's because that's really where I came from as a kid. Like many children out there, my parents were divorced when I was very young.

My brother, Dan, and I who run our network of schools together, we really kind of started our life out with a little bit of turmoil. My mom met a great guy, remarried, and then we moved to a very small community outside of San Diego, California called---a place called Julian. And it was a small town of about 2,000 people.

And the only place we could afford to live was on top of the grocery store there. And that's when I---as I reflect back, that's when I realized that, you know, what it was like to live in poverty. Thankfully for us, it did not become generational poverty.

And the reason why is because while my mom and dad were not college-educated, they knew the only way out was for their kids to be. And so that was just the thing that was pounded into our heads from the earliest moment I can remember is my mom would read us a book every single night. She really valued early literacy and would read us a book every night.

She'd tell us she loved us and then she would always say, after high school comes college. And that was my mentality in elementary school and middle school and high school. In high school, my life, to be honest with you, was miserable.

I don't remember a single day where I didn't deal with bullying. I don't remember a single day where people just were unkind. That's to put it lightly.

But I got to tell you, the worst things that I remember people saying to me, it wasn't from other students. It was from other teachers. And I remember thinking to myself, if this is what college is like, then you're going to be done after high school.

Forget this. You're done. But something very serendipitous happened.

And that was that my high school had run out of elective slots to put me in. So, a lot of other kids got to be a teacher's aide or got to do these really cool electives that were something of interest. But I had a blank spot.

And so, I went into my principal's office. I was really upset. And I said, hey, I don't have an elective like all the other kids.

And just to get me out of his office, he said, you know what, Lopez, just start walking up to the elementary school. I'm going to call the principal up there and he'll find something for you to do. And what that guy meant for evil was used for good in my life because the moment my foot hit that blacktop; it was the defining moment of my life.

That's when I knew this is what I want to do for the rest of my life. I want to work with kids. I want to impact their lives.

And that is a moment that I believe the best educators across the country, every one of them have had. And so, I was motivated right there at the age of I think it was 13 or 14. And I went off to college and became a teacher in a small in a district called Poway Unified, which is just outside of San Diego.

And I landed in this school called Los Penasquitos Elementary School. Now, Los Penn was one of 21 elementary schools in the district, but it was a title one school, and it was the lowest performing school in the district. And it always had been.

And people had always told me, whatever you do, do not go to Los Penn to get a job. Well, I ignored their advice because I needed a job. And I walked in the door, and they hired me on the spot.

And I should have known something was up. I found out really quickly that what they were talking about was right. Not only did I see other people making excuses for why these kids of poverty couldn't learn, but I found myself doing it.

They had it had impacted me so much that I started to become a part of that negative culture. And one day I was in the staff lounge, and I was complaining in front of a group of teachers who I barely knew. And I was talking about one of my kids, why he couldn't learn, why I couldn't teach him.

And the worst teacher in the whole school, he came up to me. He put his arm around me. He smiled and he said, welcome to the club, man.

And I still remember that day vividly. And I remember thinking to myself, this is the worst teacher in the school. And he's welcomed you to his club.

Either change your attitude or change your profession because it's going to be a miserable life for you. Well, through a series of events, I left there after five years of teaching, went to go become an assistant principal at another school and then came back to become the principal of that school. And I'm proud as I sit here today to tell you that Los Penns, not the lowest-performing school in the district any longer.

It's one of the highest performing schools in the state of California today. And that's not because of Damon Lopez. It's because a collection of like-minded individuals from every position got together and we started to change the culture, and we started to believe in kids and we started to do what's called create exceptional systems.

And so, we created six exceptional systems and that was all we focused on. What is the culture? Culture of universal achievement. Are we going to collaborate? Are we going to align standards? We're going to assess standards.

We're going to manage data. And then when we manage data, we're going to intervene. And that was it.

We made it simple, and we stayed to our roots. And lo and behold, it has really created this revolution, so to speak, that we call the No Excuses University Network of Schools. And I'll just share with you briefly that when we did this, we didn't do it to create a network.

We did it to change our own school. But a funny thing happened. When you're in a large district like that, you would think that other schools would be saying, how the heck did this poor school find success? And nobody did.

Nobody asked a question at all. Nobody came to visit. And so just by happenstance, I met Rick DeFore from Professional Learning Communities, and he had me speak at one of his events.

And one thing led to another, and people started to come and visit Los Penn. And so, this idea of college and career readiness at the elementary level resonated and it has spread. And today, as you said, we're over 200 schools strong across the country.

Dr. Stephanie Heald Speaker: Wow. Wow. What a story.

I had the privilege of being mentored by Rick DeFore also. And I'll tell you, I've never lost sight of the fact that we have to build these cultures. We have to really strengthen the community.

And it really does start with the children. Damon, just a quick question. What first steps advice do you have for those young Los Penn teachers, those young teachers at schools that are struggling to hang on and not join that worst teachers club, but rather work to change that culture? What first steps should they take?

Damon Lopez Speaker: I would say the first step, it always starts with your own attitude.

Your attitude drives your behavior. And it is tough to be a part of a school or a campus that is negative. I've been there.

I've worked with literally thousands of schools across the country who are dealing with these challenges and individual teachers as well. But you've got to realize, especially for a classroom teacher, you can complain all you want. You can talk about what you don't have or how you wish to be a part of a different school.

The fact of the matter is when you shut the door to your classroom, it's you and your students for the most part. I mean, you're going to get visited by the principal, and that's great in many cases. In some other cases, it's not if they're not a great leader.

But for the most part, it's you and your students. Stop complaining and just get to work with those kids. For no other reason, just to make life better for you, to live in negativity is miserable.

It will not change a thing. I'm not denying the fact that there, even today, are people that are listening to this podcast who are really frustrated, who feel like there's no way out. Ultimately, it's you and your kids, and start there.

And then when you get those great results, they will resonate, and then they'll move on to other classrooms and eventually other schools. And that's really what the story at Los Penn has been.

Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: So, Damon, will you tell us a little bit about your network of schools? Like, what's it about? What are your exceptional systems? And if somebody on here is listening and is excited about this, what can they do? How can they reach out to you? Where can they find more information?

Damen Lopez Speaker: Yeah, so the driving point for us to create a network of schools is finally our district listened, and they said, all right, Los Penn's doing something special.

We're going to put on a symposium on our professional growth day in the district, and everybody can go to it if they want to. And it's called, How Did Los Penn Do It? And it's a large district that I was in, and they held it at a high school. And we expected hundreds and hundreds of teachers to show up.

And when we got there, we had breakout sessions ready. I was going to do a keynote speech, and two people showed up. That was it.

Two people. And we left there a small core of us, and we said, you know what? What we're doing can help people. Let's just share the message however we can.

And through articles, through books, through TV interviews, whatever it was. And so, when we started the network, all the network is, is how do we utilize one another as great resources to get great results for kids? And so, schools that are trained, they go to what we call our NEU Boot Camp. And you can find this all out, as well as our exceptional systems at noexcusesu.com. They get trained, and then they join our network.

And they get exclusive access to what we call NEU Connect, which is a portal of thousands of resources that have been uploaded by our 200 schools. We've got hundreds of videos and great lessons on there. That's what it means to be in the network.

It's not just about what you get. It's about what you give. And that's really important to us.

Dr. Stephanie Heald Speaker: I love the website. I had a chance earlier today to check it out. And I just saw that you spoke a lot about the culture of universal achievement.

And that really, when you draw back the layers of that and look at the definition, I think our audience would really love to learn more about that. So, can you elaborate a little about that?

Damon Lopez Speaker: Yeah, a culture of universal achievement is really this idea of believing. You have to believe that every single student can meet or exceed standards across the board.

And not only you have to believe that, you have to believe that you as the adult are responsible. And that's the key to the success. You can believe it and then push the responsibility off to somebody else.

One of the classic excuses, probably the number one excuse that's out there is it's the parents. It's the parents' fault. This is why these kids aren't successful, because it's the parents' fault.

And I always push back and say, the parents in some cases create a challenge, a challenging home environment for some of these kids. But you and I are specially trained to do what we do. And if we don't take the things we've learned, that we've been schooled to learn, create that culture that we are highly skilled to turn these kids, their lives around, then it's kind of like a dentist who says, you know, I'll clean your teeth, but I don't mess with cavities.

Well, you know, you exist to fix what is broken. You don't exist to just keep pouring into, you know, what has already been fixed. I live in a really nice community, and I'll be honest with you, our schools thrive.

But that's not a surprise. Because the fact is, even though the schools are great, it's not hard to teach a kid how to read who's already been taught how to read by his parents. That's a piece of cake.

What's hard to do is to do what many teachers listening to this podcast are doing right now, and that is teach kids of poverty and go all in on that. So that's what we do. And that's really the core of what a culture of universal achievement is all about.

Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: Damon, you're so right. And again, I have seen you speak so many times, and you just have so many nuggets of information. But I want to make sure before we leave here today that you mentioned your website.

But do you want to talk a little bit about like your podcast and your LinkedIn and the little things that you send out to people who need them, the motivation and things like that?

Damon Lopez Speaker: Yeah, one of the great things, I guess, the silver linings of the pandemic. Normally, I'm on the road, you know, 100 days a year, but the pandemic has shut all that down. And I have always had a LinkedIn account, but just started to start digging into it in the last couple of weeks.

And so, you can find me on LinkedIn. I post weekly short articles of inspiration on there. You can go to our website; you can get my books.

I have a book called No Excuses University. Then I have a new book called No Excuses Leadership that digs deep into how to teach everyone on the staff how to be a leader. And if you go in Google Play or in the App Store for Apple, you can download my leadership app.

Just search the words N-E-U lead. You get the first button for free, which is servant leadership. But if you want to purchase the whole app, you can do that on our website as well.

Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: Perfect. So what are three takeaways that you want our listeners to leave with today?

Damon Lopez Speaker: Well, I think one is you have to believe in creating exceptional systems and simplify the work that you're doing. You have to understand, too, that it takes leadership and that leadership is not just in the principal's office and nor does it need to be.

You got to realize that the average principal time span for a principal to stay there is between three and five years. And after that, half of those people end up leaving the profession because they're so burnt out. On the other hand, teachers will stay on their site for decades.

And if we're not capitalizing on all that knowledge and teaching our teachers and our staff members to lead, we're missing out. And so, you got to create that culture of leadership. And then three, you've got to understand there is a sense of urgency, not only because what's at stake for our kids and the power of having education beyond high school.

And it's not just a four-year university. There's lots of options out there for careers beyond high school. But the sense of urgency more than ever today, I'd leave you with this.

After this pandemic, you will see there is going to be competition in education like you have never seen before. And I am a public-school guy and I've always been a public-school guy and I will continue to be. But if you don't think there's competition where parents will take their kids out of the public schools into other opportunities, you've got your head in the sand.

We have got to rise to the occasion and have a sense of urgency. And so that's what I'd leave them with. Yeah, we've got to be better.

Dr. Stephanie Heald Speaker: Yeah we've gotta be better. Damon, do you have one challenge for our audience today?

Damon Lopez Speaker: Um, one challenge is hard, but I would go back to where we started. And that is this. Make a list on a piece of paper in front of you and be really honest.

What are the things that are holding you back from being great in whatever position you're in? If you're a classroom teacher, if you're a principal, if you're a counselor, you know, if you're the school secretary, if you're the custodian, whatever it is, what are the things that are holding you back from being great in that position and great with engaging in your colleagues in a powerful way? And then start checking them off the box and start fixing them one at a time. It's not going to happen overnight, but set those goals little by little. And I think you'll be where you want to be.

Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: Wow, Damon, I knew this was going to be amazing. That's why we invited you on. Thank you so much for being here.

Hopefully we can have you again. Maybe we can dive deeper into the exceptional systems that you've made up because I've read both of your books. Again, I've presented for you and he's doing something amazing, everyone.

So, if you need more, get on his website. And Damon, thank you so much.

Damon Lopez Speaker: You bet.

I'll be back anytime you like.

Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: Thank you. All right.

Make sure you subscribe and we will see you again next week.