

## CASE STUDY: **Stonehurst Hills Elementary School**

Stonehurst Hills Elementary School is located in Upper Darby, Pennsylvania, a suburb of Philadelphia. Our current enrollment for grades one through five is 620 students of which, approximately 90% are African-American, 5% are Caucasian and 5% are Latino, Middle Eastern or Asian descent. Currently 85% of our student population receives free or reduced lunch. English is the primary language spoken within our building and amongst our parents and community members. The population is also extremely transient.

Throughout the book study of *The Art of Learning* by Josh Waitzkin, we implemented a variety of techniques and strategies outlined through the *Protocols for Book Studies*, which was compiled by the Pennsylvania Reading First consortium. Each participant read independently and came prepared to share connections between the text and their personal and professional environments. Being a large group, approximately thirty participants, we met and then broke into smaller discussion groups. This allowed everyone to actively participate and “bounce” ideas and thoughts off each other prior to sharing with the larger group.

We read the three sections designated by the author and met after each one, limiting our focus for more poignant discussions. Prior to our initial meeting we read the subsection, The Foundation, and completed a Four ‘A’s’ Protocol graphic organizer. This format allowed each participant to find ideas or themes mentioned by the author that they agreed with, aspired towards, and make the adjustments for success in implementing them. In the second subsection, My Second Art, we completed Ink Your Thinking Protocol, another graphic organizer compiled by Pennsylvania Reading First. In the final subsection, Bringing It All Together, we compiled a list of different ways to apply the strategies and ideas to ourselves as well as our classrooms. Each time we convened as a whole group, we found there were many similarities and some differences in our perceptions of the material.

Several participants chose to speak and share on the concept of “losing to win” and how when working with elementary school children this is often a dichotomy. We want them to succeed, we practice for accuracy while expecting them to learn from their mistakes and take it in stride. An abstract concept such as this is difficult for a six or seven year old child. That is where the discussion around alignment and adjustment differed. As we strive to create higher order thinking skills in our students, we often employ them ourselves.

Many participants mentioned the unique personality traits of the author himself and how they may not easily apply to the children in our building. The environment that his learning style was built upon and later refined, chess, is not necessarily something that can be directly paralleled in our students’ lives. Josh took each lesson and/or loss and was able to learn from it and have the resiliency to move on. This lack of ability to recuperate and move on is a stumbling block we see many times each day. Often students struggle to get over an error on a math problem, a mistake while writing or editing or a poor decision in a social interaction with peers. They become frustrated and overwhelmed by the feeling of failure and lose control. Given the responsibilities and time constraints of a teacher, it is not always realistic to address every teachable moment. Overall we are hoping as educators to instill this ability within

our students, so that as they become life long learners they can apply it to a variety of real world situations and do so independently.

Competition can have a good side and a bad side. We see it all of the time on television, in professional sports and entertainment. For every winner there is also a loser, which is a tough thing for a kid to swallow. Everyone likes to win, to be admired by your peers, lauded by your parents and teachers, and to have a sense of success and accomplishment. A loser has a hard act to follow. We expect children to “take it on the chin” and show good sportsmanship when they are actually so frustrated, embarrassed and disappointed, all they want to do is cry. As educators we try to be good role models and teach our students how to respond appropriately to both success and failure. We hope that these lessons carry into the classroom and also real world situations.

As a large group, we came up with some classroom strategies to implement or revisit.

Literature Circles engage students through reading novels and encourage higher order thinking and the act of “thinking through” a problem whether they are the problems of a character or the plot of a story.

We teach perseverance and persistence through creative writing and the writing process which is also linked to “not getting stuck at failure”.

The way we present this can be exemplified through Michael Jordan’s example of “losing to win”.

Each day during Morning Meeting, a component of Responsive Classroom, we work on the foundation for dealing with many of the pressures of the day.

The ideas of recovery time relate to the coping mechanisms we teach our students through peer mediation and de-escalation techniques particularly in social situations.

We look at “imperfections to take an advantage” when the students make errors and then learn to resolve or correct them with guidance, support and eventually independence.

The use of music as an auditory signal for transitions whether they be from room to room or in between the change of subject matter. We also play background music to create a calming atmosphere.

The idea of “making smaller circles” gives everyone an opportunity to look at things more closely, break them down and figure out what works and what does not.

The consistency and routines we establish enable the children to have the skills to make the transitions go more smoothly and the realization that change is “ok”.

Each adult in our building finds what works for them and their students.  
This “uniqueness” is what is effective in the classroom.

This was an invaluable opportunity for teachers and staff to come together and realize the importance of what we do each minute of the day in front of our students. The discussions we had and the connections we made through this book were informative and insightful. We each came away from this experience with specific strategies and insights that will make us a better person and educator.