

→ Mark your confusion.

→ Purposefully annotate the article (1-2 mature, thoughtful responses per page to what the author is saying)

→ Write a 250+ word response to the article.

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## Is this some kind of joke? A school facing shortages starts teaching standup comedy

By Justin Kramon for *NPR*, May 6, 2024

([Here is a link to listen to this short piece for \*All Things Considered\*.](#))

MARY LOUISE KELLY, HOST:

Public schools across the country continue to report staffing shortages, and the highest rates of teacher vacancies are in low-income communities. Well, one school facing shortages has made a bold choice to start teaching stand-up comedy, prompting the question, is that a joke? Justin Kramon has the story.

UNIDENTIFIED CHILD #1: Excuse me.

JUSTIN KRAMON, BYLINE [PERSON WHO IS TELLING THE STORY]: At 10:55 a.m., students file into Lamarr Todd's middle school performance comedy class. One student, Elani Walker, explains what they'll be doing today.

ELANI WALKER: Today we're going to be writing comedy skits. We first write our skits out, then Mr. Todd, he talks to us about the skits. He'll help us change it if it's kind of boring.

KRAMON: Todd's been teaching comedy for the past five years at The Chester Charter Scholars Academy, a public performing arts school outside Philadelphia. Today, as students work on their skits, Todd checks in on one group.

LAMARR TODD: Oh, school lunch is the whole topic. And what about the combination of foods that we get? We got...

UNIDENTIFIED CHILD #2: Terrible.

TODD: Like, they put milk, chocolate milk with everything.

UNIDENTIFIED CHILD #2: Yes.

UNIDENTIFIED CHILD #3: Yes. We don't got no water.

UNIDENTIFIED CHILD #2: They refuse to give us water.

TODD: Yeah (laughter), yeah.

UNIDENTIFIED CHILD #4: Pizza and milk is not a good combo.

TODD: Pizza and milk is not a good combo.

UNIDENTIFIED CHILD #5: Like, milk with fried chicken.

KRAMON: After hearing them out, Todd asks the students to categorize their feelings more precisely.

TODD: So school lunch is scary. We say that - scary. We're not saying weird.

UNIDENTIFIED CHILD #4: We're saying scary.

UNIDENTIFIED CHILD #5: Yeah.

TODD: Scary.

UNIDENTIFIED CHILD #2: 'Cause I be fearing for my life every time I try to eat something.

KRAMON: Todd says this is comedy - figuring out what's important to you, how you feel about it and giving examples.

TODD: What do you dislike? Let's put that in the one of four categories - hard, stupid, scary or weird. That would be the premise of our joke, just taking the topic and breaking it down.

KRAMON: Which reinforces the basic academic skills students are learning in other classes.

TODD: This is stuff that they learn in English class, T-Charts and stuff like that, making comparisons and finding the main idea.

KRAMON: The whole class started as a side project for Todd, a comedian by night. In 2019, he was working here as a teaching assistant when a theater teacher left for another job.

TODD: And so they asked me to just take some of the kids that were in there and teach them improv.

KRAMON: Todd also started teaching the students how to write jokes and perform.

TODD: And they haven't ever had a platform to talk about why school is hard, to talk about chores, to talk about being awkward.

KRAMON: Todd suggested they perform their comedy at an upcoming spring concert.

TODD: They're all very nervous. The gym is packing up more and more. I introduced them. I say, hey, this is something a little different. This is stand-up comedy, and these kids have been working very hard on this.

MINDY NGUYEN: Henry, one of the students in the class, got up on stage.

KRAMON: That's Mindy Nguyen, director of curriculum and arts integration at the school.

NGUYEN: And he was talking about being raised by his grandparents and just making jokes about different generations. And so they were things that our kids, like, connected to. Just watching them as a teacher be on stage and, like, feel proud about who they were is why we do what we do.

KRAMON: It got Nguyen thinking about Todd.

NGUYEN: So I'm always looking for different arts classes that aren't traditional. We offered him to be the teacher for performance comedy for middle school and high school.

KRAMON: But Todd insists the most important lesson his students carry into their other classes is confidence.

TODD: So when they have to write an essay or if they have to do a speech in front of a class or anything like that, they are successful in other rooms.

KRAMON: Sabree Norwood-Davis, one of the high schoolers, points out some other benefits.

SABREE NORWOOD-DAVIS: It really helps with anxiety, you know, if you've got, like, social anxiety. Say you having a bad day. He'd definitely, you know, boost that, you know, make you laugh when you need it.

KRAMON: After several rehearsals, the students perform the skits they've been working on in front of the class.

TODD: ...One - action.

UNIDENTIFIED CHILD #6: Yeah, these lunch combos be getting nasty.

UNIDENTIFIED CHILD #7: What's for lunch today - tater tots and milk?

TODD: And that's fine right there. Cut, cut, cut. Thank y'all. Thank y'all. Good job. Good job.

KRAMON: Class is over, and Todd dismisses his students hoping they can use some of what they got here out in the world.

For NPR news. I'm Justin Kramon, in Chester, Pa.

**Response option(s):**

- After reading the article, what is one main idea that you find most remarkable (meaning, "most worthy of a remark" -- so it can be interesting, concerning, confusing, alarming, offensive, etc)? What is it that you find so remarkable? Explain.
- After reading the article, what additional questions do you have? Research these on your own and write about what you find.
- Summarize any point made in the article and respond.