

# The math lesson

I always joke that part of the reason I chose to major in English is that I wouldn't need math. My distaste for numbers began in third grade when I struggled to learn my times tables. In sixth grade, the letters showed up next to my numbers, and rather than rising to the challenges Algebra offered, I resorted to doodling in the margins of my notebook. I took the most basic math class I could in college, "Mathematical Ideas," then turned my back on calculations and equations for nearly a decade. I taught myself algebra last summer to prepare for my real estate exam, but there are still more holes in my math education than there are digits in pi.

So when Dr. Peter Litchka and Dr. Peter Rennert-Ariev of Loyola University, the directors of the revolutionary professional development program St. Joan of Arc has joined alongside several other Archdiocese of Baltimore schools, asked my colleagues and I to go "out of our comfort zones" and observe another teacher from another subject area, I knew where I was heading.

Enter Kim Evelyn (pronounced "EEVE-lin"), the middle school math teacher at SJA. She invited me to visit her sixth-grade class on a Wednesday morning to observe a lesson on decimals.

Class began with a homework check, a quiz, and an awesome and unexpected prayer.



Mrs. Evelyn defied the traditional model of teaching by spending less than 10 minutes in front of the board introducing the new topic: decimal place value. "Remember: this is the pennies column and this is the dimes column," she explained. I wish I'd learned that in sixth grade!

Students spent a short period of guided practice time delving into the fascinating task of measuring gerbil's tails to the required decimal place (within the confines of their textbooks, of course.) And then, the most exciting thing happened ... the iPads came out.

An air of giddiness swept through the room as students fired up their tablets and logged into an interactive program called IXL. IXL is an online, subscription-based program available for preK-high school levels. It covers both math and language arts and includes a variety of problems and games, all of which offer incentives (ribbons), scores, and constructive feedback.

The students were so engaged in the program that you could hear the tapping of their fingers on the glass screens of their iPads. Occasionally someone would exclaim, "I got a ribbon!" Mrs. Evelyn circumnavigated the room, spending a little

more time with those students who weren't grasping the concept and awarding those who finished with a small piece of candy.

Before I knew it, class was over. I was even a little disappointed, as I had been playing along on my phone. (IXL offers 20 free questions a day!) What a striking difference from the days when I tried to nudge the minute hand forward by squinting at it, rather than moving time forward by busily focusing on the problems in front of me. The marriage of technology and the modern, "guide by the side, rather than sage on the stage," philosophy of teaching have transformed the way students learn. Mrs. Evelyn's classroom reflects that. It's a glimpse of the future of education. And it's exciting.