SWEET TAKES

S1E19

Quests, Not Grades: Inside the School With No Report Cards

Season 1 Episode 19 Notes

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bigleap

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Episode Synopsis

What happens when you strip away every classroom rule and let students choose their own path? Coby and Tanner Bowman, founder of Optio, drive to Sinners and Saints Coffee to talk about building a school without letter grades. Instead, there are quests and experience points.

Tanner shares how ten years as a public school computer science teacher and a doctorate studying autonomy and motivation led him to leave the traditional system and build something new. They dig into why penalizing failure kills learning, how one student is earning math credit by analyzing the physics of Brandon Sanderson's *Mistborn* series, and why Tanner believes the real goal of education is raising creators, not consumers.

About

Tanner Bowman

Highlights

Tanner founded Optio, the first-ever learning platform specifically designed to support real student-driven learning.

The platform is compatible with any learning format, from homeschool families to co-ops, microschools, and even traditional schools.

The LMS provides a full plug-and-play experience, allowing anyone to offer more student-driven learning experiences. All work completed on the Optio platform is accredited, and official high school diplomas and dual - enrollment college credit can be awarded to anyone using the platform.

Expertise

Before founding Optio in May of 2025, Tanner spent the last 10 years as a public high school teacher. He taught a range of courses in Computer Programming, AP Computer Science Principles, and even a Video Game Design class.

He founded Optio to address a fundamental flaw in the traditional approach to education: a lack of student autonomy.

Tanner graduated from Western Governors University with a Bachelor's degree in Information Technology and went on to receive his Doctor of Education from William Howard Taft University.

Related Links

- About Optio
- Connect with Tanner
- About Sweet Takes

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Show Notes

Memorable Quotes

- “Public school is just focused on completion and checking boxes rather than actual love of learning.”
- “The process is the goal. Not the destination, not the outcome, the journey, the process of consistently engaging in learning. That is the goal.”
- “I refuse to penalize failure. The public system is set up to penalize failure, and I try to reward failure.”
- “I want to raise a generation of people who can create, as opposed to people who just consume.”
- “I view my role as a teacher more as a gardener. My responsibility is to cultivate a good environment where kids can thrive should they choose to .”
- “A teacher can’t place their value as a teacher on the outcome of their students. The students are responsible for their outcomes.”

Sweet Stop

Sinners and Saints Coffee (Lehi)

Tanner chooses his go-to iced latte (though he was eyeing a speciality drink with the devil in its name), while Coby doubles up on the coffee order to keep up with the deep educational philosophy. The real star of the stop? Local charm served straight out of a cozy, food-truck-style setup. Sinners and Saints delivers local coffee shop vibes, serving up handcrafted espressos, signature brews, and local favorites.

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Key Takeaways

Grab an iced latte and dig in. Here's what stuck with us from this episode:

- **Autonomy unlocks intrinsic motivation:** When students re given genuine choice and trusted to manage their time, they show up because they want to learn, not because they are forced to.
- **Failure is an essential part of the learning process:** Traditional letter grades punish mistakes, whereas gamifying education with Experience Points (XP) rewards effort and continuous iteration.
- **Quest-based learning turns passions into academic credits:** Optio allows students to personalize their education through real-world quests and passion projects such as studying physics through fantasy literature.
- **Process over outcome applies beyond the classroom:** Coby draws a direct line between Optio's philosophy and marketing. Brands that chase outcomes create toxic feedback loops, while those that focus on cultivating value (not forcing conversions) earn trust from the right audience when they're ready to buy.
- **Cultivate environments instead of forcing outcomes:** Effective educators and leaders focus on setting the table and building a supportive ecosystem rather than controlling final student metrics.
- **Future-proofing students requires shifting from consumers to creators:** As automation handles repetitive tasks, human education must focus on fostering critical thinking, creativity, and self-direction.
- **Flexible tech stacks empower educational freedom:** Optio provides the technology for homeschool families and micro-schools to offer official, accredited high school diplomas while keeping their preferred curricula.