



Great Secondary Schools-Middle School and High Schools

What Makes them Great?

There is nothing better than walking inside a great middle school or high school.

There is nothing worse than walking inside a not so great middle school or high school.

Doing what I do, which is making the world safe for llamas, allows me to go inside a whole lot of schools in a whole lot of different parts of the country. Before I go any farther with this, let me say that the main thing that I see in my travels is just how dedicated and hard working the teachers of this country are! Oh my gosh! I get so angry when the media or anyone for that matter tries to portray teachers in a negative light. Ok, I am quite sure that occasionally a bad egg slips into this profession. But I am telling you, no matter what schools I see, I see teachers busting their tails to do what is right for the kids that they work with every day.

I will scream that from the highest rooftop for the remainder of my days!

Teaching is hard! Anyone who wants to criticize the teachers of today should be made to spend significant periods of time trying to do what teachers do. This goes for critics and lawmakers as well.

Even when I enter a “questionable” school, inevitably it is made up of very caring teachers.

So why are some middle schools and high schools great and others are shall we say, not so great?

Here’s the good news: This is not rocket science! This is not brain surgery! Or, as I have heard a comedian say, “This is not rocket surgery!” In other words, the ones that are not so great can make a real change for the better in a relatively short time period just by emulating a few key characteristics of the good ones.

So why haven’t the not so good ones already copied the great ones and done what I am about to tell you?

Gee, while simple, that sometimes gets kind of complicated. We tend to make things harder than they already are. The truth is also that in the year 2020 the world is *very difficult*, and middle school and high school students are living in this *very difficult* world.

It therefore makes our jobs, you got it, *very difficult*.

But not impossible. I’ll say it again. Not impossible. You are not powerless.



The Llama Guy's #1 Tip for a Great Middle School or High School

Are you ready?

Is your mind open and ready to listen?

Can you get rid of all of the clutter in your mind in order to accept this?

For a moment, can you put away all of the incredible pedagogy that you have studied and accept a simple truth from a very simple man?

Here goes:

A successful middle school or high school is one in which the adults have the belief and carry out this said belief that 100% of the time they will lovingly, relationally, courageously, and consistently put themselves in positions of being in the business of their students at all times.

Not for a moment will students under the watch of their school go unsupervised (except maybe when they relieve themselves).

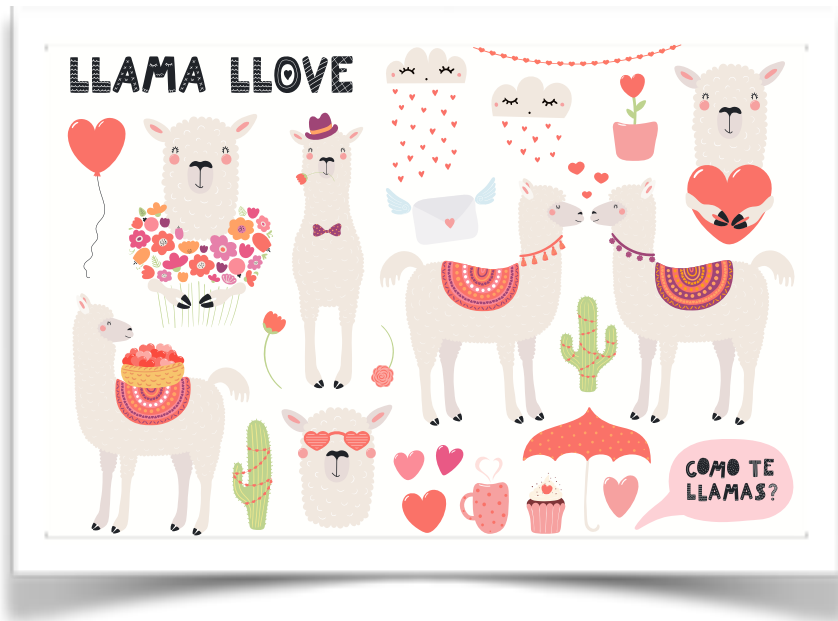
They will have systems in place that allow for constant supervision of everything and allow for the adults to monitor students at all times, and when necessary, "intervene" (also known as lovingly and relationally "hassling") students who are in need of that type of intervention.

In other words, these schools realize that even though the students appear to be much larger than 1st graders, they still need the same type of supervision, care, and loving direction that we provide to our 1st graders.

So do we treat them like 1st graders? No! In fact they need much closer supervision and loving feedback than most 1st graders require.

Don't agree with me on these points? That's totally okay.

I just may not want to walk down the halls of your school during passing period.



Relationships

Just last week I was in a high school outside of Detroit, Michigan. I was in the hallway as students were scurrying to 1st period in order to be on time.

A young lady, who I learned was a kind of administrative assistant, was standing at the intersection of two hallways during this time of transition.

She appeared to be very happy, cheerful, and glad to be at school. She stood not against the wall, but in a rather prominent position in the hallway so that students would inevitably have to see her as they passed.

I stood in awe as she called the name of every single student who passed by as she greeted them. ***She knew the name of every single student.***

Most of her interactions were cheerful greetings or questions as to how a student's evening had gone, or something family related and so on.

Even though she could not have been more than 5 feet tall, her posture and her confident presence gave the impression that she was much taller when she cheerfully but forcefully encouraged a few students to "step it up" in order to get to class.

As I went further down the hallway, I noticed that without exception, at every open classroom door an adult was standing well into the hallway, doing exactly what the administrative assistant had been doing. There were lots of high fives and back slapping going on, again with the adults knowing the name of every student.

There were no students in the hallway who were out of the reach of the eyes of a loving and caring adult who not only knew their names, but had no problem in instantly redirecting them if needed.

Wow!

There it is!

So.....

The Llama Guy's #2 Tip for Having a Great Middle School or High School:

Every adult in the school needs to have a relationship with every single student in the school.

Every adult in the school needs to take responsibility for every single student in the school, not just the ones you know.

Get to know as many names as possible and something special about every single student in your school so that you can have a conversation with any student in the school.

One way to do this is to have a card for every student you teach.
Watch this: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1IAaY8o9CfUOgwgRDSjneUdwUu3QuU9-c/view?usp=sharing>

When do we have time to establish these relationships?

The Llama Guy's #3 Tip for Having a Great Middle School or High School:

Without excuse, without exception, every staff member will be in the hallways during passing periods, even if you have an off period.

If you are in a meeting, when the bell rings, interrupt the meeting. Everyone is in the halls.

Every teacher will practice Threshold. You will stand with one foot inside your door and one foot outside of your door. Greet every student who enters your classroom and take a moment to establish that relationship. Also realize that you are responsible to keep an eye on your little section of the hallway to ensure that all is well.

If Threshold is done correctly, 8 times a day times 175 days of school, every student on our campus will be greeted by a loving and caring adult.

Nothing is more important than Threshold. Not getting ready for your subject, a meeting, NOTHING.

Watch the power of Threshold being done:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Ta0q9VVBZBVzIBe1iwagCrTbHqRIAW6b/view?usp=sharing>

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/15kmSEK6b8D5HSqYBD54sHB5LbQJ1z3F/view?usp=sharing>

In middle schools and high schools, nothing is more important than relationships.



Clear Expectations

“Oh, come on, Doug. They’re high school kids. They’re practically adults. Do you expect us to treat them like little kids? They won’t accept that. That’s not the way it is now. They should be given total freedom in order to make their own decisions. It’s not Kindergarten, for gosh sakes.”

I know. They’re older. But they are not adults yet, even if they try to tell you that they are.

They still need structure. They still need limitations. They still need expectations.

In fact, they crave it. And you cheat them when you don't provide it.

Middle school and high school students deserve a school that is both physically and emotionally safe.

**It is not their job to create it and maintain it.
It is the job of the adults.**

And it is the job of the adults to have the courage and confidence to step in and intervene when students are not living up to the accepted standards of the school.

In great schools, the adults do this.

In scary bad schools, the adults stick their heads in the sand like ostriches rather than confront misbehaving students.

Great schools get together and decide what expectations are reasonable and necessary, and they commit to enforcing them.

In scary bad schools, anything goes, and the kids know it.

Why would anyone want to work in this type of school?

Why would anyone want their child to attend this type of school?

I feel rather strongly about this part. So as to not "misspeak" concerning this, let me quote from my own book:

Once or twice a year, all of the llamas in the school should sit down together for at least half a day. Put up a lot of chart paper stands all over the room. Get in small groups. Get ready to work. Be committed. Get ready to create exceptional systems for every part of your school, no matter how small or trivial it seems. Get ready to channel the

enormous power of the collective group of llamas. You are on your way to being a great school.

Yeah, But ...

Of course, we only have this twice-yearly Llama Summit in elementary schools, because by middle school and high school, the kids know how to act, and this type of discussion is beneath us. The whole reason we became middle school and high school teachers is so we don't have to deal with little issues such as how to pass out tissues for runny noses. Leave such piddling tasks to the kindergarten teachers of the world. I am teaching my SUBJECT!

I would like to speak for all of the elementary schools in America. I will readily admit that there are numerous elementary schools that have yet to get their act together regarding school-wide systems, and I am not going to let them off the hook. However, in many cases, elementary schools have great school-wide systems. Kids are orderly in the halls, classrooms, cafeteria, etc., simply because elementary teachers are very intentional and deliberate in teaching these systems and helping students succeed.

Then you go to a middle school or high school and you happen to be standing next to the cafeteria or exit door when the bell rings and uncontrolled chaos ensues. It feels like you are caught in the surge of a particularly unruly (and hooligan) English soccer crowd protesting a questionable call by the referee. As you walk down the hall, you notice a sign:

"No Hats Worn in the Building!"

However, you start counting and you realize there are more hats being worn than not. Perhaps it is Hat Day?

You see one student not only wearing a hat, but also smoking a cigarette. You reasonably assume that smoking is frowned upon

(perhaps today is both Hat Day and Take Your Cigarette to Work Day). You stand and watch as this student walks by several teachers. You are curious to see if any teacher corrects this student. However, you witness a strange phenomenon occurring that could happen only in the wild. The heads of these teachers go straight into the sand that is on the floor. They see nothing. Perhaps this is an entire staff with uncorrected vision deficiencies?

The scenario described above happens often for a number of reasons:

- Perhaps teachers know that if they correct the student, the administration will not help to enforce agreed-upon standards.*
- Perhaps teachers don't want the hassle that comes with confronting students.*
- Perhaps the school as a whole just doesn't want to mess with the work of coming together and getting on the same page regarding our expectations for how our students will act.*

After all, we became middle and high school teachers because we did not want to wipe runny noses. Kids should know how to act by this age. It's not our responsibility to teach them how to act. If a high school llama stops to tie his shoe in the great race of life, high school tigers should be mature enough to wait calmly as a group in order not to take advantage of the situation. They are, after all, grownups. They don't require further instruction.

Now back to my speaking for all of the great (but not the lousy) elementary schools: We get our kids to be successful in all subjects — reading, writing, math, science, and social studies.

We teach them how to act — how to respond appropriately, how to be kind to others, etc. We teach them to love school and to love their teachers. We help them and their families have a plan to graduate from high school, go to college, and have a career. We package them

up nicely and we send them to middle schools and high schools. And too often it falls apart.

Now, having worked with kids of all ages, I know puberty and getting older complicates things. I will grant you that. However, that excuse is over. It is time to examine all of the factors that we control. There are plenty of wonderful examples of middle schools and high schools where the culture, environment, and student behavior is exemplary. There are too many where it's much less than exemplary.

To the middle schools: Don't let our successful 5th graders fall apart in your school because of you.

Now speaking for all the middle schools: Dear high school friends, don't let our successful 8th graders fall apart in your school because of you.

Do you know why it too often falls apart? It's not the kids. It's the adults. Do you want to keep this success going? Come together, no matter how hard logistically it is to do so, and create and maintain exceptional systems for everything, just like it's done in elementary schools.

Kids will do whatever you expect them to do if you love them and treat them with dignity and respect.

It takes courage and confidence.

In a school setting, if all of the adults in the school are on the same page regarding the agreed- upon systems of the school, and if all adults will accept their continued responsibility to teach students how to behave, then watch out! You are headed toward greatness!

Middle school and high school kids are just little kids in big bodies.

They need exactly the same thing that they got in pre-k. Accept it and you will succeed. From cradle to college, they need the same love, structure, and support.

Have clearly defined, necessary expectations.

Have a backbone.

They crave it.

The Llama Guy's #4 Tip for Having a Great Middle School or High School:

You don't need a bunch of unnecessary rules for the sake of having rules.

However, you do need rules and expectations in the areas that matter.

Get together and figure these out. Then lovingly enforce them.

The Llama Guy's #5 Tip for Having a Great Middle School or High School:

6th graders are not 8th graders, and 9th graders are not seniors.

Stop treating them as if they are!

6th graders can not suddenly handle endless freedom, nor can 9th graders.

Do you want to know what you see when you walk into a successful high school cafeteria during lunch? You will see explicit expectations for how the freshmen are supposed to line up, get their food, etc.



How Easy Is It to Escape from your Classrooms Unscathed?

Ok, the bell rings. Kids scurry into classrooms. Doors shut, and presumably meaningful and engaging learning begins.

And then in the world of scary bad schools it happens:

The halls begin to fill with students carrying nothing in their hands and seemingly headed nowhere.

Why would that be?

The Llama Guy's #6 Tip for Having a Great Middle School or High School:

Get together and come up with a fool-proof system so that we all know why a student is in the hallway while class is occurring.

Geez! How hard is that to figure?

Do you have any idea how scary your school is when there are 50 kids in the hall during class?

Systems. Systems. Systems.

Follow through. Follow through. Follow through.



Conclusion

Do you want to know what the good ones look like?

- Passing periods are loud. Kids are happy. All teachers are at their doors. All administrators are visible. It's boisterous, but it seems happy and under control. There are not large mobs of kids. Teachers are right in the middle of any situation. There are lots of positive interactions occurring. You feel safe walking along. Kids are quick to greet you and ask if you need help.
- When classes start, the hallways are clear. If a student appears in the hallway, you can see that the student has a clearly marked pass of some kind. If the student does not have the pass, an adult is quick to ask the student for one.
- Adults appear energetic. You can sense their feeling of efficacy. We are not powerless. We know that our school will be what we want it to be.
- Meaningful and engaging learning is going on in every classroom *from bell to bell*.

It's 2020. The world's a little more crazy every day.

However, these kids did not choose this world.

They deserve the same chance that you and I had in order to live successful lives, and a loving, safe, and engaging school is a right.

Happy Valentines!