

Freedom at Tenacity

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“Peace to all who enters these doors.” These words welcome every person that walks up to the Lilla G. Frederick Pilot Middle School. The buzz of the front door being unlocked by the secretary in the main office offers admittance into a whole new world. Talk of greatest common factors and lowest common multiples rings throughout the hallway while a couple of sixth grade girls giggle on their way to the bathroom. The scent of French fries and hamburgers lingers in the corridor as the faint yelling and laughing of kids in the cafeteria is heard throughout the entire school. The structure inside one of the downstairs classrooms seems influential, but the kid’s faces yearn for something different.

On the second level there are heavy double doors blockading the hallway from the classrooms. Pushing the doors open, a sixth grader named Johan walks into the empty hallway carrying a pile of books. He hurriedly walks to his classroom as the sound of fingers beating down on keyboards echoes throughout.

When asked what he loves best about school Johan responded with one word, “Recess!” This response can be seen on many other faces. Student’s eyes wander out into the hallway or gaze longingly outside at the squirrel on the grass. The curtains flap in the wind because of the open window, while the wind whistles through the classroom. However, most students remain attentive and listen intently to the day’s lesson in spite of many distractions. Michael Horn wrote in a weblog entry that at the Frederick Middle School (commonly known as the Frederick), “One-third of the children are special education students, one-third don’t use English as their primary language, 87.5 percent are on reduced lunch programs, and 50 students can’t read at all”.

Despite these hardships the children have to endure, the Frederick offers opportunities. During the school day, Tara Dugas, a coordinator at the Frederick, says, “The school has helped

to bring the students to the level of a lot more affluent neighborhood schools. Every kid has a laptop that they can use in school and take classes that permit them to take it home. That's huge." The laptops have programs on them that help kids at different levels learn the same thing. A student who reads at a third-grade level can learn the same things as a student who reads at an eleventh grade level (Horn). This type of learning is crucial towards getting the kids into high school. The students are intently working on their laptops as the bell rings.

The hallway suddenly fills with people. The once empty corridor is now filled with sixth, seventh and eighth graders all dressed in powder blue polo shirts and khaki pants. Teachers walk beside them making sure they are walking in a straight line five squares away from the wall.

Dugas says, "The Frederick runs a very tight ship but the students are good about it." The school day imposes structure on the student's lives that some of them lack at home. "It's true that some kids have it harder than we might be able to imagine," says Dugas. As the hallways empty the last class starts. Some children are sitting upright and attentive while other kids are slouched in their chairs tapping their pencils on the side of the desk. The class brown-noser raises her hand to offer her brilliant response while the teacher looks longingly for someone else to answer the question. The rustle of books being closed and pencil cases being open warns the teacher that the day is almost over. The restlessness in the room is palpable as the kid's eyes wander to the clock on the wall.

One kid mouths "five, four, three, two, one..." and the loud bell rings echoing through everyone's mind.

Another boy yells, "School's out!" as he runs out of the classroom grabbing his backpack and the wake of his fast paced motion knocks the books off the teacher's desk.

"When the bell rings, the kids show a strong desire to be free of all structure," says Dugas.

The thumping of shoes on the linoleum floors and the screams of the children reverberate

throughout the hallways. Running to their lockers, some kids stop for a drink at the water fountain. To some outsiders the water fountain appears almost dangerous as the kids fight for the first spot in line. Cliques congregate by the flat screen TV in the foyer to see what time their sports practices are after school, while other groups run around looking to cause some mischief. The quiet boy in English class is now the loudest one in the hall screaming to his friends about going outside to play football. He is now free from the structure of the school day and can be himself in other ways. Moving through the foyer, youngsters walk through the set of double doors labeled “OUT” while parents come through the other doors labeled “IN.” The movement of people is constant.

The largest group of kids moving is one group of thirty-seven as they make their way into the cafeteria for the after school program, Tenacity. Though students learn skills to prepare them for high school during the day, the desire to go cannot be taught in a classroom. It has to be developed through experience and guidance that after school programs like Tenacity foster. Today is literacy day and the kids crowd around the tables. Carrots are passed out as Dugas walks around with a clipboard making checks next to people’s names that are present. The kids do not even notice her, and run around the cafeteria like it is their playground.

“Settle down,” Dugas exclaims as the rowdiness becomes too much for her to handle. No one responds to her yelling until she says something about taking away lottery tickets for prizes at the end of the day. The silence is so sudden that one would think the kids were being threatened for their lives, but of course they just want rewards for good behavior. Tenacity rewards good behavior on a regular basis because they strive to keep these students engaged in a path towards college. On the Tenacity website it says, “95% of [Tenacity] graduates have either successfully graduated from or are still enrolled in high school, compared to a district-wide 30% high school drop-out rate. The majority of [their] students move on to higher education.” These statistics are what keep the program going. Dugas says they focus on resiliency and problem

solving, two things teachers have difficulty teaching in a classroom.

The structure at Tenacity is completely different than during the school day. The advisors get students to interact with each other and the volunteers through various activities. Today's activities entail separating the students into groups so they can rotate through different stations. Moaning and groaning from friends who have been split up for the day can be heard while cheers are heard and hugs are given to those who get to be with their friends. The rotations today involve different elements of books.

"Pumpkin!" is heard from the group playing Pictionary in order to understand the importance of illustrations in stories. Another group taste tests food with their eyes closed and describes it in order to understand the importance of adjectives and description. One boy spits his dried mango out and describes it in a disgusted voice as "Dry, rough, and nasty", while another girl refers to it as "fruity." Tenacity allows these students to learn in a hands-on way that is not always possible during the school day. Playing games and taste testing allows the students to extract their own information from the activities, instead of a teacher feeding them facts verbatim from the textbooks. Tenacity allows more freedom and exploration to get the students to learn.

Another way they teach is through journals, which Tenacity incorporates into their schedules every day. Today they are doing a journal prompt that has to do with the election: "If I were president I would..." The kids have ideas that show their true colors.

One boy remarks, "I would make every school day an hour long," while another girl says, "I would offer money to those who can't afford college or high school." Voicing their opinions, the children show a sense of pride. After speaking, many of them sigh with a sense of relief because their voice has been heard even if it is just in front of thirty-six other people. As the journals wrap up Dugas announces "Homework time" and everyone runs to his or her backpack.

Most of them understand their homework, but do not want to finish it or pay attention when their friends are sitting next to them cracking jokes. One sixth grader named Melvin, sits with his homework in front of him singing the song “Bartender” by T-Pain, as the girl next to him raises her hand asking for help on mathematics. During the school day this would not be acceptable but Tenacity allows the students to express themselves.

When asked what he likes best about Tenacity Melvin said, “Tenacity is where I can act like myself. School is good for getting me ready for high school but Tenacity allows me to improve myself.”

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