



Middle School Update

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Traditions are such a great way to connect to an institution and are always a fun part of our school day. My favorite might be the Preschool Halloween parade where every student in the school lines the sidewalks to watch our youngest Spartans show off their fun costumes, and each year the theme of the teachers' costumes is a secret carefully guarded until the big day. It's one of those events that puts everyone in a good mood for the entire day.

I may have started my own small tradition accidentally this year, or at least I've done something that I don't think the students will accept my stopping. Our new students (all 40 of them!) have had a great start to the school year, working hard to meet the expectations of their new school. I wanted to celebrate their collective good work and also have a chance to check in with them, so in assembly last week I shared that any new student could stop by my office for a freshly baked chocolate chip cookie in exchange for answering three questions: What do you like about your new school? Who has been kind to you as you've gotten started? What's tough right now and what kind of help might you need?

Last Thursday and Friday were delightful days for me as the new students stopped by the office to enjoy a cookie and brief conversation. I was so pleased with the many various aspects of our school that they wanted to celebrate. Many specific teachers were mentioned and without my even asking students shared stories about how the Athens Academy teachers went above and beyond what they thought they could expect from a teacher. Several students commented on the academic rigor, thankful to be at a school where they felt like they were being appropriately challenged. Two students specifically mentioned the Honor Code and correctly explained how the Honor Code created a culture of partnership that was drastically different from their previous school. We work hard at Athens Academy to have an exceptional school, and it was so affirming to see these new students recognize and appreciate what they would be able to do here.

As pleased as the list of things they liked about our school made me, their response to the second question made me even happier. We spend a lot of time talking to our students about empathy and kindness as those are feelings we really need to work on at this stage of adolescent development. When I asked each new student if anyone, in particular, had been welcoming to them, there were only two answers. One group of students immediately shared the name of that one kind person who was the first to reach out, describing that new person with the wonderful enthusiasm of a new friendship. The other group of students would pause when I asked that question, start to give me one name, then start to share another, then would throw up their hands and exclaim, "Everybody!" as the best possible summation.

I'm so glad our new students have started so well, and I'm so appreciative of the efforts our veteran students have thoughtfully made to make that happen. I do recognize that we are still enjoying the honeymoon stage of our new relationship as when I asked the final question about what we could work to improve, literally every student said everything was going perfectly. I'd love for that to be true, but I think it is more likely that the first meeting with the director wasn't the time to dig too deeply into challenges. But it was the right time to crack that door open for future use as needed. It's been a great start to the 2022 school year, but being appropriately challenged is an important part of growing into adulthood, and knowing when we are capable of succeeding as individuals and when we need to seek help from others is a skill that we work to learn in Middle School. Please remind your children that the adults at school are very happy when we see students succeeding through their own efforts, but that we might even be happier when they allow us to help them grow into their best selves. As always, please be in touch whenever there's an opportunity for us to work together to help our wonderful students improve even more.