MORE THAN FUN & GAMES

HOW STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IS TRANSFORMING LFLA

The fun and games at Lift For Life Academy's First Friday events are actually serious business. The monthly events are part of an Academy-wide effort to boost student engagement, encourage school spirit, and build a positive, safe culture both inside and outside the classroom.



High school students competing in a pie-eating contest at First Friday pep rally

Both the Middle School and the High School hold separate First Friday events in the gym at the start of each month, with students competing in silly games to win points for their grade level (it's like the Hogwarts Cup from the Harry Potter novels, except at the Academy, it's the Hawk Cup). This year's games so far have included a pie-eating contest, a mattress race, and a dance-off.

Students come up with the ideas for activities for First Friday gatherings, guided by Tony Woolfolk, who became LFLA's first Director of Student Life and Engagement in the spring of 2024. "The culture I'm looking for is a place where you can become the best expression of yourself, to be a rock star," said Coach Tony, who also coaches the High School's football team and goes by Coach Tony around the school. "I want students to feel that this is a safe space to be themselves."



Coach Tony speaking to the football team before a game

These kids didn't know that they were special, and I want to make sure they know it [when I started]. I started just watering them to see them start to sprout, and after a year of being here, I think the students are walking with more pride and they are proud to be LFLA students.

Tony Woolfolk
Director of Student Life & Engagement



Coach Tony on his scooter

Coach Tony remembers what it was like to grow up as the "eccentric kid" He was the kind of kid who wore sweater vests with pride, who didn't quite fit in when his family moved from St. Louis to Houston during his middle school years, and who struggled again when his family returned to St. Louis during high school.

During his high school years, he gained a reputation as a mischief-maker, which often landed him in the office of Beaumont High School's assistant principal at the time, Katrice Noble.

Dr. Noble, LFLA's Deputy Director, had followed Coach Tony via social media in the last few years, watching as he became a football coach and worked in admissions at St. Mary's High School and as a student engagement coordinator at Vianney High School.

"I could tell from his posts that students were just in love with him, that he was a burst of energy at those places," Dr. Noble said. "I wanted him to bring that same energy, enthusiasm and commitment to the students at Lift For Life."

Coach Tony still embraces his playful spirit from childhood, riding through the school's halls on a kick scooter. As he rolls through, students often call out to get his attention and say hello. During the football season, when Coach Tony required his football players to use a "word of the week" as the screensaver for their electronic devices, the idea caught on with other students, too, becoming a schoolwide rallying cry. Students would hold up their phones in the hallways to show Coach Tony words like Elevate, Grit, and Growth that he used as character-building topics for his team.



Middle schoolers racing in a bat spin relay race at First Friday

School leaders said that in years past, most school spirit activities have operated on an ad hoc basis, with individual teachers or administrators spearheading special projects. What makes this year different is that one person now coordinates student engagement activities and creates more opportunities for students to help plan them. In addition to organizing First Friday events, Coach Tony also heads a student leadership group and mentors a group of 8th grade boys who have had disciplinary issues in the past.

"It's important to have a central person who is directly in charge of making students feel heard and respected and valued," said Jeff Edwards, the High School principal. "It's a large step in the right direction for showing that these are our values at the Academy."

Middle schoolers playing a balloon stomp game at First Friday



Mr. Edwards said that even simple changes throughout the Academy – like playing popular music during meal times, and offering games like Uno for students to play together – have boosted students' morale and enthusiasm about attending school. At the High School, students who made the honor roll after first semester earned a field trip to a bowling alley, and a banquet at the school recognized students who were nominated by teachers for their accomplishments during the year.

"The more that students feel a sense of connectedness to the school, the better they're going to do, the more they are going to want to be here and excel," Mr. Edwards said. "It's important that students realize that they are the fabric of this school."

The Elementary and Middle Schools have increased their student engagement activities as well, celebrating positive behaviors and scholastic achievements. Elementary School students can earn Hawk Bucks to spend in a school store, and Ms. Price hands out Principal Awards in a special ceremony in her office. Students who receive the award wear a necklace that announces "My Principal Thinks I'm Great." Ms. Price also passes out special stickers when she "catches" students doing the right thing during the course of the day.



Zaniya B. (1st grade)



Tajuan O. (1st grade)

The Elementary School students eat breakfast together every morning. Ms. Price uses these gatherings to make announcements and set the tone for the day by talking about such topics as community, self-care, and cleaning up after themselves.

"Kids want to come to school because they don't want to miss out," Ms. Price said. "We have built this community and culture that encourages students to be here."

Tierra Jackson served as the Middle School's Culture Dean before becoming the school's principal this year. She has noticed that students are making sure that they attend school for First Friday events and other special activities, like the school's lip sync battle in December and the annual step show competition at the end of Black Excellence Month in February.

Students who had daily attendance rates above 90% were eligible to attend a March Madness basketball game at the Enterprise Center at the beginning of March. More than half of the Middle School's students qualified for the special field trip, Ms. Jackson said.

"All these things we do with students outside of learning help with the learning," Ms. Jackson said. "When students have a better relationship with you, they want to learn because they want you to be proud of them."



Middle school cheerleaders performing at the annual step show competition