

Transforming to a Culture of Universal Achievement

The No Excuses University

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Available this Spring: How to Train a Llama—The Art and Science of Classroom Management

Transforming to a Culture of Universal Achievement

Two Sides

When you enter any school as a teacher, in particular a school with special challenges, which by the way, all schools have, there will always be a struggle as to which side you take.

There is the side of hope and the side of hopelessness.

There is the side where you look at a child who comes from difficult circumstances. He may not have a mother or a father. He may have been abused. He may just now be learning the language. He has lived in generational poverty forever, and both he and his family really don't know any other way to live. He may have siblings already incarcerated. His parents may be in and out of jail. Perhaps neither of them wants him anymore. He may come from a family that only sends him to school because it is the law. Education is not a priority. It is not seen as the way to anything. The family may be hungry, and so is the student. It may be all the family knows. Coming from this situation, the student may express, "I don't care about this stuff" when faced with any educational task you lay before him. The student may appear to be hostile. The student won't read in class because he never did learn to read, yet somehow he is in your 8th grade Language Arts class.

When faced with this student and others like him, which side are you on?

There is one side that thinks, "You know, this student only gets one chance at life. He may have been dealt a lousy hand of cards. But you know what? Our school is the answer for him! Give him to me! I will help him see what his future can be! I will help him learn to work hard and experience success! If he doesn't know how to read, our school will teach him. If he is hostile,

we will win him over. We will love him. We will show him the first light he may have ever seen in a life of darkness. If we love him unconditionally, and we refuse to ever give up on him, all of the bad things that have happened to him will become his strengths in the future. Collectively, as a school we can do that! We have that power to influence kids. He will be successful! We won't have it any other way!"

The other side thinks, "What do you expect me to do with him? I can't change what he's been through. I can't make him care. I have no power to make his life better."

Which side?

In every school you will find folks representing both sides.

Most teachers begin the profession on the side of hope.

However, teaching is hard, and challenges occur. Many teachers, when faced with adversity, slowly start moving to the other side. If they don't choose to leave the profession, they believe that the only way they can survive is to stay on the side of hopelessness. This way they won't get their feelings hurt. This way they won't feel like a failure. There's kind of a protection that comes with being on the side of hopelessness.

When you stand on the side of hope, you risk failing. You risk failing and having everybody know it, because you were out there on a limb for everyone to see.

Sometimes young teachers leave the side of hope because there is pressure from their coworkers to join the side of hopelessness. These are the grizzled veterans who can't wait to tell the rookie "the way things really are" in this school.

These grizzled veterans have a real stake in bringing others to the side of hopelessness. Deep down these veterans hate themselves for having abandoned the side of hope. It soothes the pain a bit when they successfully recruit someone else to come to their side.

Many teachers enter the profession at an age where they are far from complete in their own personal growth. They are still learning who they are and what they want from life. They may have never even learned how to be assertive and stand up for themselves in their own lives. Now they stand in front of 30 high school students every day during 3rd period.

Being able to successfully manage a classroom is often about how you view yourself. Are you confident in yourself? Are you able to acknowledge your weaknesses and faults? Are you comfortable when you realize that others know all too well your imperfections?

If you are not comfortable, you are in danger of going from the side of hope to the other side very quickly. You are in danger of feeling personally attacked every time a student makes a bad decision or challenges your authority. That normal little game that occurs in every classroom now becomes something much bigger to you. It becomes more about you and protecting who you are. When this happens, the side of hopelessness beckons you. If you don't care, it's much safer. You won't get hurt. If your expectations are low or nonexistent, they are much easier to reach.

Some young teachers end up on the side of hopelessness because they have a series of bad experiences due to poor administrators. Maybe they are thrown in a rowdy class of 7th graders and offered no help or support. Instead they are blamed for the chaos that ensues. The choice now becomes one of leaving the profession or going to the side of hopelessness.

Many teachers enter the profession burdened by warped or unrealistic expectations. They are weighed down by the "shoulds" such as "kids should act this way" or "things shouldn't be this way." "Kids should come to school knowing how to act." "We shouldn't have to teach kids how to act—I am a history teacher."

Teachers like this either leave or move to the hopeless side.

As you read this, do you find that you are on the hopeless side? (Is this beginning to sound like the concluding moments of a church service?)

I am not here to judge you for being on the side of hopelessness. You may have a very good reason that you went there, and it may very well have happened because of classroom management.

Keep reading. We may get you to change sides.

Key Concepts:

- Damen Lopez created the No Excuses University with the following beliefs:
 1. Every child has the right to be prepared to attend college.
 2. It is the responsibility of adults in the school to develop exceptional systems that make that dream a reality.
- Challenges explain why a student is struggling...learning English, poor support, etc.
- Challenges can be overcome.
- An excuse is made when defeat is accepted, and hope is lost.

I made it because I had a dad who was wise enough to tell me that I had to go to college. Should future success for your students depend on where they happened to be born, or how successful their parents are?

Some students will succeed no matter how well or poorly their school does. Other students, due to growing up in poverty or some other poor condition, are "school dependent"-they literally are dependent upon the school to be good enough to inspire and educate them in order to have a successful career and life.

No Excuses Universities utilize "powerful symbolism" to enable students to develop the dream of college. In elementary schools, one day per week we wear our No Excuses shirts. One day each week the students and staff wear our college shirts. In an elementary school every class adopts a different college. The class hangs banners, learns school songs and cheers, and studies everything about that college. The same ideas are modified and used in middle schools and high schools. As Damen once told a group of my 5th grade students, "I created the No Excuses University because I wanted kids to realize that you did not have to be rich or a perfect straight-A student in order to attend college." Therefore, our job is to help provide our students with the dream of college, nurture the dream of those students who already plan to attend college, and create exceptional systems in order to insure that these dreams become reality.

How Will Our Students Reach their Potential in Life?

Short of hitting the lottery or possessing some unique musical gift, the way for our students lies in education. We must do everything we can to help them "jump the bar" that we jumped in order to be successful.

Why Would You Want to Become a No Excuses University?

Do people know what your school stands for as soon as they enter your school, or are you just going through the motions? When someone enters a No Excuses University, one is bombarded with the spirit of hope that the students of this school can reach their full potential. You are surrounded by the powerful symbolism of college. You will see and hear evidence that the adults of this school believe that they hold the key to success for each student of the school. No excuses are heard here, no matter what challenges the students face!

How Do You Become a No Excuses University?

The No Excuses University is a national movement of over 200 schools who share the same beliefs about students and learning. Go to the website: www.noexcusesu.com. All it takes to become an NEU is to attend an NEU institute with the leader of the campus and campus

representatives. Once you attend an institute, and the campus decides to move forward, there is an application process.

How Do You Transform?
Why Transform? Aren't we ok the way we are?

Consider:
Effects of Education on Life Earnings

High School Dropouts on average earn around \$16,485 per year.

The jobs they occupy are frequently unpleasant, menial, repetitive, and boring.

They are 15% less likely to be employed than people who graduate from high school.

75% of state prison inmates did not finish high school.

59% of federal inmates did not finish high school.

69% of jail inmates did not finish high school.

High School Graduates earn an average of \$26,156 per year. (Compare with the poverty chart.)

Those who graduate from high school live more than nine years longer than high school dropouts due to factors that include improvement in cognitive ability and decision making, income, occupational safety and access to health insurance.

People who gain an associate degree or trade school degree earn on average around \$37,492.

People who gain a bachelor's degree earn on average \$50,024.

People with a master's degree earn on average \$59,280.

People with a professional degree (management) earn on average \$76,648.

(Figures are from the US Department of Labor.)

Steps to Take to Transform

1. You must be willing to continually confront harsh realities.
 - Confront your data, no matter how painful
 - Put data in a way that is easily understood
 - Use TRANSPARENT DATA-Put your data up where it is easily seen by all
 - Can they read? Write? Do Math?
 - Are they truly being prepared at a level of rigor sufficient to make them college ready?
 - Use data to assess strengths and weaknesses, to drive instruction, to measure success

2. Plant the flag
 - Your leader must "plant the flag" to say that your school is going to get better by all members working together.

3. Have a shared declaration and commitment.

Our Total Commitment

1. We **commit** to **believing** and seeing that every Travis student will be proficient and above in all subjects.
2. We maintain an **intense, impatient obsession** about the academic accomplishments of every student.
3. We **refuse** to use the excuse, "Every student could be successful only if..."
4. We commit to having a **single-minded passion** for achieving positive academic results for our students, and we make decisions accordingly.
5. We **commit** to the proven "**Exceptional Systems**": Effective **collaboration, best practice techniques**, and doing what we know works.
6. We **commit** to using the **language of hope**. We treat students, parents, and staff members with **courtesy and respect**; we acknowledge challenges that exist, but we **refuse to accept defeat**.

You acknowledge that by signing, you are committing to doing your very best to carrying out these beliefs, actions, and words. If you are **unwilling or unable** to do so, **don't sign**, and do our students the favor of finding another place or occupation in which you can use your skills.

4. Begin creating "exceptional systems" for your school.

Realize: When we say, "No Excuses," are we saying that the only way that this idea will work is for our students to have no excuses? The concept of No Excuses is for the adults of the school since we create and control what we wish the environment and beliefs of our school to be. The students do not set the environment of the school, unless we believe ourselves too weak to do our jobs.

No Excuses is a clear contrast to what occurs in many schools. Are you "hoping" that eventually a "good" group of students will come along? Consider that the No Excuses mindset is one of teacher and school efficacy. You set the environment. You control the beliefs. You realize just how much power you have by your thoughts, beliefs, words, and actions to influence your students for future success. You are not helpless. Instead, you have as much power as you are willing to accept to point your students on the road to college and beyond!

Beware, however, of the work that comes with this kind of belief! In too many schools, we are content to just bemoan how things are and our inability to change them. The No Excuses mindset is proactive rather than reactive. We focus on solutions rather than the problems. We recognize that the success or failure of our school rests with us.

How do you view your students? How do you view your parents? Do you see the parents of your students as full partners in their education? Is your school a welcoming place for the parents?

No Excuses Customer Service

How to Change Your Parents in 5 Easy Steps

- Unconditionally love and accept them with no judgment
- Validate, affirm, and honor them
- Empower them
- Connect with them
- Fix your school into a school of hope for all

No Excuses Customer Service

The people in the front office are the MOST IMPORTANT persons in the entire school when it comes to setting the culture of the school!

As a customer, the people in the front office are the persons:

- That I See First
- That I Hear First
- That I See the Most
- That I Hear the Most

I may see or hear the principal occasionally. I may see or hear the teachers occasionally. However, when I walk in that front door, or when I pick up the phone to call, it is not a teacher or the principal who I see or hear first.

Therefore, if we truly want to establish a Culture of Universal Achievement, it begins in the front office, where the first impressions of our school are created.

We must be intentional, deliberate, and systematic in how we treat our customers. We cannot leave it to chance. If our students and parents are going to buy in to the mission of our school, to prepare every child (and adult) to be ready for college, then we must have "exceptional systems" in the front office.

The Most Important Persons in the School

Since the front office staff persons are the most important persons in our schools, what do we need for them to be?

- We must have hearts of servanthood. Our job is to serve our customers (parents, students, and guests) and to serve our staff members.
- We must make it our goal to "win" our customers. We will do everything within our power to help even the most reluctant or unwilling customer to see the value of what our school is offering their child—a successful, productive, and happy future.
- We must understand, that in our role as the "first responders", we are going to sometimes encounter people who are angry, frustrated, discouraged, skeptical, hurt, and in crisis. We are going to SERVE these customers and do everything within our power to help them with whatever the issue might be.

5. Build from the ground floor up. Build your "Culture of Universal Achievement". Then work diligently and continually to insure that each of these six systems are truly exceptional. You won't fail!



You must make it "cool to be good" and "cool to be smart".

- Friday is Pay Day or Showtime! (Show your papers!)
- Celebrate success!

I am unashamedly in love with No Excuses University, and I will eternally be grateful to Damen Lopez for sharing this mindset with the world.

I taught 4th grade for 18 years before folks convinced me to become an administrator.

I was a really good teacher. I made learning fun. I made learning meaningful. I helped students love Math. I worked hard to make sure that our test scores were good.

I worked in a good school with really good people. We had a high number of economically disadvantaged kids and a few lower to middle class students. We had a really good principal. It was a good place to work.

There are a large number of my former 4th graders who are very successful today.

There are a large number that are getting by. And there are a large number that I read about when I check the indictments and convictions. I want another chance with those. I didn't do enough.

You see, while we were a good school, we weren't great. We didn't have exceptional systems. We collaborated a bit. We offered some interventions. We looked at some data. We usually had a career day once a year where we would talk about the future. Test scores were more about how our school looked compared to other schools, more for bragging rights than anything else.

Those kids showing up as adults in the indictments and convictions section of the newspaper? I loved those kids. Some had some obvious struggles. Others were very bright students with a special spark. And now they are locked away. I want another chance.

Just like many of you, I was one of those teachers that kids remember forever. I had that special power that so many of you have-that ability to influence students and even steer their lives in a special direction. Kids thought I was funny. They liked all of the animals I had in my room. They did stuff just because they thought I liked it.

If only I had used this power every day to talk about college and things past high school.....

If only I had used my powerful influence to intentionally teach them how to dream and be more than they thought possible.....

If I had talked about college, how much fun it was, how it opened up doors for me, how I was the first one in my family to graduate-you see, I never even thought of talking about these things.....

I want another chance with Tony, who was one of my top Math students, but is now in prison for life. Just maybe, if I had known about No Excuses.....

If my school had committed to exceptional systems, the language of hope, and realizing that it is the adults who must create these systems in order to make this a reality, then maybe Billy, one of my top students, would be graduating from college instead of.....

I want another chance.

You now have your opportunity. Don't let it pass by. Don't mess it up. Don't think that you can leave the talk of college and career success to chance. Don't think that you can have one day a year to address this, and that it will be enough. It won't. Don't think that test scores are about you or your school. They're not. Test scores are children. Are they going to have opportunities in life or not? Can they read or can they not? Are they going to be able to escape generational

poverty and change life for the better for their family to come? Don't sit and look at your phone during collaboration time. Don't sit around predicting which children will ultimately succeed and which will fail. Don't leave this profession with regrets. Leave everything you have on the playing field. You may not see the results of your efforts for years. One day you will pick up that newspaper and.....No Excuses!

Doug Curry

Doug Curry has 35 years in education, with the majority of those years being in schools with high numbers of students living in poverty. His experience ranges from teaching 4th grade, working with curriculum, and serving in principal roles in elementary, middle school, and alternative schools. Doug now serves as the Coordinator for No Excuses schools in Amarillo, Texas. Amarillo is known as the “epicenter” of the No Excuses movement as there are currently 21 Amarillo NEU schools, including Amarillo College, the first NEU college, the first NEU church, and the first NEU preschool. San Jacinto Elementary School, where Doug served as principal for 6 years, was the first NEU in Texas. The NEU movement in Amarillo has grown to the point where there now exists “No Excuses Neighborhoods”, where entire families are persuaded to further their educations and ultimately achieve living-wage careers. Over 70 adults in these neighborhoods have earned a GED by working inside of Amarillo NEU schools. The No Limits/No Excuses movement in Amarillo is comprised of 21 community partners representing businesses, local colleges, community agencies, and individuals. While working with Amarillo schools and the No Limits, No Excuses program, Doug also presents locally, statewide, and nationally, particularly in the area of transforming school cultures. He also presents full day staff development sessions in Successful Classroom Management, Parent Involvement and Creating No Excuses Neighborhoods, and Teaching Math with Meaning. His first book, How to Train a Llama—The Art and Science of Classroom Management, will be available this spring. The Amarillo No Excuses Blog is located at <http://blogs.amaisd.org/noexcuses/>.

What's Your Plan?



Career Schools

- Apprenticeship
- Specific Job Training

Two Year College

- Associate Degree
- Certificate
- Credential

WHAT IS COLLEGE?

Four Year University

- Bachelor's
- Master's
- Doctorate

Military

- Education & Training

Prepare every student for success
beyond high school.