

Pass It On®...

The Bus Driver who Makes the Ride the Best Part of Kids' Day.

Curtis Jenkins drives his big yellow bus to and from Lake Highlands Elementary in Dallas, Texas. Along the way, he teaches his charges how to be responsible, kind and generous — and rewards their good behavior to reinforce the lesson.

For an elementary school student, the bus ride can be a nerve-racking start or end to the day. There are occasional bullies to worry about, homework anxiety, friend group inclusion, and those rainy days when waiting at the bus stop can seem like forever.

Bus driver Curtis Jenkins sees opportunity where others see hassle. For Jenkins, time spent on the bus is time for kids to learn about responsibility, make new friends, celebrate accomplishments and enjoy the father figure some are missing in their lives.

"These are my community," Jenkins says. "These are my children. I love 'em all."

The school year starts off with Jenkins giving each student a responsibility. When they climb on Jenkins' bus, they board a tight ship. There is a flow chart of assignments, with each child having a seat on the bus. There are greeters and friend makers and homework helpers. No one is left out.

Jenkins is ahead of his time in integrating bus time with behavioral rewards and collaborating with the school culture. William McDermott, head of student services for First Student, says, "We need to take the education industry and the transportation industry and mesh them together to create the best bus ride and the best student experience. What you can do in the school, you can do in the bus."

Kids should arrive at school excited to learn, not needing room to decompress after a stressful ride. Jenkins makes sure his kids feel the joy of accomplishment and look forward to the next challenge. They arrive ready to learn. His riders receive gifts for hitting academic goals, and Jenkins even printed a T-shirt for a young girl with the picture of a book she made, something to be proud of. "I'm hoping this T-shirt inspires her to keep on writing books," he says.

Many schools have grappled with how to intervene when there are problems on a bus. A driver can't be distracted and can't stop the bus to deal with issues. So, aides are assigned. But still, the bus is too often seen as off school grounds, and kids act up. A better solution is to make the kids accountable, give them responsibility for each other, and help them feel loved.

"My mom got divorced when I was only 4," says Ethan, a passenger on Jenkins' bus. "He's the father that I always wanted. In some ways, I wish my dad could have been like that."

At Christmas, every kid on Jenkins' bus gets a gift. On their birthdays, too. But the greatest gift is knowing someone, even the bus driver, cares about you.

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