

1 September, Year 3

Norris Starts at Knownwell High School

"Mah-ahm!" Norris stretched the maternal term into two syllables as he fidgeted on the car seat. "Would you stop worrying about me?! I'll be fine. I can't wait. Just let me out before someone sees us sitting here talking. It's just not cool."

"But, honey, what if you don't know anyone here? This isn't the high school that most of your middle school friends will be at this year."

"I know, Mom. They changed some boundaries around. But I still want to go here. We picked it, remember. Because people know each other here and care about each other. Sure, it didn't used to have the best reputation. But, you know, Mom, *Morris fixed all that!* Even though he graduated last year, everybody remembers how he got people to listen to what students were thinking."

"Well, I did hear a lot about your older brother at parent orientation, but it's hard to believe that a school could be changed by one kid asking questions and getting some other kids involved too. I guess I really didn't catch on to what Morris was talking about the last two years."

"Most of you adults just don't get it, do you? You think all we have going in our heads is rap music and sex. But that's OK, Mom. Don't sweat it, OK? You're not as bad as *some* grown-ups. Remember—I already know the principal and my adviser and my mentor, and I'll meet the other kids in my advisory today. Look, my mentor is standing there waiting for me right now. It's not like when I started *kindergarten*, you know."

2 Students Are Stakeholders, Too!

"I know, son. I've met the principal and your adviser too. Have a good day . . . but, um, be sure you call me if you need anything."

"Yeah—right. Just relax, Mom. See you tonight." Turning his head to hide his involuntary adolescent eye-roll, Norris grabbed his backpack and stepped out onto the sidewalk. Then he remembered the extra effort his parents exerted to get his choice of school and the transportation they would be providing, and leaned back into the car to say, "Thanks for driving me, Mom. It won't be forever. I'll get friends to ride with, and I'll figure out the city bus, and pretty soon I'll be able to drive myself."

As he hustled away in the direction of Knownwell High School, Norris's mom did her own eye-roll and sighed. "As if *that's* supposed to make me feel any better . . ."

Norris made his way through the parking lot and across the flag patio toward the three sets of double doors marking the threshold of his journey for the next four years. With each step, a bit of his bravado evaporated, replaced by the slightest twinge of apprehension. And then he heard his name.

"Norris! Hey, man! Over here!" It was the voice of his mentor, an upperclassman he had met two weeks earlier during orientation. Mark was waiting near the center entrance, holding a lanyard in school colors that he dropped ceremoniously over the freshman's head. Pointing to the novelty compass now resting on Norris's chest, he continued the greeting: "You're now a 100 percent official Explorer! Your future is in your hands."

From the orientation meetings, Norris had a sense of how carefully things like colors and symbols and slogans had been chosen. Representatives of the senior class had described how the school began an improvement plan two years earlier that had built on strengths and added new goals and focus. Months of discussion had taken place with staff, alumni, and district administrators just on the issue of a mascot.

Loyalty to a century-old tradition was challenged by sensitivity to the connotation of the previous mascot and its potential impact on the inclusive school culture they wanted to create. Emotions had sometimes flared, but in the end, "Explorer" was chosen to depict students' experiences at Knownwell High School. School colors of red and white with black accents were preserved, enhanced with descriptors. Red was associated with "heart—love and caring." White referred to "clear minds—honesty and integrity." The black accents were meant to represent "detail, definition, identity"—the uniqueness emerging as young men and women found and strengthened their understanding of themselves and their potential. The compass had been chosen to represent every student's ability to shape his or her direction in life.

As Norris nervously unfolded and refolded the schedule he had received at orientation, he remembered it wasn't going to apply on the first day of school. The schedule was being adjusted to provide an extended advisory period. Norris looked again at the list of 16 names. He knew

some of them already, because they were ninth graders too. He wondered what it would be like to interact with sophomores, juniors, and seniors. Some of his middle school friends were going to a school where they would be in a separate wing from any other grades.

“Well, let’s go meet the rest of our group, Norris. I’m glad you’ve got your notebook with you—we usually have some time when we write down our thoughts or questions. And you probably have quite a few. Remember that you can speak up on anything, anytime—there’s a mutual respect here and us seniors aren’t going to intimidate you, . . .” Mark smiles as he adds, “. . . at least not intentionally.”

Norris followed his mentor into the classroom, thinking, “I hope they don’t realize right away that Morris is my big brother. Everybody seems to think he’s a big deal around here. The first question that I want answered is—what did he do anyway?”