

Rocky Mountain News

Tipping the scales

Adventure Experience helps students rise to difficult challenges

By Janet Reese, Special to the News
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It's the third week of school at Chaparral High School in Douglas County. Thirty-five eager students gather on the grassy field for their third-period "Adventure Experience" class.

Coach Tim Cullen briefs them. "Communication and spotting are important when rock climbing," he says. "Commands are universal. Talk like climbers and use climbing commands. The climber initiates the commands. Make them short and know what you're talking about."



When climbing, always have spotters to protect climbers from falls, he says. "Spotting is active. Always be dynamic when spotting. Protect the climber's head and neck. Position yourself with feet staggered and hands up. Be right there to catch your partner."

For the next 45 minutes, students practice "trust falling" and catching their partners in a variety of team-building exercises, shouting the commands, "faller ready," "spotter ready," "fall on," that echo across the soccer field.

The Adventure Experience program teaches students ages 14 to 18 team building, rock climbing, geocaching, map and compass, first aid and cardiopulmonary resuscitation. This school year, 400 students out of 2,200 have registered for this physical education elective.

Cullen, 34, director and founder of the Adventure Experience class, says the popular program offers an attractive alternative to team sports for students interested in the outdoors. The class prepares them to

Photos By Darin Mcgregor © News

Phil Wagner helps Mackenzie Littrell belay another student as he climbs a rope ladder. The Adventure Experience program teaches students ages 14 to 18 team building, rock climbing, geocaching, map and compass, first aid and cardiopulmonary resuscitation.

climb safely and inspires some to take on new challenges. One of his students climbed 14 Fourteeners in 14 days in celebration of his 14 birthday.

"When students leave the class, many are comfortable enough to climb on their own and take it to the next level," Cullen says.

Brinna Duke, 15, is taking the class because it's different.

"Who ever heard of a (physical education) class where you can climb rocks and map directions?" she says. "I hope to travel to Europe and New Zealand one day. I want the skills to get myself out of a pinch."

Philip Wagoner, 17, says, "I'm trying out the class to learn team building, to trust each other for climbing. I like the teacher and the teamwork."

Conrad Verser, 16, thought the class would be fun. "I want to learn about emergency first aid and become more comfortable with various types of climbing and different climbing apparatus," he says. "After high school, I want to backpack in Europe."

Adventure Experience began with a climbing wall. In December 2002, 14-year-old sophomore Cody Schmidt died of a heart attack while training for football in the school gymnasium. Cody's parents wanted to keep alive his spirit for the outdoors. They donated \$10,000 to build a climbing wall in Cody's memory. The Outdoor Adventure Club raised an additional \$15,000, and the wall was completed in January 2004.

Cullen saw the learning potential in a climbing wall, but it wasn't enough to support a semester-long 16-week class. He researched other high school outdoor programs and combined ideas from them with his own to develop a class curriculum.

During this time, Cullen was teaching science and biology, coaching track and cross country and leading the Outdoor Adventure Club at Chaparral.

Cullen, passionate about the outdoors and experienced as a mountaineering guide for a Durango outfitter, set his sights on teaching outdoor skills full time. With the support of Chaparral principal Ron Peterson, Cullen launched Adventure Experience three years ago and has been the full-time coach since.

Much of the action takes place in the school's small gym, which looks like a full-fledged climbing center. The 32-foot climbing wall stretches 42 feet along one of the walls.

"There are five routes on the tallest part of the wall set up for top-roping and mock lead climbing," Cullen says. "The shorter wall is for bouldering."

Students learn techniques including anchor building, mock leading on sport climbing routes, multipitch climbing, rappelling, hauling systems, rope-ascending systems and vertical rescue skills.

In addition to the climbing wall, the gym features ropes and challenge courses that Cullen designed and constructed. There's the "wall of iron," a large pegboard leading up to a 30-foot-high chin-up bar; and the "dango duo," a giant ladder that swings from the ceiling as two students work together to climb to the top. At the rappelling station, strung from the gym ceiling, students either can rappel down or jump for the "leap of faith" trapeze.

"These elements are great for team building, trust building and having fun," Cullen says.

Student safety is the most important part of the program, Cullen says. At all times, climbers are on belay (a safety rope) and are required to wear helmets and harnesses. Annually, a professional safety expert thoroughly inspects the equipment.

Chaparral provides all the equipment. The \$35 class fee covers a field trip, books and materials for CPR and first aid certification. Students provide an insurance waiver.

"At the end of the climbing unit, we go on a field trip to a local indoor climbing gym, Rock N' Jammin'," Cullen says. "After that, the kids want to climb outside."

Students who have completed Adventure Experience can become classroom assistants. Josh Hanawalt, 17, has taken the class five times, twice as an aide helping the coach and students.

"Out of my seven classes a day, this one is about stuff I love. I learn something new every day," says Hanawalt, who plans a career in rescue services.

On weekends, Hanawalt applies his outdoor skills as a rescuer for the Arapahoe Rescue Patrol, a search-and-rescue team made up of teenagers.

"I'm learning skills in class to be confident in high-risk situations," he says. "My experience working with map and compass, GPS, first aid and CPR have helped me a lot in search and rescue. Our patrol team recently rescued a lost hiker near Mount of the Holy Cross."

Principal Ron Peterson says the program has a positive effect on the students and the school. "Parents thank us for having the program. Kids love it. Teamwork in this class carries over in the school and helps build a positive environment."

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