“To Belay or Not to Belay?” Is Never a Question in New Jersey Adventure Ed Program

By the time many students graduate from New Jersey’s Millburn High School, they can attribute much of their growth, self-confidence, and critical life skills to “tests” that are far from conventional — like traversing a shaky cable suspended 30 feet above the ground. Or sailing through the air upside down on a zipline. Or climbing an intimidating wall, net or pole — and trusting a harness, fellow students and inner resources to get back down safely.

Challenging student’s comfort zones is the name of the game in Mark Friedrich’s adventure education class, which students in grades 9-12 can take several times as part of the school’s unique Elective Physical Education Program.

The Big Idea: When Daniel Brundage, former Millburn K-12 health and physical education supervisor, first proposed the idea of adventure education to the local Education Foundation in 2004, getting community, parental and administrative support for a program no one knew anything about was virtually unprecedented. Neither Friedrich nor the two other teachers who were handpicked to teach the new class had adventure education training or experience. But, the Foundation’s $26,200 grant made many things possible. Brundage worked with Universal Ropes Course Builders Inc. to design and install the indoor and outdoor challenge courses, and Friedrich and his colleagues went off to learn the ropes — literally — at a four-day Project Adventure training program in Covington, GA. As the teachers became acquainted with course elements like the “Catwalk,” “Pirates Crossing,” “Two Line Bridge,” and “Pamper Pole,” they also learned that adventure education demands 100 percent of a teacher’s energy and attention.

The class uses the “experiential education” approach, which is based on the research of John Dewey, the pre-eminent educational theorist of the 20th century, Friedrich explains. Dewey found that people learn the most when they are actively involved in their learning and feel a sense of control over what they are learning.

“Experiential learners also find relevancy and attractiveness in their learning material and are given opportunities to reflect on their experiences, so they can make connections with other life aspects and future learning,” says Friedrich, a SHAPE America member and 23-year teaching veteran.

Besides ensuring students’ safety and creating activities that foster cooperation and communication, instructors must provide emotional support to help allay students’ fears and self-doubt. “You constantly have students saying, ‘I can’t do it,’” says Friedrich, who has a master’s degree in adventure education and also teaches it at a summer day camp for younger students. “You can’t be standing on the sidelines — you have to be nurturing, comforting and encouraging students, while continually assessing whether a situation constitutes a genuine emergency or is just an emotional crisis that can be overcome.”

Implementation: Students at Millburn High can choose adventure education as a PE elective for up to three marking periods each year, but driver’s education and health classes during that time slot usually preclude 10th-12th graders from year-long participation.
The mixed-grade classes, averaging 24 students each, meet four days a week for eight weeks. Fall and spring classes are held on the outdoor challenge course, which has more than 25 low (under 12 feet), middle (15 feet) and high (16-35 feet) elements, and winter classes use the seven indoor, (25 feet) stationary climbing elements.

“Students don’t change their clothes, so we save 10 minutes of locker-room time,” says Friedrich. They bring athletic shoes and must cross three sports fields to reach the outdoor course, which provides 10 minutes of walking.

All classes begin each marking period with ground-level activities, where students work on social-emotional skills, such as collaboration, communication, trust-building and problem-solving, as well as technical skills such as tying climbing knots and belaying, says Friedrich. Climbing teams include head and back-up belayers, and students must learn all positions before they venture up the wall or other apparatus.

“Students work under the ‘Challenge by Choice’ philosophy, which allows them to monitor their personal level of comfort in all class activities,” he adds. “It emphasizes student choices and promotes group interaction at their own personal level of comfort to prevent panic or stress. Getting students’ buy-in on activities early on allows for more success when technical skills and climbing are introduced.”

Friedrich uses what he calls the “telemarketer’s principle,” asking students three times to consider taking the next step before coming down, and encourages them to set slightly higher goals for themselves each time. “Students are motivated by their classmates’ accomplishments and are thrilled when they ‘first-time’ something,” says Friedrich.

The annual cost of about $2,000, paid by school district, includes staff training and ground-level props and equipment, as well as yearly inspection and maintenance or replacement of expired equipment. Friedrich estimates that about $50,000 has been invested since 2005, which has helped fund four large additions to the course.

Results: Adventure education supplies innumerable benefits, including physical and mental acuity and emotional and social skills that serve students in college, the workforce, and family life, says Friedrich. “Students learn how to trust themselves and their classmates. I watch self-confidence building and friendships forming as students conquer their fear of heights and learn they can accomplish anything they set out to.” Program T-shirts/Apparel reinforce the concept of teamwork with the word “Ubuntu,” which is Zulu for “I am because we are.” Students know their success is based on helping and caring for each other.

Each marking period, about 60 percent of the class roster is made up of students who have already taken the class at least once. The record-setter is Katelynn Bissett, a senior who has enrolled eight times. She will join Friedrich after graduation as a high ropes instructor at Camp Riverbend in Warren, NJ. “Katelynn came to the program in Fall 2014 and never looked down again,” Friedrich says. “She immediately fell in love with the program and has grown as a student, climber and leader.”

Millburn High School’s Adventure Education Program has received national media attention, including a recent segment on Fox News as part of Teacher Appreciation Week.

Friedrich has presented his program at SHAPE America conventions and other workshops around the country, and in 2016 was named Secondary Physical Education Teacher of the Year by the New Jersey Association for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance (NJAHPERD).

Takeaway: The Millburn High School Adventure Education Program was fortunate to have allies from its inception, starting with an Education Foundation that prioritizes physical education, as well as a supportive school administration, says Friedrich. “The program would not exist without administrators who believed in the program and the values it instills in the students who take the course,” he says. “Superintendent Christine Burton has been one of its biggest supporters and has even taken some of the adventures herself by climbing on our challenge course.”

SHAPE America’s National Standards for Physical Education

The physically literate individual:

✔ Demonstrates the knowledge and skills to achieve and maintain a health-enhancing level of physical activity and fitness.

✔ Exhibits responsible personal and social behavior that respects self and others.

✔ Recognizes the value of physical activity for health, enjoyment, challenge, self-expression and/or social interaction.

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