



Leadership students from Cascade Middle School work together to move the ball.

# WHERE ARE THE ROPES?

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## PRINCIPAL EVALUATION CRITERIA

*Creating a Culture, Engaging Communities, Improving Instruction, Closing the Gap*

**B**y December 2018, Cispus and Chewelah Peak Learning Centers will have welcomed over 16,000 visitors. The sounds of students and their teachers engaging in lessons and outdoor experiences is often enthusiastic and joyful. I regularly hear from former “campers” that their time with us was one of the most memorable experiences of their school career. I truly believe an overnight outdoor experience away from school and home has many elements that enhance the participant’s social and emotional growth.

Last year The Aspen Institute<sup>1</sup> published a paper on supporting

students’ social, emotional, and academic learning. Several of their major points grabbed my attention:

- Major domains of human development — social, emotional, cognitive, linguistic, academic — are deeply intertwined in the brain and in behavior, and all are central to learning.
- Social and emotional development is multifaceted and integral to academics — to how school happens, and to how learning takes place.
- Social, emotional, and cognitive competencies can be taught and developed throughout childhood, adolescence, and beyond.

I started to think about the opportunities we have at the Principals’ Learning Centers to support and enhance those skills. One way is to use our ropes courses. Although there are very few ropes



Trusting your teammates is a highlight of the “ropes” experience.



Training challenge course facilitators involves "hands on" experiences. Here they are crossing the deadly swamp on "safe" boards.

found, it is a term that comes from popular use over the last 50 years. We prefer the term Challenge Course. So, what happens when we take groups into the woods?

In a day-long experience, we address those competencies described by The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (casel.org). We task the participants with solving physical challenges that involve developing relationship skills, self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and responsible decision making. It turns out that the perceived physical threat is minimal: it is the challenge to learn about oneself and work together that is key.

How does this happen? There are six steps that progress throughout the experience.

**Step #1: Ice Breakers and Get Acquainted Activities.** These tone setting games are designed to warm up the group. A major goal is to laugh and have fun.

**Step #2: De-inhibiting Activities.** These activities are designed to loosen up the group. We look for the time that members of the group become willing and able to get physically close to each other to solve problems.

**Step #3: Trust and Spotting.** The facilitators give instruction and lead activities that ensure the safety of group members. Once the group shows they can work closely together, we teach them how to physically support each other.

**Step #4: Briefing.** The rules of the challenge are given including constraints and artificial handicaps

for an activity. Here the facilitator pauses and assesses the group's status. We watch for communication dynamics and insist on a good plan before beginning.

**Step #5: The Challenge.** This is the actual initiative and its plan. We define an initiative as a challenge which has many possible solutions, as opposed to a trick that only has one answer. You may hear the facilitator say, "It is important to be able to say at the end of our activities today that you challenged yourself in at least one way. Your challenge may be physical, emotional, social, or intellectual."



Keeping the ball aloft for 50 sequential hits is far more challenging than it seems.

**Step #6: Debriefing.** This is the key step as we learn best not from the experience, but by reflecting on the experience. It is vital that we lead a debriefing conversation after each major initiative. We stress that participants must discuss the process as well as the product of their efforts. We often ask team members if during the problem-solving process they listened more or talked more.

Dear Woods,  
 Thank you for being such a creative and innovative person by organizing the challenge courses. It is such a cool opportunity to be able to not only challenge yourself physically, but also mentally. I personally love a challenge, and I greatly appreciate the chance to push myself past my comfort zones therefore expanding it. I thank you once again for creating these opportunities for us. Stay awesome.  
 Sincerely,  
 [Signature]

An appreciative note to a facilitator after the day's experience.

“ We take great pride in our efforts to build teams, one individual at a time.”

Clearly, the Challenge Course experience is designed for social and emotional growth. Past participants often have told us of the benefits they received during their time at our camps. AWSP's Learning Centers at Cispus and Chewelah Peak have a way to assist in your plans to develop social and emotional competencies in your students. We take great pride in our efforts to build teams, one individual at a time. ■

<sup>1</sup>Jones, Stephanie M. and Kahn, Jennifer. "The Evidence Base for How We Learn" The Aspen Institute, National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development (September 13, 2017)