

Learning Teamwork and Building Confidence at the Gym Rafters

Cassie Anderson and Emily Goodwin are in *The Playpen*, but they don't look like they're having fun. Nor are they feeling particularly safe.

"I'm going to die," Cassie declares to a group of onlookers.

That's because *The Playpen* is not the padded, portable crib of the 16-year-old's baby days but a gangly apparatus of ropes, rings, rubber tires and lumber – the only thing between her and her destination, the gym rafters at Central High School.

While Cassie's brain knows what she has to do to get there, her feet can't quite make it happen.

With a chorus of supportive teammates and teacher Daphne Shaub encouraging her – and despite her not insubstantial fear of heights – Cassie eventually joins Emily at her perch at *The Playpen's* apex. The two of them amble back to the ground with no small sense of accomplishment.

Across the gym, Jackie Chester, another acrophobic, is slowly making her way to the rafters on a single tower of plastic milk crates. It is called *Stacking the Crates*, an exercise in which the climber, supported by a belay team on the ground, builds her way to the rafters without leaving the growing column.

A form of school-sponsored torture? Not quite.

The climbing exercises are components of the high school's Project Adventure series, an experiential learning model unfolding in CHS wellness classes over the past five years.

Gone are the days when gym class meant lining up for dodgeball teams. Today's students might decide to scale the gym wall, wrestle *The Centipede* or strap on a belay device and feed safety rope to a climber. Whatever they choose, they are learning how to take risks in an environment that promotes teamwork, encourages problem-solving and challenges them physically, emotionally and intellectually.

CHS' adventure curriculum is a product of the non-profit Project Adventure Inc., which supplies equipment and standards-aligned curriculum to schools, corporations and youth organizations around the world.

Flying Squirrel were added shortly after. Since that time, five more elements have been added. Their popularity and positive effects have been so pronounced that wellness supervisor Kiki Enderle wishes to expand the curriculum further. She is now scouting locations on campus to install a major outdoor ropes course to provide more challenges, particularly for upperclassmen, who by their junior year have mastered the indoor ropes elements. Her goal is a design using standing trees, where practical, for a rustic feeling.

"We all talk about character education and incorporating it in everything we do in

taking, goal-setting, communication, motivation, leadership, collaboration and accountability. Group activities help students learn trust, gain personal confidence and respect the diversity of their unit. Assigned to groups with peers outside their usual circle and presented with a challenge – such as a wall to climb – communication barriers break down, leading to more understanding. Teachers in other schools often report a drop in their incidents of conflict and bullying. "It really changes the school climate because now they've gotten to know the kids next to them," says Fyfe.

they provide the proper rope slack for a safe ascent and descent.

What students don't learn in communication, trust and teamwork as a belay team member, they gain in confidence and self-esteem as a climber. Shaub makes every student climb at least once, and only as far as she or he is comfortable climbing. "And you know what? Every single kid goes at least half-way," she said. "The kids respond to this challenge stuff. If you give the kids (the option of) opting out, they'll take it. They won't even try it."

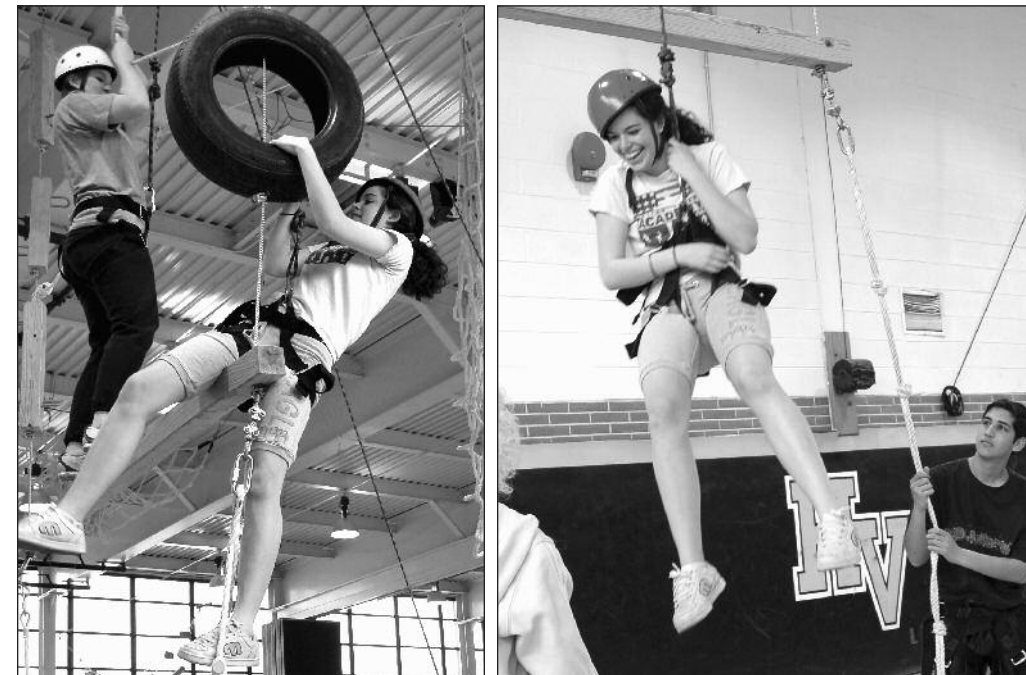
"We just don't throw them up there and tell them to have fun," adds Fyfe. "It really is a gradual program. This is complete challenge by choice."

For the time being, wellness teachers remain key figures on belay teams, most often filling the anchor position of belay. But, as Shaub points out, belaying and climbing are leadership-builders, meaning they optimally are done by students exclusively, with upperclassmen in a leadership role.

The high school's adventure curriculum is a natural extension of what actually begins in the elementary schools (all but Toll Gate Grammar have climbing walls) and is built on at Timberlane. Middle schoolers are not just introduced to the belay team concept at their climbing wall, but engage in multiple team-building activities that require virtually no equipment at all. The annual 6th grade trip, a long Timberlane tradition and for many years a three-day adventure at Camp Speers-Eljibar in the Pocono Mountains, is heavy on team-building activities. A low ropes course, installed on the Timberlane campus several years ago, provides more opportunities. By the time students head to high school, they are primed for a higher level of adventure education.

"PE isn't just about attracting the athletes and doing what they want to do," says Enderle. "This really taps into all kids. It has enhanced our curriculum dramatically." ❁

Much of this skill development comes directly from belaying. All climbing elements involve belay teams. Belay is an old sailing term, meaning to secure or hold fast. In climbing, belay teams supply safety rope for the climber. Including the climber, student belay teams at CHS usually number eight in all – one harnessed belayer, one back-up belayer, one rope tender, two ballasts and two spotters. Working as a unit,



Sophomores Emily Goodwin and Cassie Anderson get ready for their turn in *The Playpen*, one of eight high rope elements in Central High School's adventure education curriculum.

The programming is rejuvenating traditional wellness classes with activities not typically found on school campuses. It relies heavily on teamwork and problem-solving, features that punch up the fun factor and provide enduring lessons on character-building and leadership.

It started at CHS in 2003 with the installation of a climbing wall. High rope elements known as *The Ladder* and *The*

education and I can't think of a better way (to accomplish that) than a challenge course like this one," says Enderle.

Adventure education isn't about providing an adrenaline rush to teens bored with units on lacrosse and flag football. Advocates, including CHS wellness teachers Shaub and Lois Fyfe, credit it with helping develop myriad personal and interpersonal life skills, including problem-solving, risk-

Climbing Walls and Jump Rope Idol – Helping Kids Enjoy Fitness

The kids are climbing the walls and that's just where Grace Merlino likes them.

And when they're not climbing, they're clowning around – literally – spinning plates, juggling balls, navigating a balance beam.

Merlino could not be more pleased.

It's not that the veteran Stony Brook Elementary teacher has lost control of her gymnasium. The climbing wall and circus activities are part of a deliberate focus of the district's elementary wellness program to not just work on locomotor skill development but to inspire in students a healthy lifestyle. With childhood obesity on the rise and the long-term health benefits of an active lifestyle well-documented, Merlino and her colleagues understand that cultivating lifelong fitness is far more important than making sure students know what constitutes a three-point foul in basketball. The challenge lies in finding activities that keep them off the couch and away from their video screens in the hours after school.

Enter fun, adventure education elements like climbing walls. The elementary curriculum offers 12 different activities using these popular, 8 feet high by 30 feet long walls, with names like *Scrabble* and *Ring My Chimes*. Bear Tavern was the first district elementary school to get one, in 2001, the gift of a Bear Tavern family. Its enormous popularity with students and capacity for teaching team-building skills has led PTOs

at Stony Brook and Hopewell Elementary to buy walls for their schools. (Toll Gate Grammar's gymnasium walls are not large enough to accommodate one.)

The Circus Project is another enormously popular program. It brings circus professionals to the schools for a week of workshops on balance, juggling and other activities that help improve motor skills and coordination and promote self-esteem. Interactive Circus Arts Adventures was first brought to Hopewell Valley in the mid-1990s as performers only by Merlino, then at Bear Tavern, and colleague Mary Linda Wyckoff. Through the financial support of PTOs, the program has evolved at all schools into an artist-in-residency, giving students at all grades the opportunity to spin plates, walk on stilts and perform tricks with devil sticks.

Students may use the experience to find their inner clown, but the district's wellness teachers see it in larger terms. Students who are uncomfortable in traditional class activities, like team sports, often thrive when they discover they have a knack for the devil sticks or they can last longer standing on the giant balance ball than the best soccer player in the class. The boost in self-esteem can go a long way.

"I can't talk enough about that program," says Merlino. "They always find that little spark in each kid and provide them with the skills to do it. There's really no room for defeat."

"I have tremendous turn-around, behavior-wise, in kids," she continued. "For kids who have problems staying on task, this gives them a different focus. There's no competition."

The circus project and climbing walls are just pieces of a comprehensive wellness program that includes such time-honored standbys as team sports and dance but kept fresh with creative twists designed to keep kids moving.

At Hopewell Elementary, teachers have launched *Jump Rope Idol*, a take-off on the popular reality TV show *American Idol*. For her tech-loving young charges, Stony Brook's Merlino mixes it up with *GeoMotion*, an interactive video game similar to the wildly popular arcade game *Dance Dance Revolution* (DDR). In it, students match wits against a computer, dancing everything from hip hop to the cha-cha.

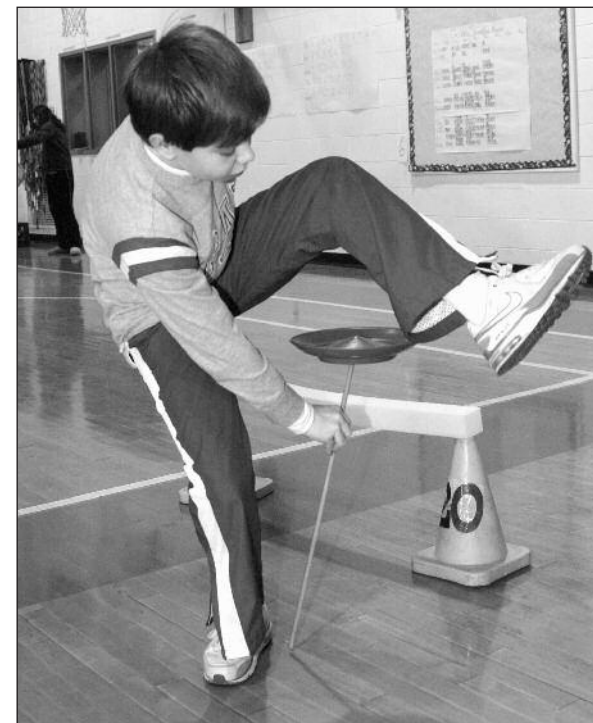
Older youngsters at Bear Tavern were introduced to orienteering this year. With borrowed compasses from the high school and new pedometers purchased by Bear Tavern, students learned about coordinates and mapped their way around school ballfields.

To the delight of fitness advocates everywhere, pedometers are increasingly finding their way into wellness curricula.

To raise awareness of International Walk to School

Day, celebrated by walking and bicycling advocates worldwide every October 3, Merlino in 2006 bought 40 pedometers for her classes and launched a *Walk Around the World* challenge to her 5th graders.

Students challenged each other and teachers to see who could log more miles, who could be the first to walk, figuratively speaking, to New York, which class



Bear Tavern 5th grader Grant Ceglia gets daring with his spinning plate

could collectively walk to Paris, etc. The competitive element pushed students to make choices to walk more and helped them set realistic goals for increasing their activity level. When it was over, many approving parents bought their kids pedometers of their own.

For many years now, the district's wellness teachers have participated in the Presidential Physical Fitness Award program to help students understand the concept of fitness and chart their progress during the school year. Begun by President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1966 to encourage youngsters to be more physically active, the program measures individual agility, endurance, flexibility and strength at multiple points during the school year. Students who improve their statistics by year's end and compare favorably against national youth fitness levels earn patches.

Teachers see its value not just in terms of helping kids improve their times in the mile run or rack up more pull-ups. The program helps students set goals

and recognize other factors that affect performance, such as eating a healthy diet and getting the right amount of rest – important lessons toward maintaining a healthy lifestyle for young and old.

Keeping kids active *after* school is the tricky part.

Millions of calories are burned after school every February when all district elementary schools host their annual *Jump Rope for Heart* events. Students sign up in droves for the popular fundraiser, an hour-long jump-a-thon between teams of students who collect pledges for the American Heart Association in exchange for their participation. The huge success of the event – Hopewell Valley schools are consistently among the biggest scholastic fundraisers in Central Jersey – has led in recent years to *Hoops for Heart*, a basketball version.

Newer traditions include *World Cup Soccer*, a co-ed, single-elimination tournament that draws hundreds of youngsters in grades 3 through 5 from all four elementary schools for a month of after-school soccer. The co-curricular activity was begun and is organized by Stony Brook's Merlino.

A basketball fanatic, she also introduced and runs the hugely popular *March Madness*, a double-elimination tourney modeled after the NCAA's version. The after-school program now runs at all elementary schools. While it draws older students from Bear Tavern, Toll Gate and Hopewell, at Stony Brook, it is so popular that teams are organized beginning in 1st grade. More than half of the school's students participate.

"It's a great community program," says Merlino. "It's huge. Parents come out at night to watch the games."

At the tourney's conclusion she gives out the *Fab 5 Award* to the students who stood out for exceptional personal growth – a reminder of the enduring benefits of healthy competition.

What Merlino likes about *March Madness* and *World Cup Soccer* is the opportunity it provides students who would opt for physical activity after school if something were available. But she has also intentionally structured *World Cup Soccer* to give students control. Merlino provides the referees and schedules the games. As for the rest of it, the kids are on their own.

"We want to empower children to learn what it's like to play pick-up games, to have a say in the way a team plays, how to organize a team, what color the team wears. As we do this year after year the process is smoothing out. Kids are developing sportsmanship."

"We have parents who say, 'how can you expect them to make that decision?' I say, 'Because they can!'" ❁

A message from Kiki Enderle, supervisor of wellness

With physical inactivity an increasingly serious problem in the United States, programs that help young people to understand the value of fitness and encourage them to be active have never been more important.

Our wellness curriculum is provided to do just that. For many of our students, their wellness classes will be their only preparation for an active lifestyle. Our program helps develop the motor skills needed for enjoyable participation in physical activities and promotes physical fitness and positive attitudes for an active lifestyle. It is our responsibility to teach the value of fitness and nutrition and to help students understand that the decisions of how they live their life today will ultimately affect their health in their adult years.

As our K-12 curriculum continues to move toward new trends in physical education, our students are being exposed to exciting activities and fresh offerings. Our elementary schools continue to stress the value of motor skills and physical fitness testing while demonstrating the use of pedometers and heart rate monitors. Our Timberlane students are exposed to activities such as Dance Dance Revolution, mountain bikes, pedometers and have been introduced to the skills needed for climbing. Once they get to high school, students are continually reminded of the importance of lifetime fitness. It is at this level that students are exposed to exercise physiology and an understanding of how to use our free weights, Nautilus and cardio equipment in our state-of-the-art fitness center. In the last four years, our students have expanded their knowledge of climbing through our extensive indoor climbing course. We are very excited to announce that within a year we will be expanding our climbing curriculum to accommodate an outdoor course. The climbing adventure curriculum helps build strength and agility but also helps develop traits that benefit students long after graduation: self-confidence, teamwork, and trust, to name just a few.

Our department works hard to educate students on topics that deal with some of society's toughest challenges for children today. We are proud to have a K-12 staff and curriculum that is second to none and help to make our program one of the best in the state.



Kiki Enderle holds the dual positions of wellness supervisor and athletic director for Hopewell Valley. A former high school physical education and health teacher, she came to Hopewell Valley in 2002 from Morristown High School where she served as assistant athletic director and successful girls' basketball coach. In 2000 she was named Coach of the Year by the state's biggest newspapers for leading the Morristown Colonials to a state championship. A tireless advocate for sportsmanship, Enderle has worked to raise awareness of character and leadership issues with students, parents, and coaches. She has spoken on topics including sportsmanship and women in leadership to statewide coaching groups and the Girl Scouts of America. A native of Caldwell, she holds a bachelor's degree from Montclair State University and a master's degree from The College of New Jersey. Hopewell Valley's first female athletic director, Enderle is one of just 43 female directors in the 419-member New Jersey State Interscholastic Athletic Association.

Where Pickleball Meets George of the Jungle (Cont'd from cover)

says Malaska, who invited Timberlane teachers a few years ago to conduct a workshop on their mountain biking unit for teachers from around the state. "Climbing walls. Pedometers. Technology is the big one. It's changing everything."

If youngsters raised with video games can be encouraged to pedal or dance to challenges glowing from a video screen, teachers are not just keeping them active in their wellness class, she says. By weaving fun and personal choice into activities, they are improving the likelihood that students remain physically active long after graduation – the paramount goal of the effective wellness teacher, Malaska points out – and a fact borne out by recent brain research.

"The type of exercise does not matter as much as (the fact) they remember enjoying the activity," says Timberlane teacher Candace Gore, who along with colleague Laurie Fallon spearheaded the effort to bring DDR and GameBikes to Timberlane. "The research shows children who exercise regularly while in middle school go on to have a positive outlook on exercise as an adult."

"You always have those one or two kids who don't like PE," acknowledges teacher Alma Quinlan. "But they come in (the fitness center) and it gives them something to hang onto."

Keeping the curriculum fresh and innovative is what led Timberlane into adventure education several years ago. Also called *experiential learning*, adventure education is a model that uses indoor and outdoor games and activities to foster team-building, problem-solving, leadership and myriad other life skills.

At Timberlane, it began with a low ropes course, installed on the campus' southeastern end, along Timberlane Drive, and a 25-foot climbing wall in the gymnasium. With movable grips that can change the climbing difficulty, the walls enable staff to continually challenge students. Students set their own climbing goals, but Weidman said the real value is in helping them gain the confidence to exceed them. "We try to get them out of their comfort zone to show them they can do this."

Adventure education does not have to be complicated.

Teachers use a variety of games with virtually no equipment to help teach important team-building concepts and self-confidence. In *Prouty's Landing*, for example, teams of students race imaginary fires to cross an imaginary river using just hula hoops and a rope in the middle of the school gymnasium. To ramp up the challenge, they'll need to take something with them – maybe a bucket of tennis balls, or a team water cooler. There are dozens of similar games, all requiring problem-solving skills to meet a challenge and usually requiring a minimal degree of athleticism.

What students take away from the experience is

learning how to identify a problem, devise a solution through critical thought and work as a team to meet a common goal, skills they will need to be successful in adulthood no matter what career path they take. For these reasons, such experiential learning programs are increasingly popular with corporations, private youth programs and a growing number of schools interested in cultivating character education and leadership.

All this adventure is used to complement, not replace, more traditional program elements. Timberlane student still learn team sports on fine, on-site facilities, including recently resurfaced tennis courts and an eight-lane running track, as well as fields for baseball, softball, soccer, field hockey and lacrosse. But even they are taught with a high degree of flexibility to ensure that kids are moving.

Weidman, for example, understands that not every student is comfortable throwing a football. So when it's time to teach it, students who can't warm up to the pigskin are allowed another catch-and-throw activity, like ultimate Frisbee. Soccer fanatics might be tossed a soccer ball to kick around.

The approach wins praise from fitness advocates like the NJAHPERD's Malaska.

"Think about what happens when you teach softball," she says. "Usually, the teacher pitches, one student catches, one student bats and the rest of the kids watch ... A lot of schools teach the same thing year after year. Come on! There are other things out there."

Like mountain biking, Timberlane started its popular program several years ago. Students learn bike mechanics, rules of the road and, with the aid of ramps and branch-covered paths, how to control a bike in different field conditions. The program began during the administration of former principal Steve Cochrane, an avid cyclist, and operates with school-owned helmets and 25 bikes rented at a reduced rate from a local bike shop.

"That's what this program does," says Weidman. "Give kids a lot of opportunities to be physically active."

Opportunities and *time*. Required to take a 52-minute class daily, Timberlane students get more than twice the 100 minutes-per-week wellness instruction the state requires.

The diverse interests and alertness of Timberlane's wellness faculty – which includes Quinlan, the high school varsity tennis coach, along with cheer coach Lisa Strigel, golf enthusiast and basketball coach David Butcavage and certified NJSIAA track official Aaron Kearns – help the department to spot fitness trends that might excite students.

Chances are, if it's fun and it makes kids sweat, they'll be doing it in wellness class.

"Ultimately, we just want them to be active," says Quinlan. ❀

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Portraits of Excellence

Summer 2008

Spotlighting Innovation and Success in the Hopewell Valley Regional School District

Where Pickleball Meets George of the Jungle

Dodgeball? Dead.
Volleyball? So '70s.
Pickleball? Now you're talking.
George of the Jungle? Grab your rope.
GameBikes? Get out of their way.

This is the stuff of the wellness classes at Timberlane Middle School, where imagination, technology and team-building activities dominate a landscape once known solely as a succession of team sports.

Parents and grandparents remember them as gym, or PE, classes and probably painfully so if they were too weak to spike a volleyball or too short to shoot baskets.

Today's Timberlaners have no such anxiety. Wellness classes are now a rich variety of twists on old games – like Pickleball, a cross between ping pong and tennis – and exciting new ones, like the wildly popular aerobic workout, Dance Dance Revolution.

They include models of what is called *adventure education*, such as wall climbing, a ropes course and other team-building activities. A new fitness center, heavy in cardio-aerobic equipment, includes rowing machines, elliptical machines and treadmills for rainy day workouts. And, unique to public schools, Timberlane offers mountain biking, allowing students to work up a sweat on the cross-country trail that loops along the wooded fringes of the school's 75-acre campus.

The extensive and creative choices are part of a deliberate effort to make wellness education more meaningful to students. With obesity statistics – in all generations – off the charts, educators understand

that helping students develop lifelong fitness habits is far more important than knowing the penalty for a foul in soccer.

But how to do that? A good place to start, Timberlane teachers have learned, is with activities with high fun factors.

They report astounding success with interactive computer games such as the popular arcade challenge Dance Dance Revolution. In it, students match wits against a computer in complicated dance routines by following onscreen arrows for dance steps.



Timberlane students match wits against a computer in Dance Dance Revolution.

Set to a soundtrack with a wide selection of contemporary dance music, DDR plays on a regular TV monitor and players go through their steps on a specially marked foam floor pad.

"You would not believe the impact we have had with that program," says teacher Karl Weidman.

The wellness program scored another hit last fall when GameBikes were added to the fitness center. GameBikes are stationary bicycles connected to a computer on which riders

compete against each other in more than 50 virtual settings. Like DDR, the bikes are hugely popular with students. Plans are afoot to add the popular, sports-themed Wii games to the curriculum.

Jackie Malaska calls it "embracing the enemy." Malaska, executive director of the New Jersey Association for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance, representing 2,200 teachers statewide, considers Hopewell Valley a leader in the state for its progressive approach to wellness education.

"Wellness (education) is changing so dramatically,"

continued inside



Timberlane students receive more than twice the wellness instruction required by the state.