

CANYON COURIER

Students escape comfort zones at Lab School

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Members of the Raccoon Group carefully made their way onto the rustic teeter-totter, sidestepping across and providing more room for the next person. Some of the kids quoted the “Cha Cha Slide” song: “Slide to the left. Slide to the right.”

Once they were all on, their leader for the exercise — Jakob Fanning, 17, a high school student from Arvada — told them that they had to work together to balance the teeter-totter for the duration of a song. The kids started singing “Row, Row, Row Your Boat,” and “Livin’ on a Prayer,” as the teeter-totter wobbled enough to touch the ground several times.

After the group members carefully climbed down, Fanning had them evaluate individual and group trail behavior, participation and respect by showing a thumbs-up or a thumbs-down. Most of the group members proudly displayed a thumbs-up for each category, and Fanning — for the most part — agreed with their evaluations.

The group then moved on to other challenges that honed their problem-solving, communication, teamwork and leadership skills.

This was Initiatives at Windy Peak Outdoor Lab School near Bailey, where sixth-graders from West Jefferson Middle School spent their weekdays last week.

Every year, both Windy Peak and the Mount Evans outdoor labs each host 3,000 Jeffco sixth-graders for an entire week, as the students learn about nature, teamwork, leadership and themselves.

At the lab, the 86 West Jeff sixth-graders at Windy Peak, and their 93 counterparts at Mount Evans, spent their days in interactive lessons learning about the bio-, geo- and hydrospheres; physics, or “forces in motion”; navigation; field study; astronomy; and initiatives, which teach students leadership and teamwork.

Principals and staff at both sites said the curriculum emphasizes “stewardship of self, community and the environment.”



Chancey Bush

Sixth-graders from West Jeff Middle School work together on a teeter-totter during an initiatives activity at Windy Peak Outdoor Lab School.

Traditionally, the Outdoor Lab has been “capstone” as the sixth-graders leave elementary school; however, as the school district starts transitioning sixth-graders to middle schools, Windy Peak principal Robb Gneiser said the week at Outdoor Lab will become “more of a springboard experience.”

“They get off that bus in a new environment, and sometimes the quiet is scary for them,” Gneiser said. “The kids have to rally around each other and leave the comforts of home, whether that be family or technology. Everybody has that homesick piece, so we teach that it’s one step at a time, and to find that strength and support network here.”

“It’s amazing what happens in one week — how much they can accomplish,” he continued.

With Raccoon Group, Fanning and the sixth-graders talked about how they were working on “ICARE,” an acronym for “integrity, commitment, awareness, respect and empathy.” The students said that with each core-group activity, such as initiatives, they were supposed to be working on one of those goals.

Initiatives, Gneiser explained, used to be only for select kids — students who were already leaders in their own peer groups. However, the course is for everyone, as Fanning explained to Raccoon Group, so that everyone can “learn how to be good team members and leaders.”

Hadley Gregory, 11, and Josie Griffin, 12, said they were having fun at Windy Peak, which they described as having “cool, unique things.” The two pointed to the nearby Windy Peak, describing the different points as the “castle” and another lower point as the “wizard” and his staff.

Hadley’s least favorite thing, she said, was being away from family; Josie’s, getting up early. Josie said she was enjoying learning about the solar system, astronomy and archery. Hadley said she was having fun within the Raccoon core group.

Hadley added that learning about “empathy and the ICARE words” would be most applicable later in life.

Mount Evans Lab

On Feb. 8, Brittany O’Connor, 17, one of the 16 students from Conifer High School who was at the school as a student leader, was taking a group of 10 West Jeff students through the cycle of the local watershed.

O’Connor gave the students a tour of the watershed, then they followed the water to a well, then to a water treatment center, then to a cistern.

At the cistern site, O’Connor and the students talked about how much water they use at the camp in a single week. Estimating that each person at the camp uses 100 gallons a day, and the cistern beneath them holds 50,000 gallons, the cistern has to fill twice a week “for everyone to have clean water,” O’Connor said.

“That’s why we ask you guys to conserve water, and take only two- or three-minute showers,” she told the group.

As the students walked to the school’s wastewater treatment plant, O’Connor said she had applied to be a high school leader “because I remember the leaders were really fun when I did it, and I might want to go into teaching.”

The hardest part, she commented, was “staying awake and happy for them.”

J.T. Dalton, 12, said he was enjoying his time at Outdoor Lab, and that hiking had been his favorite part so far. J.T. said he was enjoying learning about the water cycle, and how the local watershed experiences it “multiple times” in a single year.

“And I really like that we’re outside most of the day,” J.T. said.