

Rope-a-hope

Challenge course teaches kids to untie life's knots

BY TIM SMITH
STAFF WRITER

The answer to self-doubt and low self-esteem awaits, deep in the woods of the Boys & Girls Republic on Nine Mile Road in Farmington Hills.

It's called the Challenge Ropes Course, an assortment of ropes, swinging tires, pulleys, planks and platforms, waiting for the next group of youngsters — or even adults — to try them out. Last week, a group from Duncel Middle School's advanced life skills class tried the maze on for size.

The ropes course is the centerpiece of Adventure Challenge Education, a Farmington Public School District program designed to encourage communication, cooperation and problem solving.

"It definitely has a positive effect on kids," said Duncel social worker Lynn Levin, who co-chaired a committee that shaped the second-year program. "Not 100 percent of the time, but there have been major changes."

Levin said she worked with one Duncel student who was "failing every class, he had no friends. We spent the day on the ropes course and he came back and realized people do like him. As long as he knows people like him, he feels he can do anything."

That student found out people liked him because he was part of a team that relied on each other to solve various course dilemmas: such as how to lift a dozen participants onto a teetering plank without it touching the ground; or how to successfully walk across a cable more than one foot off the ground.

"This stuff is supposed to be fun, and that's one of the goals. Even though it takes some work and thinking," said course supervisor Pat Sala of Boys & Girls Republic, who called the myriad of challenging tasks safer than a gym class.

Low ropes course events such as All Aboard and Mohawk Traverse foster teamwork and faith. They also help show participants that the answers to problems don't always come easily.

"They have to really trust each other enough to share ideas, to spot for one another," said Sala, assisted by John Samborski of Boys & Girls Republic for the Duncel visit.

The high ropes events are designed to spur students to greater heights, to set and surpass personal goals.

Before running through the low ropes course, they led an activity called "Willow in the Wind," where one person (the willow) surrounded by a circle of people (the wind) falls without worry, knowing someone will be there to prop him back up.

District officials are calling the program successful, although any definitive statement on its effectiveness will have to wait until 1999. A report summarizing ACE was given at a recent school board meeting by district assessment coordinator Carolyn Mahalak.

"It's working," said Mahalak, adding that more students are visiting the ropes course and more teachers and counselors are being trained to act as facilitators.

Last week, several adults were there to help students. These included: Sandy Chamberlin, who teaches the Duncel advanced life skills class; Bob Crawford, Farmington High School counselor; and Darcie Layne, North Farmington High School social worker. Layne and Levin co-chaired the ACE committee that led to the pilot program before 1996-97.

There was enough interest generated last year that ACE now is open to all schools. In '96-97, it was available only at Duncel, East Middle School and Farmington High School.

"It's so great to see some kids who really never got involved before making decisions on solutions to activities," said Don Cowan, the district administrator in charge of the program. "It's amazing what it does for the confidence and self-image of kids."

Levin said students don't volunteer for the program, but are encouraged to enroll. "All are underschieving in some aspect of their life."



Ties that bind: Seventh-grader Ben Panock walks on logs using ropes as a team project.

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