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Climbing high with math

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It looks like a typical outdoor summer camp: a noisy passel of kids ages 12-15 scrambling their way up a three-story rock wall, learning to tie knots, increase their speed and reduce their chances of falling.

Amid loud laughter and supportive cheers, it's hard to believe that these students are studying math and science. But that's exactly what's happening at the Bellevue YMCA this week as 14 middle- and high-school kids participate in the first-ever "Climbing Higher with Mathematics and Science" program. Designed to teach and develop math and science skills using outdoor activities, the program was designed by Leadership Eastside and incorporated into the Y's Extreme Rocks and Ropes Camp.

The program is a response to the low test scores on this year's WASL, and the concerns of the Eastside community, said Liz Swanson, one of the program's six originators.

A survey conducted by Leadership Eastside, an adult leadership program, found that the community was most concerned with education, particularly in the areas of math and science, she said. Her group decided to develop a program that would help students understand the everyday roles that math and science play in life, Swanson said.

The program targets ages 12-15, a period when many students develop anxiety about math and science and begin to shy away from taking classes in these subjects, Swanson said.

Using nature as a vehicle for education, instructors encourage the kids to keep track of the time it takes them to climb the wall, estimate the time they think it will take, compare that to their actual time and graph their results in a journal. Friendly competition adds an extra boost by encouraging kids to compare their data, she said.

"It shows how you've improved and boosts your confidence," said Shadine Rassaian, 13, of the interactive journal. She made it to the top of the wall in six minutes, one minute past her initial five-minute estimate.

Students also study different climbing methods and learn how to use the angle of climb to decrease the probability that they will fall. Brennan Treftz, 13, wouldn't give up until he made it to the top. "I'm going to get up there, even if I have to scare myself up there," he said.

Climbing to the sound of fellow campers' shouts, he made it up the wall three times, each time improving his score and adding new numbers to his graph. His best time was 55 seconds, a record that made him a star among his peers.

Gladys Arzeta, 12, said her favorite subject was math despite her difficulties with the subject. "Sometimes I have a lot of trouble dividing," she said. "I'm going to feel some sense of accomplishment when I'm done climbing," she said. After her climb, she was all smiles.

Organizers hope that excitement for climbing will carry over to students' school work and increase enrollment in math and science classes, said Keri Stout, associate executive director of the Bellevue Family YMCA.

They also hope to see the program back again next year and replicated in other communities, said Stephanie Mapelli, Leadership Eastside spokeswoman.

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