



GOT SNOW? Students from St. George's used Chewelah Peak's plentiful snowfall as an outdoor classroom this winter.

OUTDOOR SCHOOL AT CHEWELAH PEAK

Not All Schools Have Walls

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PRINCIPAL EVALUATION CRITERIA

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

AUTHOR'S NOTE: The Principals' Learning Centers have always had a different approach to science education for upper elementary residential outdoor school. We provide the facilities, meals and lesson help, but rely on the teachers to lead their own lessons with their students. When Wanda Peters contacted me and asked if I had a position at Chewelah Peak available, I reminded her of our model. Since I met Wanda many years ago

when she worked at Camp Waskowitz, I asked her if I could forward her name and expertise to any school looking for more guidance in developing a program at "The Peak." St. George's School in Spokane liked the idea and scheduled a stay with us and worked with her to develop the schedule. I asked Wanda to tell the story of their visit.

Teachers also benefit from outdoor education experiences.



Snow, cold temperatures, alpine forest, sun, blue skies... Students observing, measuring, testing, building, identifying, diagramming in snow, role-playing, snowshoeing, laughing, sitting, listening and reflecting... All these comprised the February school day at Chewelah Peak Outdoor Learning Center. Located just an hour and a half north of Spokane, it was the perfect setting for students to experience lessons in snow science, alpine ecosystems, winter survival, and snowshoeing.

Some school experiences outside the four walls of a traditional classroom may be seen as risky and frivolous ventures. But on this day at Chewelah — with its modern facilities, experienced staff, and support for teachers — the risks were minimal, and deep learning opportunities abounded.

PLENTIFUL LESSON POSSIBILITIES

The fourth- and fifth-grade students from St. George's eagerly embraced the outdoor classroom. The academic and cognitive-based lesson possibilities at Chewelah Peak are wide-ranging and plentiful. The staff at St. George took advantage of the abundant snow to complement their classroom work.

After dividing up in learning groups of about 14 students, they embarked on their journeys into snow science, winter survival including fire building, snowshoeing with tree identification, and snow structure building. In the snow science segment — using their senses, bodies and minds — they marked the layers of snow, measured each layer, observed the snow at various levels, and discussed the conditions that caused certain characteristics of snow.

With ample classroom space, the students were able to bring snow samples indoors to a waiting hotplate

where they discovered the amount of water in a measured sample of snow and what that might mean for summer water planning. Science and math skills were painlessly reinforced as the students were engaged in relevant data collection and application.

A DIFFERENT KIND OF KNOWLEDGE

In the sessions I led on snow science, along with the usual expectations laid out for safety, respect for self, others, and the environment, I also instructed them to look for beauty, be fun to be with, and have fun themselves. Judging by student's comments during our learning reflection time, they had indeed discovered beauty in nature:

“I thought how the snow glittered in the sun was beautiful, a snowflake under the magnifying glass was beautiful, the blue sky, the flying raven.”

Although immeasurable, it appeared to me that they gained awareness and a different kind of knowledge.

Even though I took the lead for the planning and implementation for this lesson, the involved teachers made relevant connections to classroom work. For me, being a longtime outdoor environmental educator, involved teachers are key to successful, meaningful outdoor education experiences. Building professional relationships between the school and the learning increases teacher effectiveness both on site and back in the classroom. Time spent at Chewelah can give teachers valuable professional development as they experience different roles and activities and see their students in a different environment.

NATURE AS A TEACHER

While the academic focus with attention to district state and national standards is important, there are many more benefits of a Chewelah Peak experience for both students and staff. It is well known that students learn through many different modalities and often best while heart, mind, and body are engaged. When one of the sessions wasn't going exactly as planned, I decided to listen to my outdoor educator intuition and do a sit spot activity. The students and teachers sat quietly in the snow, without walking, talking or electronics. There was a noticeable and profound change when they came back together. Many spoke with awe at watching the snow fall from the trees, hearing the call of a raven, watching the wind move only the top branches. I can't point specifically to any academic standard that the activity met. But my professional and personal experience has shown me that nature can be a powerful and transformative teacher when given the opportunity.

Chewelah Peak has an abundance of nature and an abundance of opportunities for learning in deeply engaging and meaningful ways. There also seemed to be an abundance of laughter, shouts of glee, and happy looking faces on both students and staff throughout their visit.

Clearly, we have many options and a lot to offer at AWSP's eastern Washington facility. Consider Chewelah Peak Learning Center when looking to expand and enhance your curriculum with a valuable residential outdoor experience. ■