OUTDOOR SCHOOL
AT CHEWELAH PEAK
Not All Schools Have Walls

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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.

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