

How a Climbing Wall Became Part of a NEW Physical Education Program

by Gordon Cook, Al Boyan, Alice Mendelsohn, Alison Green and Colleen Woolvett

The introduction of a NEW physical education (PE) program at Ancaster Senior Public School had, at its root, the desire to make physical activity an inclusive domain for both athletic students and those not so inclined. With the growing concerns over the rapid and consistent rise in childhood obesity rates it was evident that the current model of competitive sport skill-related programs was not meeting the needs of many students. In an effort to address these concerns, it was necessary to look for ways to engage students that would meet their needs and interests.

To accomplish this end, it was determined that many of the goals we were attempting to meet could be addressed through the use of a climbing wall. The climbing wall was seen as a legitimate educational activity that would encourage the physical, mental, social and emotional growth of each participant. So many benefits could be accrued through involvement in wall climbing and it became an integral part of our NEW PE program. The new model of PE was now to consist of the traditional skills-related program (leading to competitive game sports), fitness classes utilizing selectorized strength training machines, cardio machines, interactive gamebikes and other aerobic training equipment AND . . . a climbing wall.

Planning for the first regular-use, permanent installed climbing wall in the Hamilton–Wentworth District School Board (HWDSB) was a new and uncharted area for schools. Although climbing is clearly an accepted activity for students in schools (appearing in the OPHEA 2004 guidelines, by which PE safety is governed) it was heretofore not an activity included in the regular and daily PE programs of schools in Hamilton. For this reason, there was a great deal of uncertainty

and scepticism regarding the appropriateness of it as a full-time activity in school. In gaining acceptance it was critical that risk management be a primary focus and that all possible concerns for safety be addressed. The combination of good equipment and facility combined with appropriate training and supervision had to be the basis of a successful ongoing in-school climbing program.

In January 2006 Adventureworks Associates, Inc. built and installed the new climbing wall. Following installation, eight teachers and two administrators embarked on a series of training sessions to obtain required certification. Within this group, there was a wide variation in the levels of experience ranging from non-climbers to regular participants in the activity. Through the 16 hours of training during evenings, a sense of camaraderie and team spirit developed among staff who were involved. Each recognized the unique role they would undertake within the NEW PE program and support for one another was evident.

Following completion of the training and testing, the next step was to open the facility up for parents to view and ask questions, the number of which seemed to grow as the enthusiasm for the new element in our program came closer to being implemented. In February we held a Demonstration and Information Evening for parents to see the wall in use and ask questions about the program for the climbing wall. Throughout the meeting, school staff and Brian Lisson from Adventureworks Associates, Inc. discussed the inherent risks of the activity while focusing and stressing the elements of safety involved during use (equipment, ropes, structure and trained staff supervising). During the evening, teachers demonstrated and

modeled safe climbing and belaying practices for parents.

The next step was to obtain parental consent for student involvement and use of the facility. The HWDSB legal staff prepared a document entitled *Voluntary Assumption of Risk* for review and signatures of parent and student. Although parents do not have the legal right to sign away future rights of their children and students under the age of 18 cannot legally enter into a contract, this paperwork was viewed as a necessary step in the process of gaining approval and consent for student use. (A similar consent form was required for student involvement and use of the fitness room and strength training equipment).

The Assumption of Risk Forms were then distributed to all parents of all students along with a letter outlining the intended program and benefits. No student would be allowed to be involved in the climbing wall portion of the NEW PE program without a signed consent form.

At long last with over 90% of student forms returned, the program began after March Break. Since it was so late in the school year and students had been anticipating the construction and use of the climbing wall (after fundraising to make it a reality), staff involved in the program determined that it was important to get students on the wall and climbing. Students were given opportunities to do some bouldering activities. Then, the time came to go vertical. Students were harnessed and belayed by trained teachers. A special schedule of wall climbing supervision was developed that consisted of approximately 15 periods of wall climbing per week. Additionally, some staff remained after school one evening per week providing opportunities for more students to climb. The goal was to provide climbing opportunities to all students in order to get them “on the wall” as soon as possible. This goal was accomplished through the diligence and support of trained staff.

In April 2006, we began training grade seven students who had demonstrated leadership qualities and responsible attitudes on how to belay. This training took place during lunch hours on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays and lasted approximately four weeks. This occurred because of a dedicated staff team who volunteered their lunch hours to make this possible. The training schedule provided sufficient training time for belayers but still allowed for Tuesday and Thursday intramural athletics activities to continue uninterrupted. This belay training was and continues to be a very popular program for many students who regularly request involvement in the training through voluntary participation. It is a goal they set and that may, in part, underlie some positive behaviour in order to qualify for this leadership opportunity. The initial goal was to have students fully trained and ready to belay during open house demonstrations in May 2006.

This goal was accomplished and during the open house event our student belaying team demonstrated their skills under teacher supervision for other students, parents and staff. This provided a wonderful occasion to showcase and celebrate the accomplishments of our staff and students working together in a strong “learning community.”

September 2006 began a new year and as a grade seven and eight only school, 50% of our student population turns over each year. A whole new group of students arrived with wide eyes and desire to be a part of this new experience they had been hearing about.

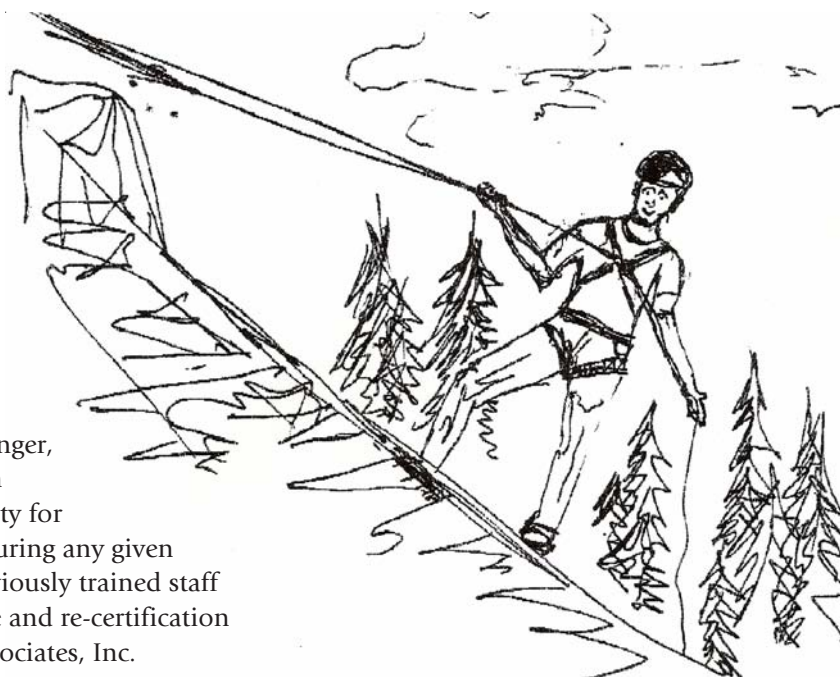
The new school year was an opportunity for staff supervisors to do some changing and experimenting now that they had a greater comfort level and understanding of the climbing wall experience. Climbing routes were changed — some to more challenging for those with experience under their “harnesses,” others to more attainable for our new students with little or no experience. The objective was to create an inviting environment where our

grade eight students with experience would continue to feel challenged while our new students would gain some experience and success with bouldering and easier routes on the wall.

A climbing wall schedule was developed based on our new timetable and longer, 60-minute periods, which provided more opportunity for more students to climb during any given period. Additionally, previously trained staff received a training update and re-certification from Adventureworks Associates, Inc.

Teachers were now gaining greater skill at developing lesson plans and activities using the wall as an integral part of our NEW PE program. A further goal was set to train *all* students in order to facilitate and maximize the safe use of the climbing wall for belaying and climbing of more students throughout the year. This plan involved the training of all students in harnessing, knot tying, boulder activities and ongoing safety procedures. By January 2007 all students had received training in harnessing and climbing safety. At this time teachers reflected on the program to date and it was determined that, in order to get more students climbing, knots would become part of the belay training. Up to this point, teachers had tied knots and some groups were trained during the harnessing lessons. It was felt that this was too time consuming and so the lesson plans were changed to reflect a different approach. March 2007 saw the start of training the grade seven leadership group to prepare them for next year. The goal is to train 50 to be ready for next year; to date 24 have been trained.

The climbing wall program continues to be one that generates high student interest and involvement (about 96% of students climb). It is also a program that our incoming students



look forward to. Sustaining the program given the demands on our staffing and trained supervisors is an ongoing challenge.

The climbing wall as envisioned is an integral part of our NEW PE program. In total the data that have been tracked have indicated fewer office referrals, fewer student suspensions and increased student involvement in our combined skill and fitness base program.

Climbing is a demanding, challenging and intense activity that has numerous and significant benefits for students observed by our staff:

- Works all of the muscle groups
- Emphasises safety, which helps create a good learning environment
- Increases students' perseverance and trust and develops their goal setting, problem solving, team work and communication skills
- Enhances self-esteem while contributing to overall physical fitness levels, including cardiovascular and muscle endurance as well as strength and coordination development (students will begin wearing Polar Heart Rate monitors to track cardio response during climbing)

- Enables students to recognize that hard work and training pay off; provides real life experiences in working through and meeting challenging situations
- Develops skills that can be transferred from climbing to every day life

Climbing wall activities

- encourage the development of students' self-confidence, personal trust, willpower and courage
- help students learn to focus and concentrate
- enable students to travel beyond their personal comfort zones into the world of adventure-based learning
- provide students with opportunities to learn about and practice important life virtues such as patience, perseverance and persistence
- focus heavily on developing communication skills, including listening, speaking and writing through reflection.

Journals relating to student perceptions of the climbing wall program include the following comments:

"It was great for making your arms and legs stronger because you're pulling and pushing yourself up the wall."

"It was just what the school was waiting for to reinvigorate the same old gym classes we've all had to go through since the first day of school".

"To be a belayer you have to be very responsible and trustworthy because you are responsible for the climber's life."

"The rock climbing wall is a great thing to have in our school!"

"I like the activity when you get to climb with a ball in your hand. That's tough to do."

"I always spend 20 minutes trying to harness myself for about two minutes of reaching like crazy."

As an educational community, Ancaster Senior has chosen to challenge the growing childhood obesity rates and assist students in finding their own activity niche. This is especially important for those who do not see

themselves as athletes and for whom competitive sports hold no interest. We see our challenge as one to discover healthy activity-based life skills that may be utilized in after-school and vacation-time programs as "connecting points" for each of our students. Best practice and evidence-based research points to the importance of positive alternative activities such as sports, music, dance and theatre as positive influences that matter and reduce risk behaviours.

Our program has aimed to expose students to multiple opportunities for activity-based involvement while encouraging a sense of responsibility for personal health outcomes over a lifetime. The integration of a permanent climbing wall in our school as part of our NEW PE program has provided students with an invitation to revisit their childhood and "climb" the new challenges presented in the "new curriculum" of the 21st century. Climbing has been viewed as the ultimate metaphor for life. The magic seems to be in the perceived nature of risk involved with the climb. . . . Ironically, the fears we all have about failing are met face-to-face there on the wall. . . . Through incremental risk-taking via the various wall problems we learn to ask for help, develop trust, accept challenge by choice, break through mental, physical and emotional barriers, and rely on the personal powers that we summon to meet and successfully overcome the challenge at hand.

At Ancaster Senior Public School the installation of a permanent climbing wall facility has taken our NEW PE program to new heights, helping us to achieve acknowledgment for program excellence at the HWDSB Profiling Excellence Awards (May 2007) in recognition of our innovative programming toward improving student achievement.

Gordon Cook is the Principal of Ancaster Senior Public School. He wrote this article with support, assistance and information from Al Boyan, Alice Mendelsohn, Alison Green and Colleen Woolvett — teachers and climbing wall supervisors.