

Cispus Works its Magic for Chehalis Students and Teachers

by Jordan Duncan

Orin C. Smith Elementary School teacher Jordan Duncan was PEI's FieldSTEM Teacher of the Year in 2023. Here he recounts a memorable visit to Cispus Learning Center for Chehalis students and teachers.

It is Sunday afternoon, and we are roughly 3.5 hours past the end of our Cispus experience - plenty of time for reflection. There is both good and bad. To start with the bad: the Outdoor Schools October workshop at the beach is no longer my favorite school memory from the past ten years. And also, many kids were upset that we couldn't stay another day.

The good? I'm not sure words do justice to the experience 49 humans just shared together (-1 sick and unable to go.) From drop-off Friday morning, and their gear being bagged and tagged by their counselors, the energy was electric. Not just with the students and counselors, but with the teachers as well. Fortunately, we were just barely able to fit all students, gear, and Costco items (it didn't seem like as much until we tried to put it in the vans) into the three vehicles we took - the bus and two vans. I had considered canceling the second van. Hindsight says that would have been a very bad idea.



The first challenge: crossing a downed tree where a bridge was out during the group hike.

We arrived and were immediately transported to a land far beyond the reaches of school, civilization, and every scene and setting the students knew. Some staff, who had attended as elementary or high school students decades ago, emotionally reminisced as the wonderment of Camp Cispus came flooding back. In many ways, and for many of us, it was a very surreal moment. For many of the elementary students, it was their first time at an overnight camp (28 of the 33 in attendance to be precise.)

After lunch and a few activities to encourage teamwork, we set off for the hike. It was beautiful, great temperature, and no rain. Their first "challenge" included getting everyone across the "Bridge Out" without anyone getting wet. They were given one 75 foot length of rope... which, much to my puzzlement, no one used. Instead, almost all groups decided to walk across the large tree that acted as a natural bridge.

Terrified is a strong word, but this was definitely the first time I had thought, "Hmm... this might not be the best idea." However, I pushed the responsible and safe educator and dad voices out of my head, and allowed Kevin, our first responder and medic for the trip, to convince me they wouldn't get that hurt if they fell. Plus, they all signed liability waivers!

We continued on with only one broken arm and some whimpering (just kidding, there was no whimpering) for an amazing hike. There was also no broken arm, but I'm sure you all just experienced an eyebrow moment. The falls were breath-taking, with some students having their first hike ever.



For some students, the walk to Curtain Falls was their first ever hiking experience.



Night #1 featured skits, fire-building and s'mores.

That evening we enjoyed skit practice, "Do You Love Your Neighbor" and a fire-building challenge by the outdoor pit. By the way, whether the giant dirt clearing was by design or the terrible result of a forest fire, great idea! The kids struggled with the ferro rods, but once given lint, I was proud to see many groups running to the fire pit with smoldering and flaming bundles in their hands! (The goal was to start a fire long enough to start the main fire!)

The campfire was memorable - beads, poems, smores, and tired eyes. The counselors stayed up late and were incredibly grateful for all of the snacks. The only negatives were a student going home that night sick, and a bat somehow getting into the boys dorm - but only on the teacher side. Several kids asked the next morning, "were you guys playing a game or something?"

All the lights were on at midnight with men yelling and opening and closing the door!" Luckily, three grown men were able to get the bat out with the ingenuity of using the rackets from the gym. There were no fatalities, and the rackets never made contact. Whether we should be proud of this feat, I'm not sure.



Rain didn't dampen the students' spirits during the challenge course on day #2.

Saturday brought rain, archery, rock wall climbing, and the challenge course. The kids were having so much fun, the rain didn't even dampen their spirits. Handwarmers and disposable ponchos were a fabulous idea, as well as the extra clothes we brought which were very much appreciated. Star room that night (A Journey through Time), more games, skits - absolutely phenomenal - better than anyone was expecting! new songs, and camp memories, and then a surprise Blind Trail hike. This may have been the highlight of the trip for many, both student and teacher alike. I hope there are no neighbors or anyone trying to sleep anywhere near Cispus. The screams and frightened cries of children filled the forest! Pleasantly surprising though, there were no tears - so we struck a good balance of not being too scary!

The night ended with us letting them stay up a bit late for rice crispy treats, final beads, and special camp counselor awards around the fire. All students were asleep within 10 minutes of lights out, and high school counselors begged me in Sasquatch to be able to come back next year.



Archery was also a first for some students.

This morning arrived, and unlike the previous morning, we had to wake ALL students (and the entire female cabin) up at 7:15. The night was not without event - a cat climbed up to the window of the adult male side again and meowed every fifteen seconds for hours. Luckily, it only kept our pseudo admin/wrestling coach/math teacher up and everyone else rested well. He was in great spirits though, and gave all the adults good laughs at breakfast. After packing and cleaning up, loading the bus, and meeting in the gym, we did our ending ceremony. All plain, white t-shirts were laid out and we played the saddest playlist we could find (hello Sarah McLachlan) while students signed and wrote positive messages on other campers' shirts. We talked about how we all shared this amazing experience, and even though we were returning to school, we would have this memory for years to come.

They were given a final bead (a small bell that jingles) and I connected the story of the Polar Express and always believing to hearing the bell and remembering their time at Cispus. It was pretty sappy, but perfect for the moment.

We loaded the bus, said goodbye to camp, and embarked on our way home. As I drove a van, the teachers inside - some of whom were hesitant to originally go - gushed about the connections and kids, and we laughed while they shared pictures and told stories the entire way home. Unloading the bus at the school, we Bucket Brigaded all gear and lined up to face the waiting parents. We sang our camp song that everyone learned, "We're Climbing Up Sunshine Mountain" at the top of our lungs (many of our voices are gone at this point) and did all the crazy gestures that went with it.



Another team-building activity: dishes!



Plans are already afoot to return next year -- with even more students.

Hugs were given, tears were shared, and every adult shook my hand and thanked me - and I, in turn them - for making this an amazing experience. Even my administrator that came on Saturday spoke of the "magic" and is already thinking toward next year.

I think we are at the start of something good here. Time will tell over the next few weeks if we start to see a change with our kids, and possibly even our staff, but this was one for the books.

I've completed the first part of the post-experience survey, shared the data collection with staff members, and am setting up a shared folder for all staff and counselors to share videos and photos (several times requested!) I will begin financials tomorrow with the hopes of wrapping this up for the district in a timely manner, demonstrating that this is possible not only this year, but for many years to come.

Thank you to everyone who has been a part of this, supported this, and the work you are doing for schools, kids, and adults all over the state who are getting these absolutely magical experiences. I am grateful that you have shared in this experience with us. We hope to turn this into a yearlong curriculum and broaden our pool to every fifth grader in our school/district (9 classrooms).

Again, thank you. Looking back on everything it has taken to get here and have this experience, I've realized that it has been the highlight of my teaching career.