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Da Vinci Communications Aims High On Its First Day

By Rob Kuznia Staff Writer

It's one thing to break the ice on the first day of school by playing a name game or putting together a classroom jigsaw puzzle.

It's quite another to do so by tightrope-walking across a log 35 feet in the air, or by climbing to the top of a pole of the same height — and jumping off.

But then, the Da Vinci charter school franchise in Hawthorne prides itself on being different.

Instead of reporting to the classroom on their first day of school, ninth-graders at Da Vinci Communications — the brand-new addition to the group of schools — hopped on a bus that took them to Fulcrum Adventures, a ropes course nestled in the hills of Culver City Park.

“Da Vinci is all about taking chances,” said Kim Merritt, an English teacher. “To start that on Day One and have them conquer all their fears about taking chances ... it really gets them in the right mood.”

Da Vinci Communications, which currently consists of 64 freshmen, is the third high school to join the Da Vinci cluster.

Much in the same way Da Vinci Science and Da Vinci Design specialize in those respective disciplines, Da Vinci Communications will include courses in journalism, film and documentary production.



Freshmen from new Da Vinci Communications school in Hawthorne gathered at Culver City Park for team building rope climbing exercise.



Daily Breeze Staff Photo: Robert Casillas / LANG --- Freshmen from new Da Vinci Communications school in Hawthorne gathered at Culver City Park for team building rope climbing exercise. The new school will allow students to attend for five years. Students work their way up wall climb.

But the really unique aspect of the new school is how it will give students the option to sign up for a five-year plan. That means graduating at age 19 instead of 18. However, those students would leave Da Vinci with not only a high school diploma, but also a community college-level associate degree that enables them to transfer directly into the CSU or UC systems as juniors.

Details have yet to be fully ironed out, and the school has a couple of years to do so, as students won't begin taking college courses until their junior year. But the associate degree would be granted not by Da Vinci, but a partner college that has yet to be named.

Principal Nathan Barrymore said he believes only a small minority of the students will opt for the five-year plan.

"If a student is going to get into UCLA or Berkeley or some school they really want to go to — and the money works out — then of course we're going to send them to that school," he said, as students strapped on their harnesses.

In addition to navigating the "partnership balancing beam" and the "leadership leap of faith," as Fulcrum calls them, students and teachers scrambled up a 50-foot climbing wall and teetered across a tightrope wire.

Even though the participants were snugly fitted into rope harnesses controlled by Fulcrum employees on the ground, the safety precautions didn't ease the fear factor — especially in the beginning. One girl wept on her way up the ladder. One teacher, while perched atop the pole, refused to jump.

"Do I have to?" he said.

As the morning progressed, the participants grew more daring. Students climbing the ladders became less timid and more eager. They attempted difficult feats, such as crossing paths on the balancing beam.

"I was shaking," said Bryan Daniels, a Gardena resident. "I just took baby steps."

"I was taking big steps just to get done with it," quipped Joshua Barrantes of Lawndale.

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