

LITCHFIELD COUNTY

## Making The Leap

### *Forward-Thinking Summer Program For Region One Middle Schoolers*

2023 marked the second successful season of Region One's summer enrichment program for middle schoolers. With funding already secured for its 2024 season, this transformative initiative has been officially named the "Summer Mountaineer Experience."

The program unites students from the various middle schools within the district who will converge at the regional high school. It provides a combination of social-emotional learning and physical, academic, and creative activities all tied to the local community. Participants in the summer program have shown a higher level of engagement as they enter high school, joining athletic programs as well as arts and science extracurriculars.

One of the standout features of the program is the variety of activities offered, and students can select ones that align with their interests. Morning sessions include outdoor pursuits such as hiking, paddle boarding, canoeing, orienteering, rock climbing, and ropes courses, while afternoons are dedicated to agricultural education, STEM, yoga, and a range of creative endeavors, from flower-pressing to pottery.

The Summer Mountaineer Experience is entirely free for its attendees, and the program has become a vital resource for students who might not otherwise attend a summer program due to financial or transportation barriers. Generous grants from BTCF's Fund for the Northwest Corner cover the program's costs, while school bus transportation is provided at no charge through funding from the Jane and Dana Creel Fund.

Parent and student feedback underscores the program's effectiveness. Parents have noted its positive impact on their children's social needs, while students enthusiastically report having loads of fun and learning valuable lessons about themselves.

Program Director Barbara Hockstader noted, "In just two weeks, students built their summer community around the shared values of respect, fun, positivity, and inclusion. Students dared to reach out beyond their friend groups to make new friends from other schools. In tricky situations, they practiced talking, listening and accepting differing points of view. They created a magical sense of belonging." ■