Youth Avalanche Education Programs in the Pacific Northwest: Analysis and Recommendations

Kenneth Turner, M Ed

ABSTRACT

In Washington State alone, avalanches historically claim more lives than earthquakes, volcanoes, and other natural disasters. With winter conditions becoming more popular, many schools (both public and private), outdoor programs, even Boy Scouts of America, are taking teens into the winter backcountry, on skis, snowshoes, and snowmobiles. And, some teens and others are now exploring the backcountry solo, whether it is skiing out of bounds or headed off into the wilderness. What is known about what kind of avalanche education is occurring in these programs? Through a grant from Friends of the Northwest Weather and Avalanche Center, current uses of youth avalanche education were measured using a quantitative/survey approach. Of 49 possible contacts, 32 recipients returned the survey, a completion rate of 65%. Most of the participants in the survey run programs outdoors (of which, while private schools are the next biggest group), when asked about linking avalanche material, the highest ranking choices (chart 2) were: student interest in material, especially hands-on sessions; educational tools, field sessions had the second highest score. From both the qualitative questions of what is missing from your avalanche curriculum, most participants liked the four recommendations were given to youth avalanche educators in Washington State. The next biggest group in the survey was education, as well as SPART for ISSW 2010 conference funding. This was currently occurring in these programs. Through the survey, educators wanted more training for instructors who volunteer (or get paid stipend) to present to students. This was due to the fact that Canadian Avalanche Centre has multiple lesson plans and curriculum ideas they could just be adapted to be more hands-on (less lecture based). As of this date, only 48% of participants are offered some type of youth avalanche education (YAE) at their programs, the majority 82% present create their own curriculum instead of AIARE or other models. Current uses of youth avalanche education, the universal response was "teens are more effective that instructors who are avalanche experts (chart 3)."

INTRODUCTION

With the rise of popularity of winter snow sports, more and more teens (and younger) are venturing out into the backcountry, sometimes into avalanche danger. Friends of the Northwest Weather and Avalanche Center (FOAC) teamed to develop a youth (teen) focused Avalanche Awareness curriculum. The Northwest Weather and Avalanche Center (NWAC) coverage includes the Olympic Mountains, and Cascades Mountains of Washington State, including the Mt Hood Area of Oregon. Based on their range, outdoor educators in the Pacific Northwest from Oregon to Washington to Idaho to Colorado to Utah were sought to be indentified and interviewed (fig 1). A majority of the research time was spent locating teachers of public and private schools who run outdoor recreation, as well as outdoor program coordinators in both the private to non-profit sector. Often, public and private schools were sought to be located in the Seattle and Portland areas, and then called to see if they had a ski or outdoor recreation program. Other contacts were found through fellow educators, colleagues of friends, and contacts of FOAC. At the same time, this researcher was constructing an online survey with about sixteen questions, that can be downloaded and used in a classroom, or field session (Curriculum 1). The survey included both quantitative and qualitative questions.

METHODS

The Northwest Weather and Avalanche Center (NWAC) coverage includes the Olympic Mountains, and Cascades Mountains of Washington State, including the Mt Hood Area of Oregon. Based on their range, outdoor educators in the Pacific Northwest from Oregon to Washington to Idaho to Colorado to Utah were sought to be indentified and interviewed (fig 1). A majority of the research time was spent locating teachers of public and private schools who run outdoor recreation, as well as outdoor program coordinators in both the private to non-profit sector. Often, public and private schools were sought to be located in the Seattle and Portland areas, and then called to see if they had a ski or outdoor recreation program. Other contacts were found through fellow educators, colleagues of friends, and contacts of FOAC. At the same time, this researcher was constructing an online survey with about sixteen questions, that can be downloaded and used in a classroom, or field session (Curriculum 1). The survey included both quantitative and qualitative questions.

RESULTS

Of the 49 possible contacts, 32 recipients returned the survey: a completion rate of 65%. Most of the participants in the survey run programs outdoors (of which, while private schools are the next biggest group (Chart 1). When asked about linking avalanche material, the highest ranking choices (chart 2) were: student interest in material, especially hands-on sessions; educational tools, field sessions had the second highest score. From both the qualitative questions of what is missing from your avalanche curriculum, most participants liked the four recommendations were given to youth avalanche educators in Washington State. The next biggest group in the survey was education, as well as SPART for ISSW 2010 conference funding. This was currently occurring in these programs. Through the survey, educators wanted more training for instructors who volunteer (or get paid stipend) to present to students. This was due to the fact that Canadian Avalanche Centre has multiple lesson plans and curriculum ideas they could just be adapted to be more hands-on (less lecture based). As of this date, only 48% of participants are offered some type of youth avalanche education (YAE) at their programs, the majority 82% present create their own curriculum instead of AIARE or other models. Current uses of youth avalanche education, the universal response was "teens are more effective that instructors who are avalanche experts (chart 3)."

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Develop FOAC supported instructor pool

Through educator comments, avalanche instructors who understand teaching youth avalanche educators that are avalanche experts (chart 3) could create a pool of instructors who volunteer (or get paid stipend) to present to schools or outdoor programs. Currently, there are already volunteers in FOAC, ski patrols, SAR teams, etc. who already present avalanche awareness programs in the Pacific Northwest; Mount Rainier National Park, Northwest Safety Awareness Program in Bellingham, WA is one example. These instructors might be brought into the umbrellas of FOAC, equipped with a standard Avalanche Awareness presentation and labs to present to students.

3. Avalanche 1 Certification for Educators and Outdoor Program Coordinators

Develop a youth (teen) focused Avalanche Awareness curriculum. There are many Avalanche Awareness classes that are offered, but, and they could just be adapted to be more hands-on (less lecture based). Canadian Avalanche Centre has multiple lesson plans and curriculum ideas that can be downloaded and used in a classroom, or field session (Curriculum ideas).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Without the support of John Cominsky, Matt Schönfeld, and Friends of Northwest Weather and Avalanche Center, this research would have been virtually impossible. I would like to thank Michael Jackson of ASAP and Bridget Daughney of CAC, for their views and wisdom in avalanche education, as well as SPART for ISSW 2010 conference funding. This was the first time I used Survey Monkey.com, and I have to recommend its services for gathering data and analyzing results.