

# The Philadelphia Inquirer

## Teaching in Philly is tough. Some schools build community on the ropes course.

“I just want them to feel supported and welcomed and loved on,” one Philadelphia principal said. “This is hard work.”



*Teachers from Lewis Elkin Elementary School celebrate after completing the ropes course at the Philadelphia Outward Bound Discovery Center in Philadelphia.*

*Monica Herndon / Staff Photographer*

by Kristen A. Graham

Published Aug. 22, 2024, 1:33 p.m. ET

Helmet strapped onto his head, harness firmly in place, brand-new Philadelphia teacher Frank Bandy made his way carefully across a ropes course, shaking a little, but determined. Behind him, Gabriella Pacheco, also a new educator, moved with similar energy.

Later, Bandy, an incoming emotional support teacher at Elkin Elementary in Kensington, was philosophical: “If I can balance on a wire that’s 40 feet above the ground, what are these kids going to say that’s going to rattle me?”

In the lead-up to the first day of school for 113,000 Philadelphia students, thousands of educators returned to work this week to set up classrooms, learn the ins and outs of a new English curriculum, and, in some cases, calibrate their own strength and resilience and build bonds with one another through the Philadelphia Outward Bound School.



*Frank Bandy, a new teacher at Elkin Elementary, crosses the ropes course at the Philadelphia Outward Bound Discovery Center in Philadelphia. Photo: Philadelphia Outward Bound School*

Hundreds of Philadelphia teachers have completed ropes courses, taken nature walks, zip-lined, canoed and tackled ground-based challenges at the Philadelphia Outward Bound School's Discovery Center in the last two weeks. (The district in 2022 signed a \$1 million contract to send students and teachers chosen by schools and administrators to Outward Bound programs.)

Elkin teachers were among the educators that visited this week.

Principal Charlotte Gillum brought her administrative team to the Discovery Center in the spring, and then took teachers a few days before school began to experience what they found to be a valuable exercise in coming together. And as they wobbled across the course, Gillum did, too.

"I just want them to feel supported and welcomed and loved on," Gillum said. "This is hard work."

Bandy and Pacheco, who will teach first grade at Elkin, are brand-new to Philly, placed through Teach for America. (Bandy is from Texas and Pacheco from New Jersey.)

After a morning spent getting to know her colleagues in a very oh-hi-you're-intimidated-too kind of way, Pacheco said she felt energized.



*Teachers from Lewis Elkin Elementary School participate in team-building activities at the Philadelphia Outward Bound Discovery Center in Philadelphia before the start of the 2024-25 school year. Monica Herndon / Staff Photographer*

“Everyone has different strengths,” said Pacheco. Outward Bound gave her skills that she’ll be expecting her students to learn, too: “This was about learning how to encourage people that you don’t really know well yet. We want them to trust us and to be able to learn from us, and to feel encouraged by the things we tell them, right off the bat.”

Even Tessa Nitkin, Elkin’s math teacher leader and an eight-year veteran of the district, found the experience valuable.

Teaching is tough anywhere, and especially so in a high-needs school in a high-needs district. Sometimes, you make eye contact with a colleague across a chaotic cafeteria, and sometimes, you support a new peer struggling with a fear of heights on a ropes course, Nitkin said.

“It’s all about those ‘I got you’ moments,” she said. “We have to mentally be well for ourselves, too; as an educator, it’s the only way to survive.”

Mason Luksch Wilson, Elkin’s assistant principal, said he felt a little readier to take on the school year — new curriculum, new students in a dual-language school.

“It’s all great stuff, but it’s a lot,” said Luksch Wilson. “You are walking and chewing gum at the same time, and we need each other more than we know.”