Cipher Squad

Mission: the thief locked the mascot again behind a scrambled code, and guessing won't crack it. Win the games, decode the cipher on the whiteboard, whisper the password, open the box, free the mascot. Character trait today: **Responsible Decisions**.

1 · Secret Signals (5–16 min) — teach the code, then read it fast

Base code 1 clap = jump, 2 claps = spin, stomp = freeze, whistle = swap spots. Demo each twice, have them mirror you.

Silent stop saying the words, fire signals only in mixed order, faster. Miss it, sit one beat. Pause and ask what the last signal meant.

Kid leads a student invents a fifth signal, teaches it, runs the round. Reward reading the key before moving.

Diff TK–2: just two signals, say the word aloud, misses get a redo. 3–8: 6+ signals, combo signals (two in a row = both in order), speed rounds with elimination under a timer, a kid designs and leads their own code.

2 · Spies Across the Room (16–31 min) — A=1 number key, send words with fingers

Key A=1 B=2 C=3 D=4 E=5 F=6 G=7 H=8 I=9 J=10 K=11 L=12 M=13 N=14 O=15 P=16 Q=17 R=18 S=19 T=20 U=21 V=22 W=23 X=24 Y=25 Z=26. Keep it on the board.

Play Split each team in half across the room. Senders flash a short word letter by letter with fingers, decoders match the key and check the whole word before calling it, then swap jobs. Starters: CAT 3-1-20, DOG 4-15-7, SPY 19-16-25.

Diff TK–2: 2–3 letter words, letters under 10, coach helps count. 3–8: 4–5 letter words, a +1 shift cipher (bump every letter, decoders subtract 1), a timed head-to-head race (3 pts first, 1 pt second), older kids run the sending station.

3 · Crack the Cipher (31–45 min) — coded message on the board = the password

OPEN number key A=1: 15 · 16 · 5 · 14 = O-P-E-N. Post the key beside it so teams decode and check.

KEY number key A=1: 11 · 5 · 25 = K-E-Y. Three letters, straight lookup. Good for a first round or younger team.

Diff TK–2: short KEY message, coach counts the key together, blank line per letter. 3–8: 6-letter word with a mixed cipher (shift +1 AND reversed, undo both in order), beat-the-clock with a 15-sec wrong-guess penalty, teams write a coded message for rivals to crack.

4 · Finale + Wristband (45–60 min)

Open Winning team announces the password to the room, coach turns the key, mascot lifts out, big cheer. Optional "thief's note" inside: "You cracked my cipher. I surrender!"

Award the **Responsible Decisions** trait wristband to detectives who found the key and checked their answer before acting ("I matched it to the key", "I checked the word made sense").

3–8 For older kids and the two middle schools, run the whole hour competitive: fixed teams, score every game on the whiteboard, visible timer each round, crown a champion here. Games bank adds **Detective Mafia** (2–3 Culprits + a Detective, 5–7 min rounds) — the one middle schoolers ask to replay.

Detective's Oath (say together, magnifiers up): I am a detective. / My brain is my best tool. / I don't guess, I reason. / I follow the clues to the truth.