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Questions to Ask about Educational Travel

Graduates will need an understanding of other cultures and nations to succeed

By Nancy Reiter

As school boards strive to prepare graduates for an increasingly demanding society, one aspect of learning that can not be shortchanged is school-sponsored educational travel. Demands, whether financial or through state mandates, seem to grow for school systems each day; but if the value of travel is overlooked, we are shortchanging our students.

The simple fact is that our world is shrinking. Graduates will need an understanding of other cultures and nations to succeed.

More people are seeing that travel is essential to a complete education. Parents, in a recent national survey, said that they saw improvement in their adolescent's grades when they traveled. The hands-on, experiential learning that occurs through travel helps students fully understand and remember concepts, and travel opportunities motivate students to apply themselves in the classroom.

Yet, school systems that are contemplating providing school-sponsored educational travel must assure that their programs offer the best learning opportunities, are safe, can be administered effectively by school personnel, and will be rewarding for all involved. The key to achieving this is using a professional travel planner. In seeking the right tour operator, school systems should ask four key questions:

Does the planner have knowledge of and experience with the target audience?

As teachers and others in education know, teenagers can present specific needs when traveling in an educational setting. Today's students are of the video generation, and they are not likely to be enthusiastic about slow-paced learning activities. Rather, they want to be involved, challenged, and to wrap their hands and minds around activities.

Clearly, the same things that excite adults will not appeal to teens. So, school systems should focus on tour operators who spend the majority of their time with that younger audience. For example, members of the Student & Youth Travel Association (SYTA) do a significant amount of their business with middle and high school students.

Professional travel planners who have worked on numerous trips with middle and high school students understand the sites that provide the greatest learning potential in destinations such as Washington, D.C., New York, or Paris. They also are likely to have developed relationships with staff members at those institutions so that the most appropriate speakers are provided for the tour and special opportunities that appeal to teens may be opened.

That is one aspect of school-sponsored educational travel which makes it much more educationally valuable than a family trip. Parents may take their youngsters to see the Smithsonian's Air and Space Museum, but the relationships experienced travel planners have built with staff there can lead to "behind the scenes tours" not available to the typical family.

Does the planner know the safest locations to take students?

Just as tour operators who are experienced in working with adolescents have the best ideas of what will meet their learning needs, they also understand the standard rules that should be in place for safe travel and can advise teachers and trip leaders of what should be demanded of their students. For example, they will counsel schools to make sure students always travel in small groups if they are away from the larger group.

Experienced travel planners also will have relationships with hotel staff and can arrange safety precautions such as having the hotel provide security personnel on each floor where students are housed at night. And finally, travel planners who frequently take teenager groups to large cities know areas to avoid and others that will offer the best experience for students.

Is the planner committed to financial integrity?

There's nothing worse for a school or the individuals involved than paying money for a trip and then finding that financial commitments haven't been met by the operator who received the funds. While this happens infrequently, it could occur when schools do not use a professional tour operator.

One should assure that their travel planner is committed to financial integrity. School leaders can ascertain that by looking at whether the planner has a consumer protection plan, has professional and general liability insurance policies, and has provided travel services under the same ownership for at least three years.

In addition to these items, SYTA has numerous requirements that its members provide services to a certain number of students/youth and a minimum revenue each year. Also, it's always wise to check a tour operator's references.

Is the planner committed to ethical performance?

We would like to think that service providers in any enterprise always provide ethical service. Unfortunately, that's not always the case if a school district works with less than a professional tour operator. One way to ascertain whether your potential company is committed to ethical performance is asking whether it is a member of an association that requires adherence to a code of ethics.

For example, SYTA members must abide by a code that calls for truth in advertising, full disclosure, compliance with all laws, and a commitment to maintaining satisfied customers, among other items.

Today school-sponsored educational travel is essential if we are to prepare young people for their role in a global society. Effective travel can be a big plus to a student's learning, but school board members should demand that the best possible travel is provided—travel meets the learning needs of students and the expectations of educators and parents. The best way to assure that goal is through working with a proven, professional tour operator.

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