



Rising costs and other factors have pushed off-campus field trips to the brink of extinction. Are they worth preserving?

Naomi Dillon

Endangered Species?

Field trips—those off-campus excursions to museums, performing arts centers, and city halls—can spark curiosity and help students make connections to concepts they study in school. In some cases, it may be the first time students have been to these places.

Increasingly, however, these experiential learning opportunities are dwindling, falling prey to the budget ax that has sliced through discretionary spending in districts. According to a 2012 member survey by the American Association of School Administrators, 30 percent of respondents had already nixed field trips, while 43 percent indicated they would do so next year.

Rising and volatile fuel prices, along with stringent accountability measures, have it difficult for districts to plan field trips. This is true even in the face of research showing that, if planned and managed properly, field trips contribute to marked increases in student learning and engagement. They also offer relevant answers in ways traditional classroom instruction often doesn't or can't.

For educators, it comes down to this: Are field trips worth preserving?

Inside out

For Idaho Falls School District 91, the answer was a qualified yes. Like many districts, the 10,000-student school system in Idaho's southeast corner has enacted some pretty significant budget cuts over the last several years.

"We did a lot of consolidating of positions, reshuffling, and reorganizing and changes in how we do business in light of the realities," says Margaret Wimborne, the district's communications director.

The fact was that Idaho Falls could no longer afford to pay transportation costs, typically the largest expense associated with field trips. But the district didn't want to abandon them entirely.

"We really see the benefits of field trips," Wimborne says. "It's a way of enriching the curriculum, of opening [students'] eyes and imagination to different experiences in the world. We wanted to try to find a way to keep and maintain it for our students."

To do that, Idaho Falls launched an "adopt-a-field-trip" program three years ago, soliciting businesses, foundations, and individuals to help keep these opportunities alive.

"We've been overwhelmed by the response," Wimborne says, noting the program has given second-graders a chance to see the "The Nutcracker" and fourth-graders a chance to take part in *Rendezvous*, a celebration and reenactment of Idaho history, complete with "mountain men" and Shoshone tribe members.

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The program funds transportation costs for an entire grade level, which comes out to about \$800 to \$1,000 per trip, but there are some limitations. Most field trips occur within the district's confines and must support or tie into classroom instruction.

Several studies have noted that successful field trips really are a three-part venture that includes a pre-trip orientation, which is designed to build anticipation and familiarity with the upcoming destination. The last part, which occurs when students return to school, gives them a chance to reflect on what they learned.

Idaho Falls officials have learned throughout this experience that the community is always willing to step up and help when asked.

"It's just a matter of working closely together to make sure our children are getting the kinds of experiences they need to enrich their learning," Wimborne says.

Outside in

Sometimes help from outside organizations comes unbidden. For example, the Cosmosphere and Space Center in Kansas has long been a popular destination for youngsters. Boasting more than 15,000 artifacts, the Smithsonian-affiliated center tells the story of space exploration from World War II-era German rockets to the Cold War space race and beyond.

"It's pretty amazing," says Dianne Blick, the center's director of development. "Many people don't even know we're out here in the middle of the heartland."

Area schools and youth organizations certainly do. More than 1,500 kids descend on the center each year, especially during the summer for adventure and exploration camps. The Cosmosphere's field trip program once drew similar crowds—that is, until the economy slumped.

Since 2009, field trips to the space center have declined by 24 percent while financial aid requests from teachers increased. Again, the main barrier cited by schools was the transportation costs.

"We said, 'We've got to do something,'" says Blick, who ultimately created the Field Trip Fund, a matching grant program that committed \$25,000 from the Patty Carey Education Endowment. "It's what Patty would've wanted."

Carey, who died in 2003, was a vibrant and inquisitive woman with a serious case of wanderlust and a fascination with space. She wanted to encourage that curiosity among others. In 1962, she opened the Hutchinson Planetarium, a place she'd carved out in the chicken barn at the Kansas State Fairgrounds, where for 10 cents a pop, you could gaze through a used star projector she purchased with help from friends and supporters.

"She thought kids should be able to see the sky, and she was going to make it happen," Blick says. "To this day, there are some people who still have the image of seeing the stars out of a chicken barn in their head."

Today, the 105,000 square foot planetarium is one of the

largest aerospace centers in the world, inducing even more awe and wonder among its spectators. It is one of several attractions at the Cosmosphere.

"I walk out and I see the 'aha' moment on these kids' faces," Blick says. "Kids are able to understand it because the way we tell it makes sense."

Fortunately, safeguarding these experiences for students also made a lot of sense to donors, who have already pitched in about \$24,000, enabling more than 2,100 kids and 32 schools to take field trips to the Cosmosphere, which temporarily dropped its admission prices.

"We had dollars coming all the way from Maryland, from Singapore. This wasn't just the local community," Blick says. "This was a global effort."

Big picture

In many cases, the fate of field trips often comes down to the efforts of a few industrious individuals. Louise Morgan certainly qualifies.

A second-grade teacher at Sycamore Elementary School in Fort Worth, Texas, Morgan also runs the Frugal Teacher blog, where she shares tips, ideas, and all manner of things she's learned in her quest to be more productive, effective, and creative.

Recently, Morgan took the school's entire second-grade class to the Fort Worth Museum of Science and History, thanks to a field trip grant she won through retail giant Target. After perusing Target's corporate website, she also applied for and secured an arts and education grant that allowed her to bring a children's book author to the school. A third grant, from the local Sid Richardson Foundation, helped support a schoolwide trip to see a live production of the "Chronicles of Narnia."

Other schools asked, "How'd you get to go on two field trips?" Morgan recalls with a chuckle. "We could never have afforded to do this kind of stuff."

Fort Worth's district-funded field trips stopped five years ago. Sycamore serves a severely impoverished population—90 percent of students qualify for free and reduced-price lunch—so Morgan says they don't ask parents to fill the gap.

"Many of our kids show up without school supplies," Morgan says. "We can't ask people who don't have anything to spare to give more."

It takes time and energy, but many programs and organizations can and will support experiential learning opportunities, she says. This especially applies to underprivileged students.

"When we went to the museum, I would say less than half of them had never been there before. They had no idea," Morgan says. "So many kids have no world experience. It's just their neighborhood, their home, and the TV. Trips like these give them a broader view of the world." ■

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