



## ASHBROOK INDEPENDENT SCHOOL

*To Challenge and Nurture Academically Capable Students*

*From the Office of the Head of School, Dr. Christopher A. Schoberl*

### **Is it Monday Yet, 4/28/23**



### **Electives, and Field Trips, and Guest Speakers, Oh my!**

I have been writing this installment of IIMY? from the passenger seat of a van driven by either Big Foot super fan Mr. Olson or the Red Vines powered Mr. Hunt, traveling with 16 Explorers, as well as Ms. Duitsman and Ms. Weber, on our way to Seattle on the much anticipated 8th Grade Trip. This annual field trip has been hosted by Ashbrook for 20 years. The 8th Grade Trip is about the 15th Explorer field trip of the year, and we'll see at least 5 more before the year is out.

Prompted by all this student travel, questions I have been asked this year include,

- Doc, why do we take field trips?
- Compared to the work they require to plan and execute, aren't there strong in-school alternatives such as simulations or guest speakers we could do instead?
- Wouldn't it be better if we just stayed in school and focused on academics?
- We can take our kids on trips ourselves... why are we wasting school time taking them on similar trips?

Of course, these questions are very reasonable, and have been posed by parents at every school in the country. Indeed, questions similar to these have prompted my own thinking about the role of field trips at every school I've worked for.

In my own experience, field trips are much more than a standard part of schooling; they are, in fact, an essential part of a program that endeavors to nurture and challenge

academically capable students. A trained educator who has thoughtfully designed a field trip, provides students with unique “extended classroom” opportunities to learn and experience life in ways that are not possible in a classroom. By their very nature, these trips have a much different goal when compared to the typical family trip. In addition to the intentional benefits of these educator designed/educator delivered, *curricularly* timed trips, there are the incidental benefits to students from getting to know teachers in a context outside the norm and where, from time to time, they are both learners, or from living in close quarters with classmates, some of whom they may not know all that well, at least at the start of the trip.

Of course, there is a cost to these experiences, in terms of tickets for travel or event entry, wear and tear on teacher and parent chaperones, and the expense of substitute teachers, to say nothing of the time-cost that it takes to plan them while teachers are also working hard to deliver awesome classroom experiences. Given the benefits and challenges associated with pulling off a great field trip, it’s easy to find people who feel strongly on both sides of the topic. That said, I imagine it wouldn’t be difficult to find people in both camps who would agree that a school with a “no field trip policy,” has probably tossed out the baby with the bathwater.

Historically, the idea of *education* as separate from *schooling*, was an idea first put forth during the Progressive Movement of the early 20th century. The Progressives, led by Dr. John Dewey, believed that experiences were more important than didactic (what they saw as) “empty vessel” teaching (particularly in large public school systems designed, at least in part, to churn out employable graduates. The Progressives gave us such phrases as “learn by doing” and terms we still use today to describe best practice methods in teaching such as, “experiential learning,” and “authentic assessment.” And they championed methods that ask students to demonstrate understanding by applying what they learned in novel problem solving scenarios. It is easy to connect the dots between these ideas and the birth of the school field trip, and to see how Progressive thinking, thinking that valued...

- cross disciplinary curriculum based on themes,
- focus on problem solving and critical thinking skills,
- cooperative learning and social skill development through collaboration,
- learning about social responsibility/ democracy via community service,
- learning content geared towards skills needed in future markets,
- reduced reliance on textbooks vs more varied learning resources, and
- assessment by evaluation of hands on projects,

... was so well suited to experiences that could be provided only by getting outside “the cells and bells,” as traditional schooling was often called (how could Miss Frizzle and her Magic School Bus be wrong?).

According to the Progressives, the ideal classroom was a museum in which a single passionate adult led small groups of children through a course of study driven to some degree by their curiosity, giving birth to the idea that off campus, outside the classroom experiences could add value to or complement the student experience inside the classroom. Of course, as with all topics, striking a deliberate balance between extremes, in this case the classroom and the field as two very different instructional environments, is the healthiest, most productive, and most sustainable way to step forward.

While school field trips often include visits to museums, field trips that complement the material students are covering in their classes through visits to historical sites, nature reserves, cultural centers, or any other place that is relevant to the subject being studied, provide students with a variety of ways to connect to classroom lessons. This instructional benefit of field trips cannot be overstated, particularly for non-traditional learners and especially in terms of the positive impact these off campus trips have on school satisfaction and academic success.

One of the most significant benefits of field trips is that they allow students to make real-world connections to what they are learning in class. For example, visiting a museum can help students understand and better appreciate historical events, artifacts, and artwork, particularly if the trip is not *officially concluded* until after a post trip debrief and reflection BACK in the classroom. Such trips also provide students with an opportunity to experience things that cannot be replicated in a classroom, such as observing live animals in their natural habitats, interacting with different cultures, or conducting scientific experiments in real-time.

Research has also shown that field trips improve school satisfaction for students. A study published in the Journal of Educational Psychology found that students who participated in a field trip reported higher levels of satisfaction with their school experience than those who did not. This increase in school satisfaction can lead to better attendance, increased engagement in learning, a discovered passion or interest, and a more positive attitude towards school in general.

Moreover, field trips have been found to contribute to students' academic success. According to a report by the U.S. Department of Education, students who participated in educational field trips demonstrated significant gains in critical thinking, historical empathy, and tolerance. Another study published in the Journal of Research in Science Teaching found that students who participated in a field trip to a science museum showed an increased ability to recall scientific information and demonstrated a greater interest in, and understanding of, the science content they were studying AND related content (what is referred to as transfer of knowledge) not directly studied.

In addition to intended academic benefits, field trips can also help students develop important life skills and social skills, such as communication, problem-solving, and decision-making. When students are exposed to new and unfamiliar situations outside the classroom, they must navigate and adapt to these situations, which helps to develop these skills (certainly a significant goal of the eighth grade trip!).

Ultimately, the primary goal of the thoughtfully designed field trip is to extend the learning students are doing in their classrooms, to complement this study with experiences they cannot have while on campus (beyond simulations or virtual visits, for example), and to deliver this in a manner that is inherently fun and even playful. This latter purpose, suggesting the trivial or the less than serious to the uninitiated, is what sometimes gives field trips a bad reputation. In fact, research has demonstrated way beyond the shadow of a doubt that joy, fun, and play in an educational setting (again, keeping balance in mind), are force multipliers, not zero sum adversaries to learning or growth.