

Field Trips: Yay or Nay?

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Field trip. Two words that can leave a little kid bouncing, a high school teacher frowning, a parent wondering and a student questioning. Field trips in elementary and middle school usually involve the entire grade for a fun day out at a museum, apple orchard or historical site. While a large endeavor for a teacher to plan, a field trip often causes little controversy. However, when a field trip in high school causes students to miss days of school, it can create a problem.

Field trips in high school provide amazing opportunities, but it is difficult, even for the most conscientious students, to catch up when they miss class lectures and work. I began thinking about this topic extensively as I am faced with the decision of going on a field trip in April to New York City with the high school band to compete at a festival and visit some tourist attractions. I would miss three days of school, right before Advanced Placement (AP) exams. I sought out teachers, administrators and parents to ask them about the pros and cons of field trips that cause students to miss school, and surprisingly found the topic more controversial than expected.

The Pros

Principal St. Coeur began the "pros" of field trips by stating, "Learning about the community and the greater world through experience is vital. I am a big supporter of hands-on learning, and field trips can provide that real-life experience."

Similarly, AP U.S. history teacher Mrs. Twomey described how students would remember course material better and feel more personally connected with it if they experience it first-hand at a historical site.

Mr. Maule, an Ashland High School (AHS) band teacher, who runs a field trip and is a big proponent of them, made a strong case, as well. He explained how field trips give students the opportunity to travel where they might not be able to go with their family and provide the room to explore the cultural and historical significance of lessons. He made the point that, "There is more to

education and learning than simply sitting in a building and listening to a lecture, doing worksheets, taking tests, and writing essays," because "feeling, touching, holding, seeing, hearing, interacting . . . all have educational benefits." In his mind, field trips do not just reap academic benefits. The sense of camaraderie of exploring an unknown place together is important for the growth of interpersonal and social interactions between students. The experience also improves students' ability to interact with people in environments different from a school setting. He described how, "[meeting and working] with people who may be less fortunate has rewards that are immeasurable, and create lifelong memories that will impact students in all they do, say, and think."

A parent and long-time Ashland resident Maria Wheeler said that field trips allow for a free day for students away from stress, which still involves learning. Wheeler loves the aspect of promoting happiness, passion and helping others when students "go on an adventure."

The Cons

The obvious "con" is missing school and other work. Class lectures always bring additional insight from any textbook, reading or lesson, and participating in discussion is vital to understanding the deeper level of subjects. Mrs. Twomey explained, "Field trips are beneficial to some extent, but to the point it is detracting to their learning is not okay."

Maria Wheeler also added that it is a lot of work and stress for students to catch up, so it might not be a good option if a student feels unsure about that aspect. There is also the financial burden to consider since field trips are very expensive and draining towards a family.

Now it comes time to make

the decision. Math teacher and AHS Ambassadors advisor Mrs. Jost questioned, "For the kids who don't go, are they now at a disadvantage? And if they aren't, then what is the purpose of the trip?" It is a dark and vicious cycle, so I asked people what their criteria would be when deciding to go on a trip or not. Dean of Students (2017 and 2019) Mrs. Carreiro vocalized, it is important to "balance and consider what [one] would be missing and gaining from the experience . . . understanding what the benefit of the field trip is extremely important and defined differently for everyone."

Science department liaison and AP Chemistry teacher Mrs. Sherman has very simple criteria: students must be capable of understanding missed instruction and still have success in the course. The consensus is that students must have good communication with their teachers, be highly motivated, organized, responsible, proactive, and be capable of self-learning. Teachers are willing to work with students if they show maturity and commitment towards both school and the endeavor they are participating in. Factoring in other major absences in the same academic year and grades are quite relevant, as well. Lastly, Mrs. Jost uses the questions "[Does going on the trip] make a difference in the material [one needs] to understand for that class [providing the trip]?" and "Is the value worth missing other classes? Would I leave college this often, would I leave my job this often?"

Many teachers try to make the choice about whether to go easier. Mrs. Graham tries to go on field trips at the end of the year, after AP exams and MCAS are administered, to lessen the strain and impact on students. Mrs. Twomey describes how academic field trips are less optional,

due to the relevance in the course, and "The bigger question is how often students should be out of the classroom for non-academic field trips, such as leadership conferences." On that point, Mrs. Jost wondered, "Could the trip be done outside of the school day?" It makes teachers question if students are going to miss school or the actual opportunity and if they would still go if they need to give up a bit of their weekend or vacation. Maria Wheeler believes that sometimes due to a time constraint, schools try to skim over all the experiences on a trip, while going on a family trip students can experience it in more depth and it may be more beneficial.

I have found this to be an interesting debate, and I am still unsure on where I stand since each case is different. At the end of the day, I have decided not to go on the band trip in April due to a variety of academic and financial reasons, along with commitments to other conferences. It is a fact that field trips are difficult to coordinate and plan, so thank you to all the teachers who go the extra mile and provide these opportunities for students. Also, a huge thank you to everyone who voiced their opinion and helped contribute to this article. For more about the world through my eyes, keep reading my monthly column :)

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