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School fields trips turn to virtual, digital technology

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When Nina Corley, a high school history teacher in Galveston, Texas, prepares her students for a field trip, more often than not these days she sets up a large monitor in the front of her classroom and dials in to a live broadcast that is brought directly to the screen.

In November, Corley's students virtually explored the late 1700's to learn about the French and Indian War. This month, they will be learning about 18th Century music while playing "Colonial Idol" through the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation's Emmy Award-Winning Electronic Field Trip Series.

After about two hours of virtual tours of the Virginia-based museum's historical content, students are given the opportunity to ask questions of experts in a session brought to them by Colonial Williamsburg's live dial-in service.

With tight testing requirements implemented by No Child Left Behind, budget cuts and the increased prominence of technology, school field trips are not what they used to be, school administrators say. Both national museums and school districts are adapting to the transformation .

For some, that means providing sophisticated digital experiences. For others, it means finding ways for physical trips to still make sense. "Field trips are absolutely suffering," said Mike Caspar, Senior Policy Analyst at the National Education Association, "We are seeing it more and more, especially with the financial crisis and budget cuts. Students who need field trips the most aren't getting them. To me, that's the exact opposite of what needs to be happening."

Neil Mulholland, President and CEO of the National Park Foundation, a national charitable partner to the National Park Service that supports America's national parks, blames the decline of the "simple field trip" on lack of money.

"We have buses sitting in school yards all day long. There's not enough money to pay for the driver, the chaperone, the bus that is sitting there to take the kids out into the field, making field trips a big challenge," he said.

The solution, Mulholland says, is, "Providing that incremental funding to get kids out of the classroom and get them where they can experience what they're learning."

In an effort to execute this solution, the National Park Foundation created "Ticket to Ride" last October, a program that provides transportation and lunch for students to experience a field trip at one of the Foundations' 400 parks for a lower cost. The program had a goal starting point of 100,000 kids and \$50,000 allotted to the program. So far, it has brought roughly 40,000 students to their parks, Mulholland said..

"We are really proud of this model," he said, "We are happy to get kids into the parks and in a setting where they can learn outside the classroom."

Despite efforts like this, Mulholland said "the demand far outweighs what we have been able to do."

"The teachers are reporting back that kids are so tethered to technology," he said. "Play-space learning and experience-based learning are so important in this day and age, we want to do our best to keep that type of learning alive."

The convenience and cost efficient benefits of virtual field trips are hard to deny, according to Corley, who is an advocate for the use of virtual field trips in her classroom.

Several museums have made lesson plans and tours available online, she said. The reason for virtual field trips, however, is not always directly linked to budget cuts, but also geographic barriers and the advanced nature of the Internet, according to Jim Bradley, Director of Communications at Colonial Williamsburg.

"An on-site field trip generally almost always has a very specific educational objective," Bradley said. "The electronic field trips have a broader educational objective that has been tuned to satisfy universal standards of learning throughout all of the states, as opposed to a particular educational objective by one school that comes to visit us."

Corley, who has 25 years of teaching experience, has been using Colonial Williamsburg's electronic field trips in her classroom for more than a decade.

"They [students] are able to watch what's going on, ask follow-up questions and play games all in one sitting. It really gets them involved," she said.

Corley agrees an on-site field trip is equally, if not more important than a virtual experience. However, it is not always practical or cost-efficient.

"Of course I would rather physically take my students on the field trip," she said. "However, it's not always an option. The cost of gas and limitations in the classroom because of budgets makes it extremely difficult, not to mention the geographic barrier as well."

The American Museum of Natural History in New York City, which saw a decline in their visits to the museum starting in 2000, has tailored on-site field trips to directly correlate to school testing as well as the federal and state initiatives regarding education, according to Anne Canty, Senior Vice President of Communications. The museum has worked carefully with teachers and administrators to ensure that the trips are relevant to the work that needs to be done in the classroom, according to Canty.

"We make sure that the field trips correspond to state standards, which has been very help for students, teachers and the museum," Canty said.

The museum implemented a program called "Urban Advantage" about 10 years ago, which works with middle school teachers and classes. The program provides professional development for teachers, helping them understand the museum when they bring their students on a field trip. The program also provides educational guides and resources for teachers to share with their students.

According to a 2011 study conducted by New York University, school districts whose teachers and students that participated in the Urban Advantage program have scored significantly higher on science exit exams.

"I've seen a lot of changes, but don't necessarily think that field trips are dead," Canty said, "I think that they are continuing to change. The best type of field trip is one that intertwines technology and the physical experience."



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