

Guest Viewpoint: Student travel offers many educational benefits

By Michael Palmer

9/23/03 -- As school systems wrestle with budget constraints, demands of high-stakes testing, and requirements imposed by the federal and state governments, we must ask whether all schools are providing all of America's children with a complete education.

There is no doubt that our young people need to be skilled in core subjects. But they also must be prepared for the increasingly complex world they will experience after graduation.

It is a world that demands an understanding of other people and cultures; the ability to work in a team structure; and critical thinking, oral communication, and decision-making skills. Our students deserve an education that will not only provide skills in math and reading, but one that will equip them to meet the challenges of a demanding global society.

For years, young people have had the opportunity to learn and practice some of these important skills through educational travel programs offered by their schools. Whether observing national landmarks or visiting other nations, travel can motivate students and expand their learning opportunities.

Here are a few of the benefits of student travel:

- **Educational travel brings history to life.**

History is so much more than the words appearing in textbooks. The American past is filled with unique individuals who had exciting stories to tell. Their clothing, food, occupations, recreational activities, and personal challenges all contribute to our knowledge of the past and help make history come alive.

A skilled teacher can inspire students. But a trip to the roots of our colonial heritage -- to such places as Williamsburg or Monticello -- allow students of today to see first-hand what made our forefathers who they were.

- **Educational travel gives depth to civics lessons.**

One of the frequent criticisms of young people and the American population as a whole is their lack of involvement in the governing process. Schools can set the foundation for voting in national elections and participating in the democratic process.

Yet, memorizing a chart about how a proposed bill becomes law doesn't excite many young people.

When students visit the nation's capitol and see legislation debated on the floor of Congress, meet with a lobbyist to understand how he or she represents the views of a segment of the population, and hear how lawmakers dicker with each other to gain support for bills, they see the real face of government. They get an accurate picture of civics that is difficult to present in a classroom.

- **Educational travel builds the foundation that will allow our students to succeed in a global society.**

The globe is shrinking today as never before. When students in today's schools graduate from college, they are more likely than ever to be working in a global community.

They will need to understand the language, customs, geography, business climate, and habits of other nations.

Certainly, some of this can be learned in the classroom.

But what better way to truly understand the culture and habits of people from another country than to live in their homes for a week? What better way to learn their language than to speak it during a two-week tour of their nation? Is there a more effective way to start building an understanding of their business climate than to see how their stock exchange operates or speak with businesspeople of that country?

- **Travel completes the learning experience for students involved in the performing arts.**

Music students can work hard all year in their classrooms, but they don't benefit from the complete learning experience without travel. Going to band, orchestra, and chorus competitions, clinics, and exchange programs with other schools' music departments gives music students the opportunity to learn how to perform. These trips also help them build pride in their performances and give them an incentive to work harder.

- **Many times a travel experience is the spark that "turns on" an unmotivated student.**

No one is arguing that school board members adopt policies that replace instruction in mathematics and language arts with travel. But it makes sense to also provide educational travel opportunities to bring life to classroom lessons.

Frankly, we have seen under-motivated students work harder and improve their academic performance after a travel experience. The values of student travel are numerous, and educational travel is part of a complete education.

Yet there are questions that come into the minds of school board members when they consider student travel. Are these programs reputable? Should we take certain steps to ensure that travel is safe for the students who are our responsibility? Are there potential problems that can be overcome through advance planning? School districts can minimize these problems by investing time in studying travel options.

Congress passed a resolution this year, saying in part, "Travel is a vital component of the educational experience for Americans of all ages." It clearly is part of a total education for our students as schools prepare them to compete and succeed in an ever-changing world. *Michael Palmer is executive director of the Student & Youth Travel Association of North America.*

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