



field trip safety

in K-12 and higher education

Field trips offer inspiring opportunities for students to see theory in practice and participate in student organization competitions. They also include increased hazards and consequential risks that require special attention to safety planning and supervision!

Field trips, such as visits to industries and companies, can provide students with stimulating experiences to broaden their perspectives about STEM topics and professions (Post & Walma van der Molen, 2014). These trips can be fun and inspiring, allowing students to see classroom concepts in practice. However, there are also hazards and consequential risks as well as the potential for increased liability involved with supervising students outside of the classroom. Teachers must be cognizant about strategies to mitigate these risks prior to planning a field trip.

Teachers must first understand what constitutes a “field trip.” Field trips are defined as any activity that occurs outside of the instructor’s assigned classroom or lab (Roy, 2016). It could occur on school property when students are in another part of the building conducting an activity for a course during regularly scheduled class time (e.g., testing a drone in the school gymnasium) or when students are outside testing a design solution as a class (e.g., rocketry

launch). It is important to remember that students assigned to your class are your responsibility under duty or standard of care. It does not matter whether it is during scheduled class time on school grounds or during an all-day visit to a local company. During field trip planning, supervising, and debriefing, several precautions should be considered to limit liability, including negligence or recklessness. The following recommendations were derived from a number of sources (Dragan, 2015; NSTA, 2015; Roy, 2011, 2014, 2015, 2016).

Preparation

Know Your Legal Responsibilities. School systems and instructors have an equal duty to protect children when participating in a class activity whether they are on or off school grounds (Dragan, 2015). Moreover, negligence requires proof of all of the following four elements as explained by Roy and Love (2017):

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1. A duty of care existed to protect the student from foreseeable harm (e.g., if a student is enrolled in your class or under your supervision on a field trip, you have a duty to protect that student).
2. Reasonable care was not exercised, therefore breaching the aforementioned duty.
3. The breach of duty was the proximate cause of the incident.
4. Physical or monetary damages were the direct result of the incident.

A school system and instructor's best defense against negligence or recklessness is to prove that one or more of the aforementioned elements are not applicable to the incident. Better professional practice suggests that school systems and instructors actively monitor for dangerous conditions on field trips, and when noticed they (1) stop the field trip activity immediately, or (2) if the risk of an accident occurring is deemed minimal, they must warn students about the hazard and provide extra supervision and assistance (Dragan, 2015).

Know Your School and State Policies. It is critical to understand the school system's policies regarding field trip protocol. These policies are usually approved by the district's legal counsel who ensures they align with any state field trip policies (e.g., California Education Code EDC § 35330-35332).

Conduct a Pre-Trip Visit. The instructor or a school representative should visit the field trip site prior to the activity. This helps determine if there are any health and safety hazards that need to be taken into consideration, what instruments and personal protective equipment (PPE) will be required, and how to best plan for activities such as bathroom breaks and lunch. During this

visit it is important to meet with a representative from the facility to review all policies and safety procedures. For any areas labeled as private property, be sure to either obtain permission for use or communicate to students that these areas are off limits. All policies and expectations should be clearly communicated in writing to students, parents/guardians, and supervising instructors/chaperones prior to the field trip.

Determine the Appropriate Group Size. The size of a group participating in a field trip can be influenced by many factors. When determining appropriate group sizes, consider the size of the overall group, student age range, student disabilities or behavioral issues, and the hazards related to the activity (Dragan, 2015). Check the school system's chaperone-to-student ratio. The field trip site may have stricter policies for safety

reasons, so be sure to abide by their policies as well. Roy (2011) suggested a chaperone-to-student ratio of 1:10; however, if there are students with disabilities involved, he suggested a ratio of 1:5 or 1:1 depending on the level of supervision needed. The number of students and busses your school system allows may be dictated by an annual field trip budget. After conducting the pre-trip visit, the instructor should determine the optimum group(s) size for the safest learning experience that also addresses learning outcomes and follows all policies. When possible, multiple trips with small group sizes can provide a safer and more focused learning experience.

Establish Learning Outcomes and Student Expectations. Instructors should develop learning outcomes to demonstrate the educational value of the field trip to administrators, students, and parents/guardians. Providing learning outcomes, well-planned agendas, meaningful assignments for students to complete before and during the field trip, and clear behavior expectations with consequences can help limit mischievous behavior that leads to unsafe conditions. Make sure there is a written policy and action plan in case a student needs to be removed from the field trip as a result of failing to follow clearly communicated behavioral expectations. It should be clear that students are expected to report any incident to the teacher immediately so necessary help can be provided.

Obtain Signed Acknowledgement Forms. See if the school system has a preapproved field trip acknowledgement form. Written permission for a child to participate in a field trip should not be mistaken as a waiver of liability (NSTA, 2015). Even with a signed acknowledgement form, teachers/chaperones still have legal responsibilities as described previously. It is recommended that teachers provide a supplementary document outlining the

educational value of the trip; potential hazards and consequential risks involved; the itinerary; preparation for weather conditions; appropriate attire, meal, and transportation plans; and any other pertinent information for parents/guardians. All teacher-created documents should have administration approval prior to dispersal. Furthermore, instructors should keep these forms until the end of the school year, unless there was an incident, in which case they should be kept on file according to the state's statute of limitations (in some states it's when the student reaches age 18, in others it's when they reach 21).

Providing Accommodations. It is important to work with your school system to provide equal opportunities for all students to participate in field trips pending safety risks presented for each student. There have been a number of lawsuits challenging the equity of field trips; therefore, teachers should work with their school system to provide reasonable accommodations for all students to participate. This could involve modified, but similar, activities on the trip to protect the student's safety, and it could require additional chaperones. If a student has an aide or paraprofessional during the school day, they should also have one with them on the trip (Dragan, 2015).

First Aid Considerations. At least one adult on the trip should be trained in first aid procedures. A fully stocked first aid kit should be included on each bus and carried with the group during the visit. Emergency medical information forms must be collected for all students, teachers, and chaperones on the trip. One copy of these forms should remain with the school nurse or an administrator, and another copy should accompany the supervising instructor/chaperone at all times. Check with your school system regarding what student medical information can be shared with the chaperones, and what information is privy to the teacher. If there are any allergies, items such as EpiPens and inhalers provided by the parent/guardian and marked with the student's name should accompany the first aid kit. Written permission and directions from parents/guardians are required if the supervising teacher will be expected to provide medication to specific students. Students requiring special medical attention should be accompanied by a parent/guardian or person with appropriate medical training who is not assigned to supervise any other students.

Communicate with Chaperones. Teachers should meet the chaperones in advance and communicate all expectations for those involved in the trip. Important medical, emergency, and communication strategies should be provided at this time. Ensure an appropriate ratio of male and female chaperones to accommodate the students (e.g., bathroom or locker room supervision). Instructors should also ensure all chaperones have obtained the clearances required by their school system prior to the trip.

Providing Transportation. Instructors and chaperones should not transport students in personal vehicles. Even with written permission to do so, the driver may not be immune from accident liability. School/university transportation services should be utilized, or if students are old enough to drive, they can be provided directions to the destination. Documenting arrival and departure time of student drivers is good practice. If minors (under 18 in most states) wish to ride with a specific student driver or the parent of a friend, written permission from those students' parents/guardians must be obtained. When using school or university transportation services, at least one adult should be present in the bus or van for supervisory purposes.

Create an Inventory Sheet. Inventory sheets help to ensure critical items are not forgotten on departure or return from field trips. These can also be used to delegate responsibilities to other supervising adults.

During the Field Trip

Supervision. Regarding supervision, special attention is required for trips off-campus, overnight, or involving younger students. Each of these pose increased risks that must be accounted for while planning and supervising. Prior to departure, the instructor should provide the following items to all instructors/chaperones: an itinerary, student roster, list of instructor/chaperone mobile phone numbers, important emergency procedures, and any critical medical information allowed to be shared (e.g., allergies).

The cardinal rule of field trip supervision is to ensure that students are always in sight of chaperones (Dragan, 2015). Each student should be assigned to a supervising instructor or chaperone. During the visit, adults should be placed at the front and back of the group. If there is only one adult supervising the group, they should try to remain in the back to keep all students in their line of sight. Instructors should communicate which areas are off limits and maintain close supervision. Participants should avoid taking any artifacts or items from the site unless granted permission by the facility's personnel. All trash and belongings should be removed appropriately.

When supervising students who are legal adults, it is still important to be aware of their whereabouts and prevent facilitating dangerous situations (e.g., separate hotel rooms for female and male students, curfew checks, etc.). Increased liability comes into play when supervising students who are of legal age to purchase items like tobacco or alcohol. Although of legal age to purchase these items, school/university rules may prohibit them at academic activities, including field trips. Instructors should emphasize such school and university policies to students prior to any trip so they are aware of the standard to which they will be held. School and university standards regarding conduct also apply to instructors and chaperones. There have been lawsuits where in-



structors/chaperones were found negligent or reckless because they did not conduct themselves appropriately, consequently allowing an unsafe condition to exist. In certain cases, they were not present to address the situation they were responsible for supervising, and in other cases they were not in the appropriate condition to reasonably address the situation.

Institute the Buddy System. Students should be paired with other students in their groups. This can quickly help account for missing students. Upon arrival at the site and prior to splitting up, a rendezvous location should be determined in the event anyone becomes separated. Taking roll throughout the day helps to account for students and identify anyone missing in a timelier manner.

Accounting for Outdoor Elements. Pending the type of field trip experience, students should be prepared for excessive sun exposure, wet/slippery conditions, and other environmental hazards (e.g., poisonous plants, wasps, ticks, etc.) that should be noted in the documentation sent to parents/guardians prior to the trip. Students and instructors/chaperones should plan accordingly (e.g., bringing sunscreen, insect repellent, a change of clothes, etc.). Instructors should review this information with students prior to the trip by showing them pictures of potentially hazardous items and indicating any site areas that should be avoided.

Eliminating Trip/Slip/Fall Hazards. Instructors and chaperones have a duty to warn students of any noticeable trip/slip/fall

hazards and either: (1) eliminate these hazards, or (2) provide increased supervision to make sure students do not sustain an injury from these hazards. Students working near or in deep water* require the use of life preservers or flotation devices. (*Deep water should be determined by the height at which the shortest student could stand without drowning.)

Addressing Accidents and Medical Issues. As described previously, all medical forms should be kept with the lead instructor. Obtain prior permission and directions from parents/guardians if medication is to be administered to specific students. In the event of an emergency, the instructor/chaperone should have the contact information for the medical staff on site readily available. For minor issues the school nurse can be consulted via phone, but severe issues should be addressed by medical trained personal on-site or by calling 911.

Avoid Hazardous Chemical Exposure Sources. During industry visits or outdoor trips there are various biological, chemical, and physical hazards to which students could be exposed (Roy & Love, 2017). It is important to identify these in conjunction with the facility supervisor prior to the visit. Determining the appropriate PPE and procedures to limit exposure to these items is critical. Examples include avoiding areas that were recently treated with pesticides or ensuring that students visiting a manufacturing facility wear the same PPE (hard hat, ear plugs, safety glasses/goggles, hard-soled footwear, etc.) required by law for the employees.

Enforce Hand Washing. Students will be exposed to hazards and germs. It is essential that they wash their hands or use hand sanitizer after activities involving hazardous materials, especially before consuming anything.

After the Field Trip

Contacting Administrators or Parents. After a field trip it's good practice (and sometimes required) to provide a summary for your administrator. Administration should be contacted immediately with significant incidents to allow them to work with you and the school's legal counsel to properly address the issue. It is recommended that you contact your school administrator first to make them aware of the situation and see how they would like to communicate it to the parents/guardians. An exception to this would be a medical condition requiring contacting parents/guardians immediately to obtain additional information needed to help the student. Another exception would be contacting parents/guardians to indicate there was an incident, and their child is being transported to the emergency room. Instructors must exercise caution regarding details they provide about the incident. It is important that all relevant factual details of the incident are secured

before sharing information with appropriate authorities. In no way should hearsay or assumptions be made. This could potentially contribute to legal jeopardy for the instructor and employer. This is why immediate communication with school/university administrators is recommended.

Conclusion

Field trips require a lot of effort, and many issues need to be considered when planning for them. Working with your administration, legal counsel, special education department, and fellow educators is important for providing the safest field trip experience possible. The most important consideration for field trip safety is: "Are there foreseeable dangers that a reasonable person would have noticed, and what actions did I take to address these dangers?" Those two questions will be used to determine the degree of instructor or chaperone negligence related to a field trip incident. A good rule of thumb is to always act in good faith and protect the well-being of all students. Additional details about the topics discussed in this article can be found in the references listed.

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