

Field Trip Safety

By the NSTA Safety Advisory Board
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I. Purpose

The purpose of this NSTA Safety Advisory Board paper is to provide fundamental considerations for safer field trips and is not meant to address all of the hazards to specific sites or science disciplines. A field trip is defined as any activity outside of the science classroom whether it occurs on or off the school campus. NSTA provides details in its series of science safety books: *Exploring Safely*, *Inquiring Safely*, *Investigation Safely* and *Science Safety in Community College*, as well as a number of publications such as the three e-books of NSTA Ready-Reference Guides to Safer Science.

To ensure that field trips provide a safer learning experience for all students, the NSTA Safety Advisory Board recommends the following:

II. Preparation for students

- The teacher must identify clear learning outcomes for the site and the strategies for accomplishing them as a result of the field trip. (Scribner-MacLean and Kennedy, 2007). Students are less likely to engage in unsafe off-task behavior if they are engaged in learning. Establish clear behavior expectations with students. These expectations should include consequences for non-compliance and a definition of who will be supervising students at all levels. Consequences, such as immediately contacting the parent to come and take the student home for serious violations, must be established and clearly communicated in writing to parents, students and chaperones. Follow-through is critical for the reputation of the teacher, the ability to take future field trips, and the safety of the students. It also helps to protect the teacher and school district relative to legal liability issues based on duty or standard of care expectations in case of a field trip accident.
- The teacher needs to determine the optimum size of the group for the best and safest learning experience to accomplish the learning goals for the field trip site. (Stephenson, West & Westerlund, 2003; West & Kennedy, 2013). Multiple trips with smaller groups may be safer and a better learning experience than a single trip with a large number of students.
- Before the field trip takes place, the destination site should be visited by the teacher to determine if there are any safety and/or health hazards and how to address them. If the site is private property, make sure there is written permission for use and that it is in concert with the board of education's field trip policies. Review all policies and procedures of the field trip destination. Ensure that students are aware of these policies and establish consequences for non-compliance. An inventory of all needed field equipment, such as binoculars, sampling equipment, cameras, trash bags, etc., should be created as the teacher views the destination site and reviews the learning outcomes.

- The teacher should create a written plan of detailed safety procedures to distribute to parents and students. The discussion with students should include emergency procedures, preparation for weather conditions, staying with a group and a partner, procedures for meals, and other relevant issues.
- Students with special needs (physical, mental, or emotional) may need accommodations to participate fully in the field trip experience (NSTA, 2004). In preparing for the field trip experience, teachers and administrators are recommended to confer with specialists familiar with the students' special needs, with the students' parent or guardian, and when appropriate, with the student. The Individualized Education Plan (IEP), 504 Accommodation Plan, or other intervention plan should provide guidance for determining safe and appropriate accommodations for students on field trips (IDEA, 1997).
- At least one adult on the trip should be First Aid trained. A fully stocked First Aid kit should be on each bus.

III. Permission

- All school and district policies and procedures must be followed when planning a field trip. A parent and/or guardian must provide written permission for students to participate in any educational experience off school grounds. The school's administration should approve the list of students to ensure no students with unacceptable disciplinary records are allowed to attend.
- For science-related field trips, parents and guardians may require additional information about safety concerns. This may include appropriate attire, risks involved with native plants and animals, or other relevant information. Be aware, however, that written permission for a child to participate is not a waiver of liability for student safety.
- Permission slips must include contact information for the responsible parent or guardian during the time frame of the field trip. In addition, the permission slips must include relevant medical information, including allergies, about the child. Parents and guardians will also need to give written permission for teachers to be able to give necessary medication to students as needed. Emergency contact information for chaperones is also needed. One copy of the contact and relevant medical information must accompany the teacher and the second copy must remain with the school administration.
- The teacher in charge of the field trip should review the list of students attending the trip with the school nurse so that the teacher is aware of any medical conditions that the students may have
- Emergency medical treatment permission slips for everyone, including chaperones, must also accompany the teacher.
- Teachers should not transport students in their own vehicles, even if parents or guardians have given written permission to do so. Instead, they should use transportation services according to local policy to transport students to and from the field trip location.

- If school busses are used, then the teacher must have the administration's procedures and contact information in case of vehicular problems.

IV. Supervision

- Student field trips should include adult chaperones to supervise small groups. The ratio of chaperones to students is determined by school/district policy, policies established by the destination being visited, and by the nature of the experience.
- Teachers who are sponsoring the field trip should meet with chaperones in advance to explain the expectations of the students, the expectations of the chaperone, and important emergency information.
- Teachers and chaperones should identify the method of communication and exchange contact information with one another so that in the event of unforeseen events, such as separation from the main group, injury or illness, all participants may assist with services.
- At least one adult per busload of students should be responsible for student medications and keeping a first aid kit, which may include bandages, disinfectant, and other similar items. This adult should be provided with instructions on which students receive medications, times for the medications, and specific details about medication administration. This adult should also be trained on the use of emergency medications as needed, such as rescue inhalers and epinephrine injection systems. Children with more involved medical needs should be accompanied by a parent or a person who has specific medical training and who does not supervise other students.
- The teacher should identify the school procedures for vehicle emergencies.

V. Outdoor field experiences

- Before the field trip, field trip supervisors should create a checklist of needs that may occur outdoors. These include, but are not limited to, parking, availability of drinking water, washing and lavatory facilities, trash disposal or recycling, and other needs. These needs can best be determined by a visit to the site prior to the field trip.
- Before the field trip, field trip supervisors should determine the ability to use a mobile telephone or another device such as walkie-talkies, the presence of unexpected harmful substances in the site (flooding, broken glass, fallen trees), and the local flora and fauna that are present. In particular, the presence of poisonous plants, stinging insects, and pests should be assessed.
- Adults should be placed at the head and end of the group, even for older students.
- In some outdoor experiences, acoustics can be a problem. Supervising adults and instructors may wish to bring a voice amplification device, especially in locales where there is interfering background noise, such as machinery or running water. Hand signals may also be needed in

these circumstances.

- Accounting for all students regularly in outdoor experiences is crucial. Separate groups should establish rendezvous procedures and locations, and should plan to meet as a whole group regularly and take role.
- Field trip supervisors need to account for weather and other outdoor conditions. In particular, students may need to be protected to excessive sun exposure, water, and environmental hazards by wearing appropriate attire and using appropriate safeguards (e.g. broad-brimmed hats, sunscreen, sunglasses, insect repellent).
- Field trip participants should avoid taking any artifacts from a natural environment back to the classroom. Removing artifacts may disturb the local ecosystem and the items removed may pose a hazard to others. Likewise, all belongings, including trash, must be removed from the local site according to established policies.

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