Museum Visits Can Bolster School Curriculum

Museums are a wonderful and under-utilized educational resource that schools and teachers can tap to augment student learning. Normal Park Museum Magnet School in Chattanooga, Tennessee, which has been recognized by Edutopia.com as a “School that Works,” is a prime example of a school that has invested in museum experiences for its students.

Students at Normal Park Museum Magnet School visit museums or other community resources, such as the aquarium, every week. The museum visits provide students with an out-of-school educational experience that stimulates new ways of looking at the world. The school uses these visits to expand the reading, writing, math, science, and arts curriculum.

“When students are experiencing concepts in a meaningful way, investigating new ideas, or getting their hands dirty through exploration, true learning takes place,” says Normal Park Museum Magnet School principal Jill Levine. Levine, who this year is serving as a Principal Ambassador Fellow at the U.S. Department of Education, believes that the curriculum should not be bound by the front and back cover of a textbook or the four walls of school buildings.

So why aren’t more schools leveraging museums and visiting them with more frequency? Many reasons exist. First is the cost of transportation and admission. Also, some educators are unaware of the museums in their area and what they can offer, while others view museum trips as extracurricular. Another common concern among teachers is discipline problems outside the school building. Although these concerns are all legitimate and understandable, each is surmountable with some thought and planning.

What Museums Have to Offer
There are many advantages of informal learning experiences in non-school settings. Museums are places where visitors can see, learn, enjoy, and, in some instances, touch artifacts that are not commonly encountered in everyday school life. In the classroom, the teacher can talk about artifacts and use computers to display information and pictures of the artifacts. In-class experiences, however, do not compare with the awe and excitement of seeing the artifacts in a museum.

Begin by finding out which museums are located in the area. Principals and teachers should visit the museums and talk to museum staff to find out what exhibits and learning experiences are available. In Civilizing the Museum (2005), Elaine Heumann Gurian describes five basic types of museums: object-centered (objects are usually for eyes only), narrative (objects in an exhibit tell a story), client-centered (focus is on educating the visitor, often hands-on), community-focused (emphasizes the well-being of a community), and national (usually displays national aspirations). Many museums have characteristics of more than one type.

Narrative and client-centered museums are popular with schools because they provide opportunities for hands-on exploration and extension of knowledge. Children’s museums, science centers, and historical sites fall into these categories.
Cross-Curricular Learning Opportunities

Many museums have begun to align their educational activities with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for reading and math. Often, a museum’s educational staff will prepare activities for children to explore before, during, and after a museum visit. The school knows the curriculum sequence and the various ability levels of the children and can consult with museum staff to develop a reading list and math activities that will align with CCSS.

Moreover, museum visits tend to motivate children to expand on a subject that has been brought to their attention by a museum visit. Students begin to read books on a particular artist (like Matisse), a particular time period (like Colonial America), or engage in engineering projects (like bridge building) in the classroom after the educational spark was lit at the museum.

Potential Discipline Problems

Teachers’ fears on this front have usually been unfounded. Many museums make available a list of behavioral expectations that they send to the schools to prepare the students for a visit.

Ask for recommendations about the size of individual groups that explore the museum together. These groups are determined according to the age of the children, the type of exhibits, and the number of chaperones available.

Defraying the Cost

A few options exist to confront the financial obstacle. First, the school can contact the museum to find out if the fee can be negotiated. Some museums may not charge a fee, and others might charge a reduced fee for groups. In addition, museums may have grant money available to help defray the cost. They also can make the case to the financial supervisors that a museum visit is an educational experience that the children need. Museums provide information to students in unique and interesting ways in a setting other than the classroom. Knowledgeable museum staff can build on the classroom curriculum, providing first-hand and often hands-on experience students will not soon forget.

If additional finances aren’t available, most museums offer a free day each month that usually falls on a weekend. The class can encourage children to attend the museum on these days and develop an activity to go along with the visit. (Those children who cannot attend would be required to do another activity.)

Also, teachers can do a virtual tour of a museum with students. Many museums archived collections online, and some museums even provide corresponding activities. For example, the Smithsonian has a wonderful series of online tours and activities for students of all ages.

The final option is to make arrangements for museum personnel to visit the classroom and bring some hands-on materials with them. The children can get a taste of the museum and may be encouraged to visit the museum at a later date.

Conclusion

Museums are a community-based, educational resource that schools neglect at their own peril. Museums provide a place for students to examine, explore, and expand their thinking in many ways. With the right type of planning, a teacher can implement activities prior to, during, and after a museum visit to promote creative engagement with the class curriculum. Museum staff are willing to help with these educational activities. They only need to be asked.

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