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BUILDING A LEARNING LAB, ONE BRICK AT A TIME

By Charles T. Russo, Superintendent; Michael Carlson, Middle School Principal; & Emily H. Peterson, Professional Coordinator and LMS, East Moriches UFSD

This is a follow up article to Building a Learning Lab published November 2013.

Some years ago, in the mid 1980s, a young teacher sat in a superintendent’s office and was asked a final job interview question, “If you could change something about education, what would it be?” The young, beaming teacher gave several situations that she thought she would do differently. One in particular caught that superintendent’s attention and was one reason why he offered her the job. She said, “I would make sure I only took kids out of school on trips that are directly related to curriculum so they could receive the experience that only a teacher can provide. This way, the trip is justified and educationally sound. I take education seriously, and taking students out of school for a day, is a weighty decision.”

Throughout the journey that started in 2010 to adopt the New York State English Language Arts and mathematics curriculums, the road less traveled took us to reviewing field trips. Where do they go? Why do we go to that particular place? Is that trip still aligned to what we currently teach? As these questions began to emerge in our minds, and the minds of our colleagues, several obvious and glaring misalignments needed to be fixed. At the same time, a new trip was implemented to set a clear direction for the type of experience that we were seeking. The days of taking students out of school for a day to see a fictitious dramatic production simulating a Hollywood version of a knight joust were quickly fading to unimportant and not a thoughtful use of the precious time we were afforded.

The trip that was the change catalyst in the way students learn outside the classroom at East Moriches was the grade four, *Guys*

Read Club field trip to Four Freedoms Park on Roosevelt Island. In a collaborative effort, we discussed the possibility of taking the fourth graders to the park in spring 2013. Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s celebrated speech titled *Four Freedoms* and his vision to create a League of Nations to guarantee human rights to the peoples of the world are celebrated in this park. CON’T / 2



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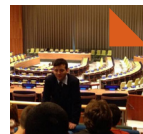
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3



7



11



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LEARNING LAB... CON'T FROM / 1

This seemed like a perfect experience for fourth graders who would eventually study the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and visit the United Nations the following year. The Four Freedoms Park is located directly across the East River from the United Nations.

The Four Freedoms trip was composed of 14 students and their parents who traveled to see this remarkable park. This experience was the catalyst for us to think about the rich and endless possibilities to reconnect school trips directly to school curriculum. It was clear, as we stood in the middle of the East River under the shadow of the United Nations, that field trips could be so much more than just out-of-school activities. They could help students “connect the dots” because they could build priceless schema today that will be called upon tomorrow. This could have only been possible with our new curriculum that was connected, scaffold, and culturally rich.

At this point, we engaged in conversations with faculty about these misalignments. Many faculty members embraced the opportunity to start anew and bring forward a trip that would give children a hands-on, concrete experience that reflected the new classroom curricula.

In the elementary school, a task force was formed and they started with an audit of the current trips for each grade including cost, parental involvement, and alignment to current instructed curriculum. Throughout the process, the shared vision was that field trips should extend learning beyond the classroom walls and provide students with a hands-on experience that enhanced the curriculum. It was also understood and agreed to by the members that a trip should not continue just because it was conducted in the past. The figure below displays a sample of the completed audit. The original document included all grade levels.

Grade	Trip	Curriculum Alignment
3	Nature Preserve	Animal Adaptations, Local Environment, Birds and Bird Behavior, Community Service
3	Bronx Zoo	Module 2A, Butterflies, Animals Throughout The World
3	Playhouse/Theater	Language Arts
3	Brookhaven National Laboratory	Science, Emphasis On The Frog Module
3	Audubon Preserve	Supports Walking Trips To The Nature Preserve

Prior to full implementation of the new curricula, teachers in grades K-2 selected a few of the domains (units of study) in the Core Knowledge Language Arts (CKLA) curriculum to instruct during the 2012-2013 school year. One of the selected domains in grade 1 was Astronomy. The students devoured this unit. We then thought a trip to the planetarium would be an ideal co-curricular experience.

Research and visitations were conducted to see if the content of such a trip would be appropriate for first graders and we found that it was. The teachers became very enthusiastic after seeing how excited students were to learn. Most importantly, vocabulary related to astronomy increased after the trip. This provided evidence that a carefully planned, co-curricular trip enhanced classroom performance. Another field trip was scheduled for June 2013 and is now a part of their annual learning experience during this domain. In the years prior to the domains being adopted, a trip to the planetarium was conducted, but it was experienced in the third grade.

As part of the Immigration domain, second grade students are asked to write a personal narrative letter as a weary traveler traveling from a European land to America CON'T / 3

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LEARNING LAB... CON'T FROM / 2

aboard a ship sailing into New York Harbor and seeing Lady Liberty for the first time. They are instructed to write about that feeling to a relative or a friend in their homeland.

Prior to this unit of study, the second graders build background knowledge on immigration beginning in Kindergarten with Columbus, The New World, presidents and American symbols. In first grade, the students study the significance of the Declaration of Independence in the New Nation domain.

This prior exposure enhances their understanding and enjoyment once they reach second grade and begin this domain. The elementary school task force realized that a trip to Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty would be a natural fit and would be a culmination of the three years of instruction they had on how America became the "land of opportunity." It is our plan that this new trip will take place for the first time in the spring of 2015.

The task force also looked at the traditional third grade trip to the Bronx Zoo. They thought the trip had merit and would continue with more carefully planned curricula emphasis. Third graders learn how plants and animals must adapt to their environment while studying Adaptations and the Wide World of Frogs, which is module 2A. With this curriculum content in mind, the teachers made a conscious decision to focus on the World of Reptiles at the zoo.

A trip that that changed the entire fifth grade experience for students was taking them to the United Nations. This trip was a culminating activity to Module 1, unit of study titled *Becoming a Close Reader and Writing to Learn: Stories of Human Rights* from engageny.com. As you know, the United Nations (UN) hosts delegates and dignitaries from all corners of the globe to come together to foster peace. On December 5, 2013, it hosted the East Moriches fifth graders for the first time. The students had just completed a study of the Universal Declaration of Human

Rights (UDHR) and they learned and appreciated the basic rights that we are all entitled to no matter where we live, or who we are.



The critics of teaching this document to fifth graders would have you believe that fifth graders could not handle this text. We found the UDHR to be eloquent in its simplicity and provide a clear message: we all deserve to be treated fairly. The students were engaged and excited about their work and looked forward to seeing the UDHR in action. The trip also included an observation of important council meetings and locations.

The Security Council was one meeting that the students visited. The Security Council's job is to discuss problems throughout the world and try to maintain peace; the UN flag illustrates this with its olive branches. The students also entered the Trustee Council where they assist countries that do not have their own government. Perhaps that most relevant council our students entered was the Economic and Social Council. Their job is to help others achieve a better way of life. One focus of this council is on education. The students were able to learn about resources and special agencies they studied in the classroom. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) mission is to improve the lives of children everywhere. This built upon the work that the children studied in Grade 3.

In the past, the sixth grade students took a trip to Medieval Times. Medieval CON'T / 8



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LEARNING LAB... CON'T FROM / 3

Times is entertaining, but was it relevant? This trip was a classic example on the need to reassess taking children out of the classroom. We then asked ourselves: Is this trip still aligned with what we currently teach? The answer was no.

We decided to review our curriculum and the standards to guide our decision on planning a new trip for our sixth graders. The sixth grade students study mythology in Module 1. They read several myths that are quite complex and the high-interest hero's journey of *The Lightning Thief* by Rick Riordan. Throughout these readings, social studies core content of civilizations that blossomed into huge empires is addressed while students encounter several famous mythical characters. Is there a better place to experience Greek mythology than the Metropolitan Museum of Art (MET)? Through our research, we found that the MET had already compiled a guide that complimented *The Lightning Thief*. It asks students to assume Percy's (the main character) role and take them on a journey through the mythical galleries. Following that discovery, we contacted the MET and tours were arranged. The trip was such a success it has replaced Medieval Times and is now our new annual learning experience outside of the sixth grade classroom.

The work that began in 2010 is far from over, as with all changes, it is a process and not an event. To allow changes to take hold, we focused on sharing by learning from community members and building consensus through a collective synergy. This new-shared vision has become the program that we want to provide our students. The review and eventual field trip revisions are one such step in the evolution to that vision.

It is through this constant collaborative effort that the building of the learning lab in East Moriches is thoughtful, deliberate, and it is one brick at a time. As John F. Kennedy once said, "All this will not be finished in the first one hundred days. Nor will it be finished in the first one thousand days; nor in the life of this Administration; nor even perhaps in our lifetime on this planet. But let us begin."



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