

# Travel Brings Classroom Lesson Alive for Middle School Students



Seton Catholic Middle School students stop for the traditional photo in front of the White House during their Washington, D.C., visit. Seton Middle School photo.

There's no greater feeling for an educator than seeing a student become excited about knowledge. As adults, we experience that feeling each year when we take our eighth graders on a four-day educational trip to Washington, D.C.

We have seen that field trips and extended trips such as the one to the national capital bring classroom lessons alive for our students and truly become part of a complete education in our evolving society. We live in a time when many educators are concerned primarily with meeting standards in the classroom and with safety—certainly important issues.

However, the true value of educational travel for us at Seton Catholic

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**Tom Kropidlowski** is a social studies and religion teacher at Seton Catholic Middle School in Menasha, Wisconsin. The sixth- through eighth-grade school, where he has taught for 17 years, is part of the Twin City Catholic Educational System ([tkropidlowski@tcces.k12.wi.us](mailto:tkropidlowski@tcces.k12.wi.us)).

Middle School in Menasha, Wisconsin, is demonstrated by two or three students each year for whom the Washington experience actually makes a difference in their lives. Coming from a small community of 25,000 people, many of our students aren't aware of all they can achieve as adults. If we are able to open their eyes to new possibilities as middle-school students, they will consider choices in high school and beyond that will open more doors for their future. For example, one student who went on the Washington trip will be the first in her family to graduate from high school. Seeing a metropolitan area such as Washington, D.C., with governmental operations and economic development, opened her eyes to new possibilities for her future.

## Trips Can be Close to Home

While the Washington trip is the highlight of travel opportunities for our eighth graders, students also ex-

If we overlook educational travel opportunities for young people, we are not providing all the benefits our students can receive from education

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perience field trips within Wisconsin, where classroom lessons are reinforced and become more meaningful to students. Among these are visiting a synagogue in Milwaukee, where they learn about another religion; seeing a professionally produced play; and visiting a nuclear power plant to learn about conservation and energy use. Some of these trips raise topics that may be considered controversial, but they are ideas students will have to confront at some time. When those ideas are introduced on a school trip, we have a chance to discuss their merits and students are challenged to stretch their thinking.

Educational travel should be considered an essential part of the instructional experience. My belief is that if teachers can't relate what goes on in the classroom to the broader world outside of it, students are justified in questioning why their lessons are important. Knowing that my students will be visiting Washington allows me to direct my curriculum

## Additional Resources

### Student & Youth Travel Association

The Student & Youth Travel Association (SYTA) offers a number of resources on its Web site: [www.syta.org](http://www.syta.org).

A "Trip Planning Guide" pamphlet outlines how to find the right tour operator and provides checklists on knowing what you're paying for, working with reputable travel providers and resources for evaluating providers.

"Travel Safety Tips: For Students, Youth and College Age Travelers" is a brochure geared to the needs and challenges faced by young people traveling in groups or on their own. A special section, Questions Parents Should Ask, advises parents on what to discuss with the travel provider before their students depart.

The SYTA Youth Foundation, Inc. provides "Road" scholarships five times a year for students who need financial assistance to participate in school trips. Teachers, principals and other adult youth leaders can

submit nominations. Complete information, specific deadlines and nomination forms can be found online at [www.sytayouthfoundation.org](http://www.sytayouthfoundation.org).

The SYTA Web site also provides advice on avoiding travel problems, a list of professional travel planners and links to other travel resources. This information is available to students, teachers and parents and can be used by educators to teach travel skills and prepare youngsters for a trip. Information on any of these services also is available by phoning (800) 509-7982.

### Educators Eligible for \$800,000 in Field Trip Funding

Target is furthering its support of teachers and classrooms with the fall launch of the Target Field Trip Grants Program. The initiative, designed to help teachers bring learning to life for students, will distribute 800 grants up to \$1,000 to education professionals throughout the United States.

Applications for the grants program are available online at [www.Target.com/teachers](http://www.Target.com/teachers) through Nov. 1. Recipients will be notified

in January 2007. Criteria for the selection of grant recipients include: the description of the field trip and its objectives, benefits to students, tie-in to the school curriculum, number of students who will be involved and proposed use of funds. Funds may be used to cover transportation costs, entry fees, supplies and equipment and resource materials.

"With our nation's schools facing increasing budget shortages each year, field trips are often one of the first elements eliminated from the curriculum," said Laysa Ward, vice president of community relations for Target. "It is our hope that the Target Field Trip Grants Program will help fill this gap so that teachers may continue using the valuable experiential learning gained from field trips to enhance students' classroom studies."

The Target Field Trip Grants Program is open to educators, teachers, principals, para-professionals or classified staff employed by a K-12 public, private or charter school in the U.S. having a 501(c)(3) or 509(a)(1) tax-exempt status. Only one submission per applicant will be accepted. Field trips must take place during the 2007 calendar school year.

throughout the year to concepts they will see firsthand on the trip. We talk about the surrender of Cornwallis as an important historical event, but when they see the painting of his surrender in the rotunda of the Capitol, it brings history to life.

We also study the Holocaust as part of our social studies curriculum. While we can read about it and see videos in school, that doesn't compare to seeing firsthand what is in the Holocaust Museum. Students meet relatives of survivors at the museum and observe the impact it has on them. They are able to touch the gate of a concentration camp and experience it tactically. It's no longer just an idea; now it's an historical object. When you can see and touch history, that's ideal education. Our students always call visiting the Holocaust Museum one of the most moving experiences they have ever had.

Similarly, in our classroom we teach about the wars the United States has fought. However, the human impact of conflict is difficult to impart to students through lectures, textbooks or videos. Each year we have been able to have four of our students lay a

wreath at the Tomb of the Unknowns in Arlington National Cemetery. To be part of this ceremony and see the solitude and respect people show is a powerful education for young people. It teaches them a sense of respect and appreciation for our freedoms and that "freedom is not free."

### More Instructional than a Family Vacation

While some young people are able to visit such sites on family vacations, others are not and miss out on these valuable learning opportunities. When these trips are taken as part of the school program, they can be more instructional than a family vacation. When they are with their friends, students become more excited about learning. They discover a fact and immediately want to share it with each other. When they take that ownership of information, they are much more likely to remember it for years.

While it's important that students have the firsthand learning opportunities to reinforce what we teach in the classroom, they also are learning "life lessons" that are impossible

to understand in our small, white, upper middle-class community. The Washington trip exposes many of our students to diversity for the first time in their lives.

Before traveling to Washington, we review social rules and laws they will need to understand. For example, we tell them not to stare at or take photographs of homeless people. The vast majority of our students haven't seen people going through garbage in search of food. By the end of the trip they begin to understand diversity and develop a sense of tolerance. These are essential lessons they will need as adults.

At Seton Catholic School we know educational travel makes a complete education. It's something that all adolescents should experience. If concerns about budgets and safety are raising doubts in your mind as an educator, find ways to overcome these challenges. Organizations such as the Student & Youth Travel Association (see sidebar) provide scholarships and useful advice on planning safe trips. Use these resources, rather than shortchange students of this essential learning opportunity. ■