

Developing a Connection: Partnerships Between Schools and Museums

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What do horses, an old farmhouse, a glass factory, and a nature sanctuary have in common with local students? The answer is a new educational landscape available at the museums and historical sites located in Orange County. These special sites offer a wide-range of unique programs for students that will challenge their intellect, inspire creativity, and perpetuate our community's history. In fact, many are now offering programs that directly supplement the school curriculum as well as support the learning standards developed by the New York State Education Department.

In 1996, New York State instituted a system of learning standards that were designed to enhance a student's education. According to the State Education Department, "the learning standards represent the core of what all people should know, understand, and be able to do as a result of their schooling." The standards were designed to address math, history, science, art, language, and career development. Today, these standards continue to serve as guidelines when designing curriculum.

Through the creation of partnerships between schools and community organizations, teachers and museum educators can work together to plan learning experiences and programs that strengthen curriculum. According to the NYS office of Cultural Education, "when students engage in experimental, hands-on, exploratory learning at alternative sites such as museums and art institutions, students strengthen and integrate their skills in research, analysis, problem solving, and communication."

In order to make sure the time away from school is well-spent, the teachers and museum educators are working together to plan a program that provides educational themes. The programs should be informative, entertaining and provide a forum to introduce students to new areas of interest.

Why is Goshen called the "Cradle of the Trotter?" What are those monuments on the back roads in Chester and Warwick? (Many local teachers are taking advantage of the opportunity to supplement school curriculum with a field trip outside the classroom.) Because Orange County is so rich in history and culture, day-long field trip packages are available so that classes can visit more than one site! Some local museums even offer pre-visit materials that can be sent to the classroom before a field trip visit.

During the field trip visit, students can immerse themselves in organized, entertaining, hands-on programs. By incorporating technology, and opportunities to experience new ideas first hand, children are more likely to absorb important information. Even better, the new ideas have been extracted from a familiar foundation – history, math, science, and art. Once students recognize familiarity with these topics, they make a connection. The learning standards become a reality in a surprising setting.

But, can learning about topics like harness racing or a glass factory really enrich a student's education? The New York State Education Department feels that by offering children a variety of educational experiences, they are more likely to become life-long learners. By introducing a child to the world of harness racing or the art behind molding glass, these intriguing experiences will foster the development of new, enjoyable hobbies or future careers.

In culmination, by the end of the field trip, although students are unaware of the planning and strategy that went into developing the field trip program, the mission has been completed. Students make a connection between their school work and the real world, teachers feel that learning standards have been addressed, and the local historical and cultural sites have taken one more step in achieving their goal to educate the community about the importance and contribution of their unique culture.