

Learning from a Bike Trip

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Every year for the past 20 years, I and other members of the seventh and eighth grade team have organized a bike trip for students which fits right into the social studies curriculum, as well as that for physical education. The bike trip marks the culmination of a unit reviewing map-reading capabilities. In seventh grade, students develop various map skills, including cardinal and intermediate directions, how to measure distance on a map using a scale of miles, how to interpret the legend of a map, and how to locate places using latitude and longitude. The bike trip brings several of these skills to life. Students have to use real maps of the Milwaukee area to plan the route of the bike trip from Maple Dale School in Fox Point, Wisconsin, to the lakefront. They need to be able to follow directions while using the map and to measure distance on it. There are some guidelines which students need to follow in planning the routes. (These include staying off main streets!) Bikers travel from Maple Dale School to Veterans Park by Lake Michigan, which is about a 25-30 mile roundtrip route. Students who do not want to bike are offered an alternative that also requires planning with a map: a walk of about eight miles from Maple Dale to Klode Park in Whitefish Bay, Wisconsin.

Once the routes are planned, usually a day or two before the actual trip, students put the plan into action. To help students orient the map to the actual direction they are facing, the science teacher usually teaches a lesson on orienteering prior to

the trip. Students then begin the trip following the routes they have established and the instructions given by the group leader. Instead of looking at maps that have no meaning, students bring the unit to life by using maps of their city. If they make a mistake in reading the maps, they see the consequences of their error. A mistake could mean more biking, less down time at a rest stop, or arriving late to lunch (a big deal to students this age).

Learning from the Trip

A trip like this helps students understand the environmental impact of biking as students see that there are alternative methods of transportation that are both effective and enjoyable. In classes before and after the trip, students learn how biking reduces the demand for gas and lessens the release of carbon dioxide into the air. Students are taught about the major effects that would occur if more people biked or walked to work when possible. Since the trip is done in the fall, students also learn about leaves changing color and why this occurs, how animals prepare for the upcoming winter, and about the watershed of the Milwaukee area. (Three rivers empty into Lake Michigan.) There is even a recently opened children's science museum, Discovery World, right on the lakefront which we visited last year. Students are able to see how science and science issues relate to this trip.

In seventh grade, students review map-reading skills and use these skills to plan routes. In eighth grade, students have the routes mapped out and do more

continuous biking to reach their final destination. "I thought it was a great way to get outside and learn," said eighth grader Danny Waldman, expressing the typical opinion of his peers:

There are other curricular connections to this trip. While at the lakefront, we visit Veterans Park. This park has some monuments and a memorial to those who have served in the armed forces and to those who have died in service. I explain to the students why each monument was built and what it means. In math class, students calculate the average speed of the trip and discuss why it may be faster either going to the lakefront or coming home. (This is usually determined by wind and/or the slope of the land. The trip to the lakefront is more of a downhill ride than the trip back, but sometimes strong winds have a greater impact.) Finally, the language arts teacher and the art teacher organize writing and art activities that are related to the trip. In language arts, students usually write a reflection about the trip or develop poetry related to what they saw or did. In art, students usually paint scenes from the trip. This is truly an interdisciplinary activity and field trip for both grade levels.

Organizing the Trip

A trip like this requires a total team, school, and parent commitment. All the teachers in seventh and eighth grade play some kind of role. Homeroom teachers collect lunch money and permission slips. Teachers serve as leaders for the biking



and walking groups. Two teachers deliver the Rocky Rococco's pizza and soda to the various lunch spots. They also bring some footballs and soccer balls so that the students can play at the lunch destinations. In addition, drivers may need to transport students who cannot take part in a bike trip, who have problems with their bikes, or who are unable to complete the entire trip. Parents are needed to help chaperone the biking and walking groups. Without parent and staff involvement, we could never accomplish a trip like this.

One of the pleasant byproducts of the trip is that it builds relationships between students and students, students and teachers, teachers and parents, and students and parents. Parents have a great time assisting the groups and being with the kids, so that the activity has become a great way for the school to build positive relationships with parents. Students forge new friendships and observe each other under different circumstances than in the school building. The trip allows the teachers to see a more complete picture of each student. Students also see teachers in a different setting. As eighth grade

student Becca Shertok said, "When we were biking, we were able to get to know our teachers more personally. When we were biking, we could talk to our teachers about our lives too." Parents also feel the same way. As seventh grade parent Steve Schnoll said, "The kids benefit, but really the parents come out ahead knowing we helped create one of those 'life moments' that will stick in the minds of parents and kids forever."

I ask the physical education teacher to place students into groups so they can bike with students with similar biking capabilities and needs, so that everybody feels comfortable with the pace of the trip. The ride allows students to see beautiful scenery; the changing leaves of fall make for a beautiful backdrop. As eighth grader Samantha Shore pointed out, "Biking over 24 miles would seem to be tiring, but it was fun because the scenery was beautiful. The leaves from trees decorated the bike paths, and the trees were covered with many shades of green, red, yellow, and even orange."

Another pleasant feature of the trip is that students can just be themselves without facing many of the pressures

they normally face. Rolling down hills at the resting spot, playing with equipment outside of the Discovery World museum, and relaxing on beaches near the lake creates a school-sponsored experience that is refreshing and makes learning seem like fun.

To top off the trip, on the way home students stop at Dairy Queen for ice cream refreshments. The walkers go to a variety store where they can get treats they like. It is a perfect way to end an early October day, with temperatures around 70, low humidity, a sunny sky, and spectacular autumn foliage. Eighth grader Megan Burger made our day by saying, "The 2007 bike and walk trip was an event that I'll remember for the rest of my life." 🚲

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