

## Want students to do better in class? Send them on culturally enriching field trips

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Research from BYU found that students who participate in multiple field trips during a school year have higher test scores, perform better in class and have increased cultural conscientiousness over time. Credit: Jaren Wilkey/BYU

School field trips have been part of the educational experience for

children across the nation for decades. While many school administrators believe there's intrinsic value in letting students develop socially with out-of-classroom experiences, quantifying the impact and the value of field trips is difficult. And justifying out-of-class time can be burdensome for teachers tasked with providing a good education amid the pandemic.

As such, many art venues, science museums and zoos have reported declines in field trip attendance. Teachers and students have also reported decreasing amounts of [school](#)-sponsored trips, particularly for [minority students](#) in academically low-performing schools.

But thanks to new research from BYU, Johns Hopkins University and the Heritage Foundation, the value of field trips is finally being understood and measured. The study, published in the *Journal of Human Resources*, found that students who participate in multiple field trips during the [school year](#) have [higher test scores](#), perform better in class and have increased cultural conscientiousness over time.

"Contrary to practice where schools, facing accountability pressures, trade extracurriculars for increased seat time, we found that there's no harm to academics by taking time out of the classroom," said Heidi Holmes Erickson, assistant professor of educational leadership at BYU and lead author of the study. "It's possible to expose students to a broader world and have culturally enriching curriculum without sacrificing academic outcomes, and it may actually improve academic outcomes."

The study used an experimental design and randomly assigned fourth- and fifth-grade students from fifteen elementary schools in the Atlanta, Georgia, area to participate in three culturally enriching field trips during a school year. The field trips included a trip to an art museum, a live theater performance and a symphony concert.

Students who attended three different field trips in fourth or fifth grade scored higher on end-of-grade exams, received higher course grades, were absent less often and had fewer behavioral infractions. These benefits were strongest when students entered middle school.

"We anticipated that field trips wouldn't harm test scores. However, we started seeing academic improvements and realized that students who participated in these field trips were doing better in class," said Erickson. "One potential reason for this is that field trips expand students' world concepts and expose them to new ideas. Similarly, students might be more engaged in school thanks to field trips. Students find school more exciting and want to try harder in class."

In addition to the academic improvements, students who participated in multiple field trips were 12% of a standard deviation more likely to express a desire to consume arts in the future and nearly 14% of a [standard deviation](#) more likely to agree with the statement, "I believe people can have different opinions about the same thing."

Researchers say this is more evidence that field trips are beneficial not only for academic success but for individual character development as well.

"Parents are very interested in the academic quality of their child's school, but they're also interested in the social skills and social engagement habits they develop. Cultural [field trips](#) are easy ways to help facilitate both."

Erickson says she's hopeful this study will be a resource for policymakers and school principals who are interested in improving children's growth during the children's school experience. When considered in the context of the pandemic, she says this research should be a caution to administrators who are considering eliminating out-of-

class opportunities.

"Field trips have been non-existent for the last two years, and many cultural institutions like museums and science centers were closed. Schools want to make up learning loss from the pandemic and might feel pressure to sacrifice a well-rounded education for increased seat-time," says Erickson. "Field trips might be the first thing to go. Addressing [student](#) learning loss is crucial, but schools should be thoughtful in their approach."

**More information:** Heidi H. Erickson et al, An Experimental Evaluation of Culturally Enriching Field Trips, *Journal of Human Resources* (2022). [DOI: 10.3368/jhr.1020-11242R1](https://doi.org/10.3368/jhr.1020-11242R1)

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