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School field trips take detour as grants, aid pick up slack

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Park ranger Valerie Morgan (left), and Louis V. Denti Elementary School kindergarden teacher Michelle McVay (right), dress 6 year old Liam Butler in colonial period clothing, as fellow classmates watch during a field trip at Fort Stanwix, May 10, 2011 in Rome, NY.

By DANIEL P. BADER
Observer-Dispatch

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When the fifth-grade class from Christopher Columbus Elementary School got on the bus and headed last month to Fort Stanwix National Monument in Rome, they got a little help getting there.

A grant from the National Parks Service paid for the buses that opened the fort to siege by about 100 excited children.

Grants and other methods of funding to help schools go on field trips are becoming more prevalent in a tight fiscal environment where anything involving paying for transportation is subject to being cut.

Indeed, next year, the roughly \$24,000 the Utica City School District planned on spending on field trips was cut from the proposed 2010-11 budget, leaving teachers with few avenues for field trips.

Several area destinations are trying to pick up the slack with grants, paying for busing or offering discounted admission.

It's field-trip season for area schools, and Fort Stanwix is packed, said Valerie Morgan, the educational coordinator for the fort. The \$2,600 grant is new to the site this year, Morgan said, and she hopes that amount will grow.

"When it rolls around again next year, we'll have more evidence of need," she said.

The parks service grant is need-based. Schools have to have Title I status, a designation given to low-income schools, and there's an application process, but depending on the distance from the school and gas prices, it can be worth the extra work.

"We didn't go looking for (the grant)," Columbus Principal Dona Dawes said. Fort Stanwix lined it up for the school.

Twice a year the classes try and get out of the building, but it depends on funding.

"(Teachers) are going to have to rely more on (grants) and fundraising," Dawes said.

Last Thursday, the Erie Canal Village in Rome saw its first school trip arrive — a Mennonite group from Little Falls.

Museum Director Melody Milewski still is getting calls for this season's tours but said she has seen a decline in attendance this spring and since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

"There were many parents that would not let their children go away," she said.

Before then, groups would come from far away, and spend two to three days traveling around the region.

"I don't see that anymore," she said.

At its peak, she said there were 500 to 700 children a day at the

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At its peak, she said there were 500 to 700 children a day at the 1800s-era village; now there are 250 to 300.

It's not necessarily financial, either. Standardized tests for elementary school children are scheduled for the end of the first two weeks of May.

"The school districts have to offer so much more than they did 20 years ago, and a lot of it is mandated, and there's not enough time in the weeks," Milewski said.

Potato Hill Farm

For the past three years, Clinton Middle School physical education instructor Christina Buschmann has taken advantage of busing paid for by the Potato Hill Farm Outdoor Education Center in Boonville.

In the fall, Clinton students rode mountain bikes and hiked the trails maintained by the center, and in the winter they snowshoed and skied cross-country.

"They provide the busing, they also provide all the equipment," Buschmann said. "They also have instructors and pros that help putting on the equipment,"

There isn't a cost to the school for any of the activities, she said.

"The kids get an opportunity to try something they may have never been able to try," Buschmann said. "And they're lifelong activities."

Elaine Hage, educational activities director at Potato Hill Farm, said the transportation certainly isn't free but is made available by the anonymous family that founded the center.

"Although we are hearing there are financial issues, we're able to keep our funding steady for those who need it," Hage said.

Farmers' Museum

Garet Livermore, vice president for education at the Farmers' Museum and Fenimore Arts Museum in Cooperstown, said Key Bank recently donated \$5,000 to pay for busing for fourth-graders – that's on top of the \$10,000 raised for trips through the museum's membership.

"We were hearing from teachers throughout our region that all extracurricular trips were being canceled left and right," Livermore said. "It's been building over the last year. As the budget situation gets worse, more school districts are saying no leaving school for any purposes."

Twenty percent of the museum's membership comes from field trips. Livermore said that school-group attendance is down about 25 percent since 2009.

Utica Zoo

At the Utica Zoo, if the kids can't come to the animals, the animals go to the kids, Education Manager Mary Hall said.

The Dominion Foundation has given the zoo a \$5,000 grant to visit all the universal pre-kindergarten classes in Utica with the Zoomobile. The classrooms get a book, which Hall reads to them, and gets to see the animals she brings.

The Lion's Club has donated money to bring the Zoomobile to Utica schools in the past, and National Grid has given about \$9,000 in the last two years to put students at Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary School in touch with the animals.

For actual trips to the zoo, 50 classes visited in 2010, and this spring seems to be on pace to match it.

"This year it seems like there are a lot of last minute bookings," Hall said.

The Stanley

The Stanley Center for the Arts has offered its Yellow Bus Presentations for more than 25 years, inviting students to see live performances, and experience art and music first-hand.

Students are bused to the Stanley for the shows. Students are given a discounted ticket price, and the districts cover the busing costs.

Kevin Marken, the Stanley's director of institutional advancement, said he has noticed a decline in the number of children attending the presentations.

Marken said the theater partners with the individual performances, donors and fundraising events to help keep the cost low.

"We're looking at creative ways to do more," Marken said.

He said support has come from members of the Stanley, local businesses and even the Mayor's Ball to help keep the program affordable, Marken said.

"It really makes a difference in their love of the arts," he said. "It enriches their lives forever," he said.

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