

DistrictProfile • McMinnville (Ore.) Public Schools

A New Twist on Field Trips

McMinnville (Ore.) Public School's after-school program simply wasn't cutting it for Deborah Weiner, the school improvement coordinator who oversaw its activities. She knew they could offer more than a glorified babysitting service—if only the funds were available to pour into field trips.

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The blueprint: That was wishful thinking. So in September 2003, Weiner gathered a handful of folks—including a fifth-grade teacher and the district's AmeriCorps volunteer—to brainstorm Plan B. If the K-5 students couldn't leave the elementary school buildings, they'd bring the world to the kids instead. They'd beg business owners to select one of the six elementaries and then spend 45 minutes presenting something about their industry. Weiner picked Tuesdays as the designated day for these in-house field trips because it would free up the teachers assigned to the after-school program to attend the weekly staff meeting. Thus Community Tuesdays was born.

Surprise, surprise! "Wouldn't it be amazing if we could get one a month?" Weiner, now the principal at Cook Elementary, says of the initial goal. "It was amazing. We had people in every school on every Tuesday. There wasn't room for all the volunteers to get on the agenda." In the first six months, 68 community

members from 35 organizations participated, making 84 presentations at the schools.

Crawling out of the woodwork: The pizza shop owner told his assistant to take over the joint so he could show the kids how to roll out dough. The county's arts association set up hands-on tables to let students try various mediums. The model airplane club brought its supplies to allow the grade-schoolers to fly planes in the field behind the building. The bookstore passed out discount certificates. A manufacturer allowed the students to weigh and measure plastic tubing, and a professor gave an interactive presentation on clouds.

Eager beavers: Too many times, says Celia Wheeler, president of the McMinnville Chamber of Commerce, people assume a business has to see a benefit before it gets involved. Community Tuesdays turned that notion on its head. "It's not always about winning future customers. There are a lot of small businesses who want to help in the community but they aren't big enough to sponsor a field trip or other event," she points out.

Advertising partners: Having the chamber's official endorsement definitely helps sell such a program, Weiner advises. Its PowerPoint slide shows and newsletter announcements alone went a long way in whipping up enthusiasm among volunteers. The second ingredient for success: assigning educators to work with the businesses ahead of time on their presentations. Interactivity is everything. "We don't have a lot of funds but we know what flies with kids,"



Weiner says. "And then the businesses feel so successful they want to do it again."

Worth knuckling down: Community Tuesdays have been such a hit with students, they're more than willing to devote the other four days of the week to "power hour" study sessions where they practice reading, math and other homework assignments. To date, McMinnville schools have tracked higher grades among this segment: After-school fifth graders score three percentage points higher than the total grade population in reading and math on the Oregon State Assessment tests. Third graders score six percentage points higher. That's quite impressive for a group of whom half the members receive free or reduced lunches, and 25 percent are learning English as a second language.

Chin up: "We had nothing to lose and it didn't cost us anything," Weiner says of the experiment. "The worst that could happen is it wouldn't work." **DA**

Julie Sturgeon is a contributing editor.

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