

## *Curriculum Corner*

**2023 New Jersey Superintendent of the Year Dr. William T. Smith,  
Chief Education Officer, Point Pleasant Beach School District**



### ***Love Note to the Humble School Field Trip***

Dear School Field Trip,

I found myself thinking of you the other day as I crossed New York Bay by ferry, having just climbed out of the cockpit of an F-35 fighter jet. With the Manhattan skyline receding behind me, the silhouette of the Statue of Liberty entered the frame of my window and pulled me instantly back—back to the field trips that have shaped me as both a student and an educator.

I am slightly embarrassed to admit that despite growing up in New Jersey, just twenty miles west of Liberty Island, it wasn't until my forties that I finally visited Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty. Fittingly, the visit happened as part of a two-stop field trip with my high school students. We paired the tour with time at the Museum of Jewish Heritage, and—just like the students—I felt myself shrinking in the presence of these enormous historical touchstones.

Even for an adult, standing before Lady Liberty evokes an imagination that modern screens and artificial images have dulled. The real figure towering above me animated the pictures and paragraphs I had once skimmed past in my schoolbooks. For our students, seeing Her in person invited curiosity, wonder, and a sense of belonging within a much larger story.

In class, our students had studied Elie Wiesel's memoir *Night* as part of a substantial unit on the Holocaust. The Museum of Jewish Heritage, less well-known than its larger

Washington counterpart, drew them into a quiet, deeply personal experience—with testimonies, artifacts, and voices that demanded full presence.

For me, the somber weight of the museum rested within the larger promise that education will ensure such atrocities are never repeated. But for students, their time immersed in the exhibits was transformative, inviting a level of contemplation that is hard to replicate inside a classroom.

A similar transformation unfolded during our theater and cultural trips. At McCarter Theatre, a raucous and bawdy production of *Romeo & Juliet* elevated Shakespeare from the page onto the stage with an energy that left both students and teachers blushing and invited a new understanding of the tragedy. A comedic and Broadway-worthy *Waiting for Godot* at Two River Theater suddenly made an “inscrutable” play accessible—even delightful, despite its deep themes and puzzling circuitry. Each trip offered students something they could not access on their own: an audience living *within* a performance, sharing the experience of watching a script breathe.

As educational leaders, we face the constant pressure of time, cost, transportation logistics, and competing priorities. Field trips are often the first “extras” squeezed out of a crowded calendar or a shrinking budget. Yet these moments are precisely the necessary ones. They expand students’ worlds, deepen their empathy, and link their learning to their lived reality.

Our responsibility as school and district leaders is to preserve and champion opportunities that immerse students in history, art, culture, and community—as well as those experiences that may never cross their paths without us extending our classrooms’ reach. The instruction within the four walls of a classroom matters. But it cannot shoulder the entire burden of preparing students for a complex world.

Which brings me back to that F-35 cockpit. That experience, too, was part of an educational program—this one built around leadership, teamwork, and high-stakes decision-making. It wasn’t until I zipped up the olive-drab flight suit, pushed the throttle to full thrust, and felt my simulated jet leave the tarmac and barrel roll through the sky that my stomach dropped and the flight simulation became “real.” Even as an adult, I needed to *do*, not just read or observe.

And maybe that is the central reminder you give to us, School Field Trip: to truly understand the extraordinary and the tragic, the heroic and the cautionary, we sometimes have to travel, touch, and step into the experience ourselves.

As leaders, we must seek and preserve the kinds of learning that lift students out of abstraction and into engagement—experiences that remind them, and us, what education can make possible.