

Educator Preferences and Barriers for Virtual In-School Programming

Prepared for Mill City Museum

In 2020, Mill City Museum began offering virtual educational programs for elementary students in partnership with the National Park Service. These virtual programs are free, 30-minute live presentations on topics related to the history of Mill City, such as *The Big Boom That Changed How You Eat!* and *No Electricity? Water We Going To Do?* They are aligned with state teaching standards for elementary students.

In 2022, Mill City Museum partnered with Wilder Research to conduct focus groups to better understand how the museum can meet educator needs and address barriers they may face in accessing virtual programs.

Methods

Mill City Museum and Wilder Research identified a sample of 137 educators or education specialists for grades 3-5 in the 7-county metro area (Anoka, Carver, Dakota, Hennepin, Ramsey, Scott, and Washington) that had either registered for a virtual program or attended an in-person field trip at Mill City Museum during the years 2019-2022. This sample was invited to virtual focus groups hosted and facilitated by Wilder Research in September and October of 2022. There were three groups: two groups for educators from Ramsey and Hennepin counties, and one group for educators from the remaining five metro counties. Mill City and Wilder Research were interested in any differences between the two groups of educators. Due to low participation in the focus groups, Wilder Research also connected with educators through one-on-one interviews and emailed responses.

A total of 13 educators (teachers, school staff, or administrators) participated; 9 from Ramsey or Hennepin county, and 4 from the remaining five metro counties. Transcripts and notes from these conversations were analyzed to determine key themes, including why educators would consider participating in virtual programs, barriers they have experienced or foresee in accessing programs, and their interest in and barriers to in-person field trips. Due to the small number of educators who participated in the focus groups, the findings should be interpreted with caution; they may not align with some educators' experiences or perceptions. It is difficult to identify what led to low focus group participation, but some possible explanations include: busy schedules for teachers, especially towards the beginning of the school year when the groups were held; hosting the groups virtually rather than in-person, which may have had less buy-in to participate; or a lack of connection to the topic of virtual programming. That being said, a "saturation point" was reached in our conversations, meaning that the 13 educators largely talked about similar experiences and perceptions. This suggests that the findings, while limited, likely provide an adequate overview of how educators feel about virtual programming and in-person field trips. Quotes may have been edited for clarity and to protect respondent confidentiality.

Key findings

Reasons to look for virtual programs

Virtual programs are accessible and cost-efficient, especially compared to in-person trips

When asked for some reasons why educators would consider booking a virtual program, the most common response was that virtual programs are accessible and convenient to use. Virtual programs provide a way to offer enrichment opportunities without leaving the classroom. Compared to in-person field trips, virtual programs are a convenient alternative. They often require less planning, scheduling, student time, and financial resources than taking students on an in-person trip somewhere. For example, educators mentioned securing and affording buses, managing permission slips, coordinating chaperones, and figuring out student lunches. Similarly, cost and financial resources were cited as a reason to consider virtual programs, since many of them are free or low-cost.

We just do it because it's free, it's accessible. Logistically you don't have to get buses or worry about collecting permission forms.

I feel a field trip takes up a lot of time. I'm not complaining about that. I love field trips, but if we could get a virtual program that we didn't have to spend time on buses or anything and we can have an exciting experience during the day that didn't take the whole day and didn't have kids missing potentially more minutes with therapists or special education services, then that's a bonus.

We've had a hard time with having consistent transportation and bus drivers. I could see us being willing to do much more virtual programming instead of field trips, even if it's not free.

Virtual programs enrich classroom curriculum and content

Another reason educators shared for considering virtual programs is that they provide an opportunity to enrich related classroom content – to add on to a lesson plan, culminate a unit, or provide something the teacher isn't able to provide themselves. They are an additional way to engage students and make connections between what they're learning and the outside world. Further, when asked what they look for in a virtual program or what describes an ideal virtual program, some educators shared that they specifically look for programs that will tie into their classroom content and curriculum. This was mentioned more in the conversations with educators from Ramsey and Hennepin counties than with those from the other five metro counties. This was the only notable difference between the two educator groups. One participant noted that for one virtual program they participated in, they were able to talk to the presenter in advance about what the class was learning so the presenter could provide a more customized experience for their students.

I really look for where they can take what I'm already teaching [students] and apply it somewhere in the real world. I like experiences that are realistic. ... I really like field trips as a cumulative project of, "Here's what we've learned. Now let's go and apply it at a deeper level or in the real world." That's what I really look for.

I think it's fun to think about ways in which we can engage kids in just an introduction to a unit where you get them curious about something, or as a final wrap-up.

[Thinking about the ideal virtual program,] [i]t's not a leap that I need to try and figure out where to place it into the curriculum. There's an obvious connection. We always do energy in fourth grade or something, and then it's like, "Okay there's an energy [program]. Perfect, that can be our hook in for the unit, or it can be the end because then they'll have that background knowledge."

Participants were also directly asked how important is it that a program aligns with state teaching standards or with their district curriculum. Many shared that alignment with state teaching standards is critical; otherwise they won't consider bringing a program to their students. This alignment is also used as justification to parents or administration for why a program is worthwhile. Some shared the state teaching standards are more important to them than their district's curriculum, or that the two are equally important. That being said, two participants said they would be willing to consider a program that does not align with state teaching standards if it was a really unique or novel experience.

Virtual programs can and should be engaging and interactive for students

As mentioned previously, during the discussions participants were asked how they would describe the ideal virtual program or what they would look for in a virtual program. Overwhelmingly, participants agreed that a virtual program should be engaging and interactive. Educators look for ways students can participate with the presenter or with the content being presented, so students will stay engaged. Some examples of this were having question and answer time with a presenter, having a hands-on component in front of students that they can do alongside the virtual program, using polls or reactions to engage students throughout a program, or having opportunities for students to get up and move their bodies. A few educators mentioned that a program should not be just a lecture-style "sit and get" format, but rather should be a dynamic, responsive experience for students.

Obviously there are more distractions that students have to self-regulate away from [in a virtual setting]. If the instructional strategies being used are engaging, then the odds that students are going to pay attention are higher.

I think it's really hard to watch a presenter for a long time. We had [a dancer] Zoom in and she had them doing some movement or some rhythm things. We've had authors and then kids drew along with them or something like that. Just something for the kids to be doing so that their voice and self can be involved and not just observing.

I just love the opportunities where they can have that reciprocal conversation with kids or even get them to predict what's going to happen or things like that. There are some places we work with where they are great presentations and there is a lot of learning, but it's super just "sit and get." When it's live, it doesn't make sense to me why it would be like that.

Some educators also shared they like having additional materials or content to engage with before or after a program. For example, they mentioned having students search a topic online before the program so they come prepared with questions, having debrief questions prepared that the teacher can go over with the class after the program, or providing the students with a list of places in the community they could go to if they wanted to learn more about the topic afterwards. This can help to further engage students and extend the learning beyond just the virtual program.

Barriers to accessing virtual programs

Many educators don't have the time to search for and schedule virtual programs

Participants were asked if they had the time needed to bring virtual programming into their classroom, as in time to search, plan, schedule, and coordinate. A few shared they do have the time, or that there's more time when doing their yearly planning at the beginning of the school year as compared to later in the school year, but many said time can be a barrier – notably, the time to search for and schedule virtual programming. Some said if they don't find what they're looking for quickly, or don't have all the information available right away and understand how it could be useful to their class, they will move on quickly. For example, having an informative, interesting

description of the program, what technology will be used, how long the program is, and how it engages students upfront can be beneficial for teachers as they search.

If I don't find what I'm looking for pretty quick, I'm probably not going to keep looking. If it doesn't pop out that it's unique or that it's kind of fitting what I'm searching for, I'm going to move on.

I don't think I would search. I signed up [for a program] last year because my colleague had known about it from the year prior. I have signed up for things, professional development things, just from an email kind of advertising in an easy link where you can quickly get the information. That works for me, but for me to go out and search it, I don't know where to start. It's too overwhelming and I don't have the time.

As a teacher, I want to make sure that the content is actually going to be relevant and engaging and the students will make connections. So, I could see myself looking at a list of programs of virtual field trips and if it's too vague or if I just don't have a strong kind of gut reaction of, "Oh, my students would just love that," I would pass up on it. So, I think just the more transparency and marketing materials that can be given to teachers just so that they can have a sense of what setup I need in my classroom to make that successful, any materials. Just the more information you could give, the better. That would make me more comfortable with booking a virtual program.

A few also talked about familiarity. For example, some teachers organize the same program or in-person field trip every year. This is partly because the teachers know how to coordinate it, what the content is, and how their students will likely react to it. This familiarity saves time. Teachers may not be as familiar with new virtual program offerings, which means it takes extra time to consider them and think about coordination. However, some teachers also talked about the negative side of familiarity, where they may get in the routine of doing the same programs over again and not venture outside of their comfort zone.

It takes time to research and find the virtual field trips, to find any field trip. As a teacher having taught in the same position for a number of years, I get into a routine of this is what we do, and this is the time of year we do it.

I would just emphasize peoples' need to have a lot of clarity. I don't like to go into anything unplanned or not knowing what to expect. So again, the time to plan a field trip, I'm not going to spend that time if I'm not already really excited about what I think is going to happen and then digging in more.

Related to available time, when asked what educators look for in a virtual program, a few mentioned that the program should be convenient and organized. As in, it should be relatively easy for a teacher to plug it into their lesson plan with little preparation and burden. This may mean having all needed materials prepped and sent in advance of the program.

I need it to be a convenient time and to be able to fit into my school days in the ways that my schedule is really limited by or my student's schedule is packed. So, I just want it to be convenient.

Virtual programs are reminiscent of distance learning at a time when educators would prefer in-person options

In addition to available time, participants were asked about any other reasons why they may not consider a virtual program. A few educators we talked to said virtual programs are too similar to distance learning at a time when they would rather focus on in-person interaction and less screen time for students. Similarly, a few also mentioned

that virtual programs are not a substitute for the level of engagement and interaction that in-person experience provides.

[Virtual programming] was such a need at the time [during distance learning], and there were just a lot of places that weren't doing it, even though we were begging for them to do it. I was begging for them to do it. Then there were a couple of places that popped up with really amazing stuff. Now, it's interesting because I think even at school, the teachers are really trying hard not to have [students] on screens.

One reason I've hesitated in the past is, with schools going back and forth between online learning, that families that are not looking for additional screen time.

I mean the whole idea of a field trip is having that experience going there, being in that place, having an interactive [experience]. I think that's a big draw of going on a field trip versus virtual. It's just actually seeing it face-to-face and being there. ... Especially [for students] that struggle with just being engaged, it might be easier for them to be engaged if they're face-to-face with somebody.

Access to technology may not be a barrier but can be an extra logistical consideration

Participants were also asked about technology barriers in accessing virtual programs, and whether they and their students have the technology needed to make a virtual program successful. There was a lot of variety in responses, suggesting that each school and classroom is a little different when it comes to technology. Many educators said they have access to technology, but the details of a specific program matter. For example, a common consideration mentioned is whether the program is presented to an entire class or if each student is participating on their own individual device. In our discussions, there was a preference for large group presentations, since individual devices may not be available in a school or accessible for younger children. Some also shared they are limited in the types of platforms they can use (e.g. Zoom, Google), or that there are inevitably technology issues that arise, such as an unstable internet connection. Other components educators mentioned are whether a program is live or pre-recorded, how many other classes will be using the school internet at the same time, and planning for classroom management during the program. One participant mentioned they would prefer a high-quality online resource, like an interactive website or game, as opposed to a presentation-style program.

Given these considerations, participants mentioned a desire to have as much information upfront as possible about the technology used, as well as options for how a program is delivered. Particularly, they would like to know which platforms the program can be viewed on and how it will be delivered (such as a presentation to the group or via individual devices). One participant shared that with a few virtual programs they've done, they were able to do a test run of the technology in advance to make sure everything worked properly.

We haven't had so much virtual programming, but we've had a lot of [guests] Zoom in, and when they expect the kids to use their own technology, that hasn't worked really well ... but as far as Zooming into a classroom, I haven't had any issues.

My students don't have their own devices in the classroom. I could check out the laptop cart and maybe get them all logged in. [Having] an option [between large group presentation and individual device] would be helpful. To have that choice. ... Our classrooms are very different in how we use technology, so just giving teachers that information at the beginning would be helpful.

I have noticed with some of the virtual programming that I've done that there are always going to be hiccups when it comes to connecting. So the ones that I thought were really interesting, we would schedule a quick time before the school day or over a lunch period or whatever it is, just to make sure the link works so that when "go" time actually came for us to have our students on the screen, everything would be going as smoothly as possible.

Thoughts on in-person field trips

Participants were asked about their interest in in-person field trips. Many expressed high levels of interest, with a few sharing recent or upcoming examples of in-person trips. However, when asked about barriers to in-person field trips, participants shared multiple barriers. In-person trips can be expensive, including the money for bussing. There is variability among schools on how field trips are paid for, with some looking for additional funding, while others can consider asking parents to help cover the cost. There are also multiple logistical pieces to consider. Educators frequently mentioned concern about buses and a current bussing shortage. Some also mentioned concerns about having enough chaperones, receiving permissions slips, lunch logistics, and the amount of time that an in-person trip consumes. They are often full-day experiences, which can take time away from other important services and learning opportunities for students.

I feel fortunate that I'm able to bring my students [on field trips] because I feel that's one of their favorite experiences during the school year – a field trip. They look forward to those days.

[Our interest is] very high especially since we haven't had opportunities to do it in person. Our school runs into cost issues pretty quickly. And right now we're kind of trying to balance where do we want to go, and where do we want to ask students to pay money or try to get funding for?

[Field trips are] always exciting. And we have a certain amount of budget for it, and then a certain amount of budget for visitors and onsite programming. Then it's up to us to how to use that budget. But it's been very difficult with bussing for Minneapolis Public Schools, and I don't foresee that changing any time soon.

Recommendations

Based on the key findings and suggestions from participants, we offer the following recommendations for Mill City Museum to consider to improve outreach and general awareness of virtual programs.

- Many of the educators we talked to shared they do not have the time to search for and schedule virtual programs. To increase visibility and reach of virtual programs, Mill City could:
 - Use direct to consumer marketing to reach out directly to educators or other education specialists with details on virtual programs, including links to individual program offerings and instructions on how to register
 - Ensure good website design and search engine optimization (SEO) so educators or other education specialists can easily find programs on a website or with a Google search
 - Include a clear, engaging description of the virtual program with as much as information as possible, e.g. the topic, the grades it is designed for, state teaching standards alignment, length, and details on the technology platform and delivery method
 - Go to where educators are for outreach and to raise awareness. For example, attend conferences for educators or other in-person gatherings. This outreach may focus on Mill City Museum in particular or could include other programs within Minnesota Historical Society
 - Consider including a sample video of the program as a preview, so educators can have a better idea of what to expect. This may pique interest and remove some risk from registering for an unknown program
 - Include a user-friendly way for educators to see program availability, cost, and to register for a time and date, in order to limit additional back and forth communication around inquiring and confirming these details

- Engagement and interaction is a key component to a successful program. Participants identified ways to ensure an engaging program:
 - Include a hands-on component or activity for students to interact with alongside the virtual program
 - Provide ways for students to interact with the presenter, such as question and answer time, polls, call and response, or chances to move around
 - Expand the learning by preparing an optional activity before and/or after the program for the class to do on their own; this can also help further tie the program into classroom curriculum, which was important to educators
- Ease technology concerns by being explicit on how technology will be used (which platforms, how the program is delivered) and giving teachers options in this regard. Consider offering opportunities for educators to test the technology in advance to ensure the program goes smoothly from a technology standpoint.
- Consider outreach offerings, as in having a presenter come to a class to deliver a program. While this does not improve access to virtual programs, some participants identified this as a potential “best of both worlds” programming approach. It has the engagement of an in-person experience without the barriers that often impact in-person field trips. It is not reminiscent of distance learning, which some cited as a deterrent to participating in virtual programs at present, but rather embraces a return to in-person learning. However, participants acknowledged that this type of programming may present its own barriers, such as cost and logistics, which should be taken into consideration.

Summary

The results from these conversations with educators shine light on the role of in-school virtual program options moving forward. These types of programs can provide accessible, engaging enrichment opportunities for classrooms and provide convenient alternatives to in-person, resource-intensive field trips. Some barriers to accessing virtual programs identified were the time to search and register for programs, a lack of familiarity, and a reluctance to continue virtual programming when students have largely returned to in-person classrooms. Key suggestions to reduce the barriers include: finding ways to increase program awareness and visibility, reduce the time burden for educators, continue creating engaging and interactive programs that augment educator curriculum, be as upfront with program information as possible, and consider in-person classroom programming as an additional option.

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