

Schools' perceptions and environmental needs

Prepared for Three Rivers Park District

Three Rivers Park District is a park system in the west suburban Minneapolis/Saint Paul metro area of Minnesota that manages nearly 27,000 acres of park reserves, regional parks, regional trails, and other special use facilities. The mission of Three Rivers is to “promote environmental stewardship through recreation and education in a natural resources-based park system.” As a part of their vision for the future, Three Rivers strives to expand environmental education opportunities for school-age children. To achieve this objective, Three Rivers conducts research to identify the needs and barriers for environmental education with school districts, private schools, charter schools, and other home school groups. In addition, Three Rivers endeavors to bring nature to schools and other locations through a travelling interpretive program.

Methodology approach

In 2012, Three Rivers Park District hired Wilder Research to conduct a study to better understand the environmental education and outdoor recreation needs of schools in their service area. All 1,139 schools in Three Rivers Park District's service area were invited to take part in a survey, available online or over the phone between April 2012 and June 2012. A total of 257 surveys were completed. Results of this survey will inform and improve accessibility, content, and format of field trip programs and school-based services Three Rivers Park District offers.

Findings

Study results indicate that the majority of the schools surveyed are unaware of many of the parks, services, and programs offered by Three Rivers Park District. (The survey includes schools that have previously used Three Rivers Park District's services and facilities, and schools that have not used them.) Most of the respondents who had visited a Three Rivers Park District site indicated that they would consider the site for a field trip.

Most respondents indicated student enjoyment (93%), the availability of hands-on activities (91%), and cost (81%) as the top priorities when choosing an environmental education or outdoor recreation field trip. Two-thirds of respondents also prioritized curriculum alignment (65%) and integration into life practices (63%). Over half (57%) reported equipment

and resource availability as a main concern for environmental education field trips.

Respondents specified distance, cost, and time as the major barriers for field trips and cost and time as the major barriers for on-site (i.e., “outreach”) environmental education. Over half of survey respondents (54%) cited transportation costs as a significant barrier to environmental education field trips. Half (49%) listed high program and activity costs as a major obstacle. Travel time is another major impediment to field trips for two-fifths (39%) of respondents. In addition, one-fifth (21%) listed time away from the classroom as a major barrier to environmental education field trips.

A majority of respondents (62%) indicated that financial assistance to cover transportation costs would definitely increase their school's ability to offer field trips. Need-based assistance for program fees was also selected by half of respondents (49%) as a preferred method to increase their ability to offer field trips.

Respondents are interested in a variety of environmental education opportunities. Most of the schools indicated an interest in receiving more information about environmental education field trips and on-site opportunities from Three Rivers Park District. Respondents were most interested in environmental arts (47%) and nature programming (47%). Outdoor recreation (42%) and historical programs (41%) were also identified as areas of interest.

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The survey results varied by whether or not the school was an existing user of Three Rivers Park District, the school location (distance away from any specific Three Rivers Park District site), student population, and the proportion of students who received free and reduced-price lunches at the school (and indicator of the poverty level in the school). Survey results are segmented by these variables to illustrate awareness of specific sites in the Three Rivers Park District, barriers that schools face when selecting field trips, new opportunities for environmental education programming and outdoor field trips, and how these schools differ based on their characteristics.

Recommendations

The following recommendations address the top issues after analysis of survey results and schools' perceptions and needs assessment. Addressing the barriers of cost, time, distance, and transportation are critical to helping schools offer environmental education field trips. Three Rivers has already placed importance on these limitations for schools by addressing these items in their Vision Plan. New concepts to address these barriers include bus grants, providing an eco-bus to and from field trip sites to decrease transportation costs. Need-based assistance and price breaks on field trip packages are also discussed in the plan. Next to cost and distance, time is cited as a big barrier for environmental education field trips. Three Rivers should consider ways to make travel time part of the educational experience. Another avenue to consider is ways to help teachers plan field trips more efficiently. Putting these ideas into practice would potentially increase the amount of field trip visits to Three Rivers Park District.

Using survey results to customize programs and marketing according to top priorities and school needs will be a beneficial strategy for Three Rivers Park District to use when forming new partnerships with schools and as a general marketing strategy. Specifically, Three Rivers should consider emphasizing the top priorities of student enjoyment, hands-on activities, cost, curriculum alignment and integration into life practices in their marketing strategy and when conducting outreach to schools. Three Rivers should also examine respondent comments such as the need for health and fitness activities, the arts, conservation, and youth mentoring and promote how these activities benefit students in their marketing materials.

Also, Three Rivers should use survey information to tailor marketing materials regarding outreach programs and field trip curriculum to specific schools' needs and student make-up. Three Rivers Park District has identified curriculum revision and development as efforts to meet the goals stated in the Vision Plan. Implementation of this portion of the plan will help in development and customization of school programming and marketing—a “one size fits all” approach to marketing may not be the ideal method to reach the schools in its service area.

In addition, Three Rivers Park District should continue to conduct evaluations of their programs and sites to measure progress of the mission, vision, and goal implementation regarding environmental education and outdoor recreation field trips. Three Rivers Park District should also evaluate its current process for post-field trip or post-outreach program school surveys. Surveying participants will gauge satisfaction and identify areas for improvement. Consider conducting in-depth interviews and/or focus groups with school staff to ensure continued accountability and success to both internal and external stakeholders. Continued evaluation will support ongoing assessment of program success and will aid Three Rivers Park District in future decision-making related to programs and services.

This summary presents highlights of the *Schools' Perceptions and Environmental Education Needs* Report.

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