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Best Practices for Overnight Field Trips & Excursions

by Eric Lucero

When field trips and excursions extend overnight, careful planning and execution is needed to prevent an injury or loss. California courts have consistently held that a special relationship exists between school districts and their students. This relationship results in an affirmative duty on the part of a school district to take all reasonable steps to protect its students during field trips and excursions.

California Education Code §35330(d) affords immunity during these types of trips, but not if an act of negligence, including inadequate supervision, was the proximate cause of the loss.

Not every school-sponsored activity qualifies for this type of immunity either. Generally, the school-sponsored activity must be voluntary and students must not receive academic credit for participating.

Even though claims arising from an overnight trip are unlikely, the potential for litigation requires careful planning. The defense against a claim of inadequate supervision will be influenced by the following factors:



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- Were district policies followed and adequate for the age of students and location of the trip?
- Was there an appropriate number of chaperones? A general ratio is one trained chaperone for every ten students, but the ratio may be higher depending on the needs of the student population or to fulfill IEP requirements.
- Was a pre-trip meeting held for students, chaperones, and staff to review the detailed itinerary, district policies, code of conduct, and general behavioral expectations and consequences?
- Were overnight accommodations suitable for students? No mini-bar access or adjoining rooms, for example. Do not use Airbnb, vacation rentals, or other types of residential housing as they are less secure, less reliable, and may not afford the same insurance coverages compared to traditional and more reputable accommodations.
- Were adequate precautions taken to prevent student-to-student and staff/chaperone sexual abuse and misconduct (SAM)?

Chaperones

Chaperones often do not have experience supervising groups of students and may not be familiar with district protocols. Before the overnight trip, conduct a mandatory meeting with chaperones and volunteers to discuss the district's rules, daily itinerary, and behavioral expectations of students and adults. Review "what if" scenarios with chaperones such as, what if a student gets sick or what if there is a student that cannot be accounted for.



Chaperones should be instructed to focus equally on their assigned students and not to overly devote time to their own child during the trip. Other issues that can be discussed with chaperones include:

Specific roles and task assignments

- Chaperones should not be seen smoking cigarettes, including electronic cigarettes, and the use of alcohol is strictly prohibited
- Instruct chaperones to pre-program emergency contact information into their phones before the trip
- The importance of being vigilant during scheduled free time as the chances for horseplay or inappropriate conduct increases
- Minimizing social time with other chaperones as it distracts from their primary task of supervising students
- A review of the district's boundary policy for school adults working with students

Although not all inclusive, the following best practices are suggested for an overnight field trip or excursion.

Pre-Trip

Actions to take before the overnight trip:

- Ensure the proper approvals have been received and the trip is in compliance with applicable district policies.
- Permission slips and waivers of liability should acknowledge that the field trip is voluntary, not a part of the school's curriculum, and list the explicit hazards that students may be exposed to during the trip.
- Review or update the district's emergency action plan which should include district guidelines for emergencies that can be reasonably foreseen, including, but not limited to: student illnesses, injuries, motor vehicle accidents or breakdowns, hotel fires, natural disasters, and assaults.
- Whenever possible use district vehicles and drivers for student transportation. If not, ensure drivers are licensed and at least eighteen years old. Drivers should submit their DMV driving record for evaluation and have valid automobile insurance liability limits acceptable to the district.
- Ensure all chaperones have undergone background checks and live scan fingerprinting. Any volunteer drivers should also receive the same screening.
- Ensure the required first aid kit is replenished and easily accessible.

During the Trip

Each trip presents its own set of challenges and needs, but the most important task during the trip is supervising students. Tips for supervising during the trip include:



- Limit the amount of free or down time and schedule staff/chaperones to supervise during these times
- Take head counts throughout the day
- Prohibit chaperones and staff from sleeping in the same room with students. If co-ed, there must be male and female chaperones.
- To minimize allegations of sexual abuse and misconduct, as an extra precaution require two adults to perform bed checks.
- Ensure students do not sneak out of their room during the night. Some districts have initiated a practice of creating a door seal by placing a tape across the hallway door after the final evening bed check.

Post Trip

After an overnight trip, debrief staff and chaperones to identify areas needing improvement. If an injury occurred, submit the appropriate paperwork as soon as possible. Any lessons learned or "close calls" that occurred during the trip should be shared with the site principal and the district risk manager.