

LOCAL

In the pandemic, field trips go virtual for Minnesota students

From schoolrooms or home, virtual excursions add a bright spot to kids' days.

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During their planetarium field trip, the third-graders from Castle Elementary School in Oakdale had plenty on their minds.

Is there any water on the moon? Which is the coldest planet, and the hottest one? What is a black hole? Would you freeze to death on Mars?

Kaitlin Ehret, the Bell Museum planetarium educator leading the field trip, smiled as the students peppered her with more questions — in the "chat" window of a Zoom call. One by one, she called on them in the way they've become accustomed to this year: by telling them she would unmute them so they could share their thoughts with the class.

In the chat window, teacher Karrie Sperbeck typed some encouragement: "Good questions, kids!"

With off-campus excursions out of the question, school buildings mostly closed to visitors, and many Minnesota kids learning from home, virtual field trips have become an important window to the outside world for students living through the COVID-19 pandemic. Across the state, schools are working with museums, artists and musicians, park rangers and farmers to bring a little adventure into the classroom, whether at school or at home.

"A bunch of museums and organizations have stepped up their virtual field trip game," said Sara Kraiter, a teacher at Falcon View Connections Academy, a Woodbury-based online school. "You don't have to dig quite as much to find virtual opportunities."

Kraiter and other Falcon View teachers have led students on virtual field trips to Glacier National Park, the White House and local museums. In December and January, the school's field trip plans include a free viewing of "A Christmas Carol" from the Guthrie Theater, a performance of "The Nutcracker" from a ballet in Colorado, and a virtual question-and-answer session with directors and actors from the Ordway Center for the Performing Arts.

The University of Minnesota's Bell Museum, in St. Paul, offers a variety of science and natural history programs. On the recent morning when the Castle Elementary third-graders "visited" space — virtually touring several planets, spotting a rover on Mars and examining the surface of the moon — another group of first-graders tuned in for a visit about bees and pollination.

Wearing a bee antennae headband, museum educator Mila Velimirovich-Holtz directed the class from St. Peter Claver Catholic School in St. Paul as they drew pictures of honeybees. On their screens at home, the students danced and sang along as Velimirovich-Holtz led them through a song about the parts of a bee, to the tune of "Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes."

Sights, but not the smells



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Educator Mila Velimirovich-Holtz taught about pollinators during a virtual field trip with first and second grade students from Saint Peter Claver

Sometimes virtual field trips come with even more live-action activity. Earlier this fall, students in Minneapolis and Eden Prairie got a surprise visit from Charles Krause and cows on his dairy farm near Buffalo, northwest of the Twin Cities.

Before the pandemic, Krause's sixth-generation farm frequently hosted school groups for in-person tours. This year, Kemp's, the dairy company Krause works with, linked up the dairy farmer with some classrooms via Zoom. When Krause popped up (<https://vimeo.com/466191817/847d34d38a>) in the middle of a virtual class, the students at Bryn Mawr Elementary in Minneapolis were thrilled.

One student wondered about how farmers got milk out of the cows. Another wanted to know whether cows had birthdays. A third was concerned about cows staying warm: "They actually wear jackets? Like jackets that are for humans, or jackets for cows?"

Krause said he was glad to be able to show students something new, though it isn't quite the same as when they get to come experience all the sights — and smells — of the farm for themselves. Especially with young children, he said, those sensory aspects of being on the farm are usually the most memorable part of the experience, more than any facts about the dairy business.

"The people that learn the most are the bus drivers and the teachers," he joked.

Bright spots in a tough year

Even if a virtual visit isn't quite as special as the real thing, it can still be enough to get students excited about logging on for class, said Kraiter, the Falcon View teacher. That's important in a year when many students and teachers have been forced to adapt again and again, shifting between virtual and in-person learning and trying to stay connected and engaged.

"I actually love hosting these field trips because a lot of times students who maybe don't get too enthusiastic about their regular classes will get really excited for field trips," she said.

It's likely that virtual field trips might become a classroom staple in the future, even as schools return to some in-person outings.

Colleen Feller, a program planner with Success Beyond the Classroom, a Twin Cities organization that organizes student enrichment programs like Knowledge Bowl and an annual Young Authors Conference, said making things virtual means that students have more opportunities to join in, no matter where they live or go to school. She expects that when her group starts holding events in person again, they'll also offer a "hybrid" component, allowing students and teachers to participate in some parts of the program remotely.

For now, she said participants in the virtual versions of events seem happy to have some version of special trips or events to incorporate into a very strange school year.

"We've gotten so many great comments from teachers saying, 'Thank you for doing this. It's not perfect but it's still enrichment,'" she said.

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