

Taking Kids Out of School For a Disney Trip: A Vacation Dilemma

by Roger Sauer, PassPorter Guest Contributor

Part 1: The Decision Imagine three scenarios: Family A takes its vacations during the summer when school is out and Dad has his annual two week time off for a trip.

Family B has two parents working and need to coordinate their times off for a vacation. Needless to say, this sometimes means vacations during the school year.

Family C has a single parent working a job with no paid vacation. If there is a vacation at all, it must be during off-seasons when prices for lodging are lower. These are invariably during the fall or early winter.

The decision to take students out of school for any vacation is now driven by numerous social, educational, and economic factors. As a retired school administrator (including service as a high school principal) I was often called on to deal with students whose attendance was impacted by parental vacation decisions. Simply put, my position was that students need to be in school when it is in session. Absenteeism is strongly correlated with lack of success in school. To paraphrase Woody Allen, "Half the secret of success is simply showing up."

However, as the three scenarios above indicate, times have changed. America may have moved beyond the agrarian calendar that drove its educational system a century ago, but that same calendar refuses to give up the wheel. Just as families have changed, the types of vacations (and even the ability to have one!) have also changed.

And sometimes the school calendar and vacation windows simply do not cooperate. This means that decisions to take trips during the school year including those to Disney World should be made with foresight and an open consideration of a variety of factors. While there is no one good answer for every situation, what follows is a series of questions that should be discussed as plans are made. Part 2 is a set of activities that can help one maintain an element of educational rigor during a Disney World vacation on school time.

FAMILY ISSUES:

* Do parent work schedules allow for time off during non-school periods?

* Can the family afford vacation costs during school vacation periods (read: Peak Season)?

* Can the parent(s) properly supervise homework assigned during the absence?

* Can the parent(s) properly develop a series of activities that take advantage of Disney World and the travel itinerary?

* How many days will the student remain out of school?

* Can the trip be scheduled so as to minimize days of school missed? More than a week can set any student back.

STUDENT ISSUES: These should be answered for every student and more critically for student in grades 6-12

* Does the student want to go? Your college-bound senior may like the idea but not the timing. Is there a responsible adult available to serve as a guardian in your absence?

* Has the student been successful in school?

* Has the student missed more than ten school days in the past year?

* Is the student enrolled in a performance class (band, choir, and orchestra) or an extra-curricular activity that would be missed during the trip?

* Is the student in the habit of doing homework on a daily basis?

* Is the student enrolled in special education, accelerated, or other specialized program?

SCHOOL ISSUES:

* What are the state law and district and school policies regarding pre-arranged absences from school?

* Will the teacher/s assist the student is assigning homework for the trip?

* Will the student be able to make up work on his return from the trip?

* Can any element of the Disney World experience be used to supplement or enhance the material covered in specific classes?

Remember that most educators have worked in a system that starts in the fall, takes winter and Spring Breaks, and shuts down in the summer. It is sometimes assumed by educators that the rest of the world is on this schedule.

As one can see, the answer to the question posed in the title of this piece is: It depends. My own view is that, if the parents are forced to take time off during school time, they will. But if they have a choice of

vacation times, then they need to seriously consider the second and third question sets and weigh the pros and cons. These all lead up to a single compelling question: Can my child afford to be away from direct instruction and participation at school for the duration of the trip?

PART 2: Educational Opportunities- Those Taken and Those Missed

If the decision is made to remove students from school for a trip, it has hopefully been done with the blessing of your student's school and that teachers have cooperated in providing homework in advance. This is not always as easy as it seems; one would like to think that teachers can just whip out the assignment for the next week or two at the drop of a hat -- some can, some cannot. Hopefully, it will not be busy work. On the other hand, are you ready to help Sally with her calculus? Again, the decision for an older student will be in part driven by the student, and Sally might rather be in calculus class.

But if you have homework with you, your students should be able to do some of it in the car on the way to the World or on the airplane. The educational advantage of this is obvious, as should be the lesson that "play" time sometimes requires "work" time.

Even if there are no lessons to do, your job as parent-mentor can be enhanced by providing supplemental work materials at a grade-appropriate level. Any bookstore or American Automobile Association store can provide these types of workbooks. And, if the student is old enough, the simple act of reading is beneficial. Bring BOOKS in their carry-ons!

A couple of years ago my daughter by necessity had to arrange a vacation during school time. My twin grandchildren, Colin and Caitlin, had reading books as well as a journal that they were expected to complete. Each journal had a page with the date at the top. Each filled out boxes on each page covering topics like naming three activities of the day and their favorite event, person, or place of the day. They were also asked to draw something they saw that day. My daughter also had them do the World Showcase tour with Passports to have signed at the Epcot Kidcot stations.

One key to providing some thinking skills in the trip to Walt Disney World is MAPS. Traveling to Orlando either by plane, train, or automobile can be enhanced by having younger children learn the geography through which (or over which) they are traveling. Maps from AAA can be a godsend. Similarly, the park maps can be used to let children plot their daily activities. Disney makes beautiful, customizable

family-specific maps for free and they can be ordered through the Disney World website www.disneyworld.com

Advanced students interested in art and architecture can learn a great deal though the recently published Imagineering Field Guides to the Walt Disney World parks. And, of course, the parks themselves and especially Epcot and Animal Kingdom can be considered living lesson plans. Even as experienced an educator as I recognize that a trip to Harambe Village is going to be more memorable than Miss Feeny's scintillating lecture on African quadrupeds!

So the decision is yours to make. But in doing so, be thoughtful about your own family's flexibility to travel, your children's educational needs and maturity, and how YOU can make a school time trip to Disney World educational as well as fun.

About The Author: A native of Oregon, Roger Sauer is retired from school administration. Since retiring he and his wife Donna have traveled to Europe for Disneyland Paris, to China and Tibet, and most recently, Japan. They have been members of Disney Vacation Club since 1993 and have traveled to Florida once or twice a year since joining. They have three children and five grandchildren. Their next trip to the World will be in December.

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