Field trips can be enriching, but they also can increase a teacher’s risk of liability. Follow these guidelines to decrease liability risk and enhance student safety.

Plan your field trip months in advance to ensure time to work out the details. First, the trip must be approved by the principal. Then consider transportation. How much will it cost to have a school bus transport students back and forth? And will the school pay for transportation or will student families bear the cost?

A field trip may be expensive, so it might seem like a good idea for the class to hold a fundraiser, but such events can be problematic for teachers. Allegations can arise that the money was stolen from the teacher, or that the teacher stole, borrowed or misplaced the money. This can result in school system, PSC and criminal investigations. If an expensive field trip is worthwhile, the better idea is to let the parents be in charge of the fundraising. (You still must get the principal’s permission.) After selling items, such as candy or popcorn, the parents give the money raised to the school secretary to pay for the cost of the field trip; the teacher never touches the money.

Permission slips also are an important consideration. The school board attorney should provide the school with official permission slips so that the parent assumes legal liability for their student taking the trip; please do not make up a field trip permission slip on your own. Permission slips must be signed by parents and returned. To demonstrate approval for the trip, the principal also must sign the permission slip. A teacher may not sign the principal’s name. Because of liability concerns, a student without a permission slip may not go on the trip. Keep all signed and returned permission slips in a safe place, as they may be needed should an issue arise.

When a field trip will last all day, the teacher must make sure that all students have lunch and water/drink. All special education and 501 plan students, and students with allergies must be individually checked to be sure they have the appropriate lunch and drink. A student saying, “Yes, I have a lunch,” is not good enough: The teacher must see it or there may be consequences.

If a student tends to be challenged by new surroundings or changes in routine, ask that the student’s parent serve as a chaperone. If one or more students will need extra attention on the field trip, discuss that with your principal. If the parents cannot go on the trip, perhaps the special education teacher or a paraprofessional could come along.

Bus drivers typically have to be back at school for their afternoon bus routes, so it is imperative that the teacher has all students back on the bus at a specific time.

OVERNIGHT TRIPS REQUIRE 24-HOUR VIGILANCE

Teachers who escort older students on overnight trips to destinations such as Atlanta, Athens, Washington, D.C., New York, Orlando or Savannah also must account for students at all times. Teachers must make every effort to ensure that the students do not have sex, drink alcohol or take drugs on the trip. If the teacher lets his or her guard down, they may find that students have gotten involved with inappropriate activity that could have been prevented. This can be cause for termination; it falls under the umbrella of providing adequate supervi-

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Follow Field Trip and Fundraising Policies

By Margaret C. Elliott, PAGE Assistant General Counsel

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sion for all students. A busy schedule tends to keep students out of trouble. If students are feeling sick on the field trip, the teachers cannot take the “well group” of students back at the hotel unsupervised where inappropriate things could happen. All students must have adult supervision all the times.

Even a teacher not listed as an official trip chaperone must follow protocol. None of the teachers present can, for example, drink alcohol at dinner, because all teachers must be prepared at all times to help if a student is lost or injured, for example. Drinking alcohol (even in the privacy of a hotel room or with dinner) on a field trip may result in the PSC issuing the teacher a one-year suspension. Also, if a teacher is a parent and takes a personal day to go on a field trip with his or her own child’s class at another school, and the parent elects to have wine with dinner along with the other parent chaperones, this could result in a PSC sanction. In the eyes of the PSC, “an educator is an educator” and alcohol would impair the parent/teacher’s ability to quickly handle a student safety issue.

If a student is to be sent home from a field trip for infractions (such as sexual misconduct or drug use) the teacher must call the parent to come and pick up the student. So, for example if a teacher calls the parents’ phone numbers and cannot get in touch with them, it might be that the teacher would ask the student for another phone number. Teachers want to be careful because the student may give the teacher a friend’s phone number and then the friend would come and pick up the student. Therefore, it is imperative to have accurate parent phone numbers. Also, the teacher is responsible for verifying that the person coming to get the student is, in fact, the parent of the student. If you cannot get in touch with a parent, ask the school administrator how to handle the situation.

Another issue is that the teacher must provide adequate supervision on the bus. There have been allegations of students engaging in sexual activities at the back of the bus, while other students create a distraction for the teacher in the front of the bus. Teachers must constantly be scanning all of the students to make sure they can see all student faces.

On overnight trips, the teacher must make sure students are in their assigned rooms and not in another student’s room or outside the hotel. Usually, overnight field trips are not a restful time for teachers. Teachers are not permitted to bring friends along. All of these rules or situations also apply to coaches who are taking student athletes to a competition that requires the students to stay overnight.

We hope that you are able to provide students with wonderful field trip learning experiences; however, you must plan all aspects of the trip carefully, and once on the field trip, do not let your guard down. If anything unusual happens, please call the PAGE legal department at 800-334-6861.