

National Park System Advisory Board



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National Park System Advisory Board

Education Committee

Partnerships Subcommittee Report

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Education Committee

PARTNERSHIP SUBCOMMITTEE

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The National Park Service provides natural and historic resources to educators and students that are unmatched by any other organization or agency. The content expertise of park rangers and educators enhances the variety of in-depth, real life learning opportunities available in the National Park system. Our national parks have much to offer our nation's students and teacher.

At the same time, there are a multitude of national, regional, state and local organizations that have specific capabilities and skill sets that can help National Park Service educators reach schools, design curriculum and implement innovative educational programs. We believe that the National Park System's delivery of educational programs could have greater impact by leveraging partnerships, both nationally and locally. The knowledge and experiences of partners, especially in the light of a tight federal budget situation, could make the difference in continuing and improving our national parks' ability to effectively be part of educating students for academic and life success.

We offer in the following sections checklists and case studies of educational partnerships. We created a tool that can be easily used by field staff in evaluating and managing partnerships for success. Our intent is to provide something simple and short, so that it will be utilized. We believe that partnerships are critical to the future of the National Park Service's education program and strongly encourage that national and locally based park staff analyze the potential for using collaborative partnerships to attain education goals.

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1 | Protocol for Creating National and Local Partnerships in the National Park Service

The importance of partnerships to expand and advance the use of our nation's outstanding National Park System cannot be underestimated. Appropriate partnerships at both the national and local levels are critical to advancing the strategic objectives of the NPS, and must be carefully considered in order to move the mission of the NPS forward. The following protocol has been developed in order to assist staff throughout the system in the implementation of successful partnerships.

SUMMARY

- a Partnership considerations must be predicated on their ability to advance the goals and objectives of the National Park Service strategic plan;
- b Potential partners may present themselves to the NPS or be identified by the NPS for recruitment, and once identified, must identify how their engagement can advance the NPS strategic plan goals and objectives through specific detailed responses. The goal is for mutual benefit through the partnership, so this is a critical step.
- c Once there is agreement to move forward because it is mutually beneficial, a formal agreement needs to be developed and signed by leadership at the NPS and the partner levels to assure there is no misunderstanding about roles and responsibilities, outcomes, benchmarks and measures of progress.
- d Implementation strategies need to be clearly stated, with specific point persons identified at the NPS and partner levels.
- e Timelines need to be established for goals and objectives to be accomplished and status needs to be checked at least bi-annually, with specified quality control measures, with review of the partnership on an annual basis prior to continuation. The process for assuring continued alignment of the partnership with the NPS goals and objectives needs to be in place.
- f The NPS needs to consider the implications for a national partnership on the local NPS sites, and consider advice/feedback from the local sites prior to obligating their engagement in National partnerships that may not be appropriate for all sites.

2 Successful Local Education Partnerships

Many of our national parks have strong education programs. Parks provide outstanding, authentic settings for a variety of curriculum based experiences. Some parks provide only a setting for learning, and many also provide staff and volunteer resources.

Local schools utilize parks for field trips, teacher education, residential experiences and research. Some parks provide distance learning resources, reaching schools around the country. Others focus on programs for schools within a one to two hour radius. Visitor centers, residential facilities, and historic buildings are sites for meaningful experiences.

For parks to reach their full potential as centers of educational excellence, park staff may want to assess what they have to offer, and how partnerships can help them improve their relevance and delivery with schools. Partnerships can take a variety of forms and have varied outcomes, depending on identified needs. The purpose of this section is to identify the types of local partnerships that a park might utilize, the features of a successful partnership and how the National Park Service can encourage and support such partnerships.

- 2.1 Identify Needs
- 2.2 Types of Successful Partnerships to Consider
- 2.3 Features of Successful Partnerships
- 2.4 Think Creatively About Partnerships
- 2.5 How the National Park Service can Encourage Strong Local Partnerships

2.1 IDENTIFY NEEDS

- Determine what schools need in order to be successful and meet their educational goals. Avoid a “build it and they will come” mentality which is the traditional approach of parks and similar non-formal educational resources.
- Know required standards and testing content areas. Identify those that are hard to learn and difficult to teach in the classroom, and that best suit the park’s site.
- Involve teachers, curriculum specialists and administrators. Consider an educational advisory committee to give input as to content, staff support, pre and post visit needs of schools.
- Spend time in classrooms and listen to students. Identify what they know about the park’s resource and where there are gaps in understanding.
- Spend time listening to parents and adult care givers to determine what they look for in a field trip or residential experience.
- Talk to universities and local teacher education providers to determine if there is a gap that the park can fill in terms of content, setting, or educational style for teacher education. Listen to teachers and pay attention to what content they desire and the best time and style for delivery.
- Identify gaps in park staff in terms of training, experience, content knowledge.

TYPES OF SUCCESSFUL PARTNERSHIPS TO CONSIDER

- Compacts with school districts.
- Other nonformal educational providers (museums, libraries, etc.)
- Park friends group
- Higher education
- Local education based groups
- Other parks

FEATURES OF SUCCESSFUL PARTNERSHIPS

- Based on a win-win model where each partner benefits from the partnership.
- Leadership which embraces partnerships
- Shared vision and goals
- TRUST
- Willingness to give up control and power
- Joint planning, especially in determining outcomes
- Transparency
- Open agreements related to budgets and expenditures
- Joint evaluation

THINK CREATIVELY ABOUT PARTNERSHIPS

- Can a friends group or other partner hire staff to complement park staff?
- Who might bring unusual, new ideas and energy to a park? An arts organization? A cooking school? An education reform group? Retired teachers or college faculty? A local astronomy club?
- What learning outcomes drive a park's educational program?
- How can partners be empowered by being part of a national park? The Teacher Ranger Teacher program is a model of this, in that it clearly benefits teachers and schools as well as parks.

HOW THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE CAN ENCOURAGE STRONG LOCAL PARTNERSHIPS

- Make it easy for parks and partners to write a simple memorandum of understanding. Have trained partnership coordinators in parks who know how to make it easy for park staff and partners get mutually successful work done.
- Reward park staff for leveraging partnerships. Encourage them to spend at least half of their time facilitating partners' educational success in addition to traditional teaching/interpretive work. Base performance reviews in part on successfully meeting partnership objectives.
- Where there are long standing educational partners, create a long term agreement that encourages long term investment in the partnership. The current five year standard is too short for successful partners engaged in fund raising to support the partnership.
- Involve educational partners in creative planning for the future. Don't limit planning activities events to park staff. Determine ways for partners to participate as leaders on an equal footing with NPS employees. In most educational partnerships, it shouldn't matter who the employer is—the commitment to the park and to park/NPS themes should matter most.
- Empower partners to be successful. Recognize them for what they contribute. Be invitational in welcoming them to sites. Determine which policies restrict partners unnecessarily and create and reward shared models of success.

3 | Successful Local Education Partnerships: Case Study

Why has the University of Massachusetts Lowell-Lowell National Historic Park partnership been successful?

WHY WAS THE PARTNERSHIP ESTABLISHED?

Mutually beneficial – the park wanted to establish itself as a pioneer both as an industrial park and a center for education; the College of Education wanted to serve school districts and improve the quality of the educational offerings available to K-12. The mission of the university was more heavily focused on service and teaching in the late 1980s.

WHAT HAS HAPPENED OVER THE YEARS?

The mission of the university, while still having a service focus, has shifted toward experiential learning for undergraduates and a stronger research focus for faculty. This has required the partnership to re-focus who it serves and how the partnership operates. The university sees the partnership as a “center/institute” which needs faculty involvement and research funding. The park sees the partnership as a premier educational center enriched by faculty involvement.

Missions of the Partners Must Align

WHAT HAS IT TAKEN FOR THE PARTNERSHIP TO SURVIVE?

- An excellent program that meets the needs of K-12 schools, expertly delivered – without attention to this, at all times, visitation will dwindle.
- Administrators/supervisors who believe in the type of education that is offered and are able to bring it to the attention of other members of the institution.
- Personnel who are able to adapt to changes in mission.
- Involving as many stakeholders as possible so that community support is gained for the partnership
- Hard work and a sense of trust between the “principals” of the partnership.
- Faculty involvement through their courses and grants.
- Excellent DIRECTORS who have moved the TIHC forward, but also know how to strengthen the partnership.

HOW DOES A PARTNERSHIP ADMINISTRATIVELY CO-EXIST?

- With difficulty – partners have to be willing to “seed” some control without violating official policies and procedures.
- A joint agreement of responsibilities is needed (Cooperative Agreement), but this needs broad support at the university partner level.
- Regular meetings between partnership “principals”

4 | Residential Learning Centers in National Parks

Models of Local Partnership Success

WHY WAS THE PARTNERSHIP ESTABLISHED?

Tens of thousands of school children participate with their classroom teachers in residential learning experiences in national parks. They live in a national park for three to five days, experience hands-on field based instruction, and develop a deep appreciation for our national parks and green space.

Some centers are located near urban settings (Golden Gate, Cuyahoga, Delaware Water Gap, e.g.) and others are in remote locations (North Cascades, Great Smokies, Olympia, Yosemite, e.g.). What all centers have in common is that they are managed by non-profit organizations that are key partners to national parks and that have strong relationships with schools and with other community organizations.

The needs of residential programming make it very important for the National Park Service to work in partnership with others. The NPS has restrictions that result in food service, overnight supervision, some aspects of program planning and implementation, and fund raising being best done by a partner. While there are a few examples of residential programs being managed only by the NPS, these are small programs and are limited in scope.

In comparison, those run by nonprofit partners hire leaders who are skilled and experienced specifically in residential program management. They have skill specific staff, including food service, curriculum development, janitorial, and residential programming expertise. They are trained in environmental education, emergency and risk management, overnight program management and camp administration.

It is especially valuable that partners bring fund raising expertise to the table when managing residential programs. Grant writers, corporate relations and individual donor management are critical in order to attract program development and scholarship support dollars to the program. This allows residential centers to serve children from a variety of backgrounds.

There are various models around the National Park System of types of locally based partnerships that are managing residential centers. Friends groups or other community based organizations can be a managing partner. In some cases the centers are their own nonprofit organization. In one case there is a national partnership with local leaders at each site (NatureBridge).

Perhaps the greatest benefit of the partnership between the National Park Service and residential centers is the ability of the nonprofits to provide stable connections and leadership to and with local schools. They provide a depth of educational leadership and school relationships that can be hard to develop in field trip based programs. School administrators and teachers invest a lot of time and commitment to make successful residential programs work and this allows for deep ongoing relationships with residential center staff. Participating teachers become champions of the national park and incorporate what is learned in the park into their classroom instruction. It is this depth of commitment to national parks, developed in immersive experiences that will help guarantee future support for our national parks.