

THE MATRIX THAT SCHOOLS WORK WITHIN TO EXCECUTE OVERNIGHT FIELD
TRIPS AT WOLF RIDGE ENVIRONMENTAL LEARNING CENTER

by

Charles Jacob Pavlisich

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND.....	1
Background Information	1
What is a Wolf Ridge Trip	2
Focus Statement and Question	4
2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK	5
ELCs, Students, Teachers.....	5
3. METHODOLOGY.....	9
Demographics	9
Data Collection and Analysis Strategies	11
4. DATA ANALYSIS	14
Results	14
5. CLAIM, EVIDENCE, AND REASONING	20
Claims From the Study	20
Value of the Study and Consideration for Future Research	25
Impact of Action Research on the Author	26
REFERENCES CITED.....	28
APPENDICES	30
APPENDIX A: Survey and Survey Information	31
APPENDIX B: Interview Questions.....	35
APPENDIX C: IRB Exemption.....	37

LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1. Data Triangulation Matrix	11
2. Cash incentives for Lead Teachers paid by schools.....	15
3. Funding sources for an RELC trip	16
4. What are Teachers Looking for in Classes.....	18

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1. Largest barrier to Teachers in making a Wolf Ridge trip happen	19

GLOSSARY or NOMENCLATURE

RELC's: Residential Environmental Learning Centers

Lead Teacher: Individuals primarily responsible for organizing a school trip to a RELC and the main contact person for the trip

ELC: Environmental Learning Center

ABSTRACT

In the world of Residential Environmental Learning Centers (RELCs), our existence hinges on the attendance of students via visiting school groups. Whether a school visits or not often comes down to the effort and will of one or few teachers from each school willing to organize the trip. How teachers and schools organize, fund, and plan trips to RELCs is understudied. This research looked into Lead Teacher preparation efforts, funding acquisition, and compensation, as well as the barriers faced in executing a successful visit to Wolf Ridge Environmental Learning Center in Finland, MN. It was found that teachers spend on average 38 hours planning and on average received 381 dollars in compensation, though 68% of Lead Teachers received no compensation. They found funding for the trip through piecing together money from fundraising, grants, scholarships, and donations to pay for the trip and major challenges faced such as high bussing costs, lack of outdoor equipment for students and finding volunteer chaperone. How schools overcome these limitations and barriers often hinges on the support of the community, teachers, as well as federal and state programs.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

Background Information

Wolf Ridge ELC (Environmental Learning Center) is located in Finland Minnesota and serves around one hundred schools across the Midwest. Wolf Ridge is considered a Residential Environmental Learning Center (RELC) where schools bring students for three to five days. While at Wolf Ridge students live, sleep, eat, and take classes with their peers on our 2000-acre campus in rural northern Minnesota. Because of the known value of EE experiences and logistical challenges of organizing multi-day school trips, having a better understanding of what it takes to visit an RELC as well as what schools hope to accomplish by visiting is vital to the RELC's ability to improve their service and adapt to the schools wants and needs in the 21st century.

In order for schools to visit a RELC it often requires a large amount of work and effort from one or a few teachers or school staff. The person primarily responsible for organizing the trip from the school's side is referred to as the "Lead Teacher" though this person may not always be a teacher; they are sometimes the principal or community member. The organizing of a field trip to a RELC like Wolf Ridge can be overwhelming, with the bulk of responsibility to find the funding, recruit chaperones, choose the classes, organize bussing, collect permission slips and health forms, assign learning groups, meet with families, and document the trip often falling on one or a few teachers. Once they are at the RELC they often need to supervise and handle any behavioral issues from students and manage the other chaperones. In the last five

years there has been a large shift in school groups coming to Wolf Ridge ELC. Schools that have been coming for years no longer have the lead teachers they've depended on, and schools that have never come before are now interested. We are currently still below pre-pandemic levels but each year we have been getting closer to pre-pandemic levels. After the turmoil every part of the education world has felt from the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers are being asked to do more and more, and in some cases are dropping their visit to Wolf Ridge or other RELC's. From the RELC's perspective we need to do more, make it easier, and incentivize schools to keep coming for students to keep receiving this experience.

What is a Wolf Ridge Trip?

To better understand why teachers, go through the process of making this trip happen, it is important to describe a typical trip to Wolf Ridge ELC. Groups travelling on busses from across the Wisconsin, Illinois, and Minnesota arrive at the Wolf Ridge campus in Finland, Minnesota, located just south of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness in Lake County. Whether schools stay for three days or five days is up to the schools, for the 2023-2024 school year Wolf Ridge charges \$181 for students for three days and \$287 for five days. This includes meals, dorms, and classes but does not include getting the groups to Wolf Ridge. The cost charged per student paid by a mix of fundraising, grants, scholarships, parents paying, and donations to the attending schools. The cost Wolf Ridge charges is not the true cost of the experience, Wolf Ridge is a private non-profit that receives no direct state or federal funding. We fund the program we offer through charging the students, collecting donations, and applying for grants.

The official Wolf Ridge experience begins when the bus drops off students in front of a dorm building where a Wolf Ridge liaison meets them and a mass shuffle of moving supplies and bodies into the dorm rooms which were assigned in advance is facilitated by teachers and other chaperones. However, many schools say that even the drive up is the experience coming over Thompson Hill into Duluth is the first time many students see Lake Superior. Once gear is dropped into the assigned rooms students and chaperones meet in a dayroom, (common space) and are given a welcome by their Wolf Ridge liaison. The liaison is also a naturalist and educator at Wolf Ridge who explains the schedule, map, and general flow of their time at the ELC. This person eats meals with the group and is their connection to the ELC, often teaching several of their classes. Fifteen minutes before lunch a small group of students and a chaperone are sent to the dining hall to help in the kitchen, known as kitchen patrol. This group rotates throughout the week and students eat early then help serve food, do dishes, and clean the hall after serving. The rest of the school group has some time before lunch to finish settling in while the liaison finished checking in with the Lead Teacher, collecting forms, getting final numbers for the dining hall and double checking the schedule. When the schools designated lunch time arrives, the group goes over to the dining hall and eats cafeteria style, served by their classmates. They return to their dorms to get ready for their first class in the afternoon. The schools are divided into learning groups of 12-20 students with a few adult chaperones, and those groups head to their respected classes in the Education or Science building. There a Naturalist is waiting for them with a classroom set up and will spend the next three hours (1:30pm to 4:30pm) in that class. Each group is often taking different classes that spread out across the 2,000-acre campus. Classes include Orienteering, Rock Climbing, Animals Signs, Birds, Lake Study plus many more with

around 40 class options available. After class they return to their dorms, another round of kitchen patrol is sent off for dinner, soon followed by the rest of the group. Evening classes begin at 6:30 and are split into two pathways. First option for learning groups is a three-hour class of Rock Climbing or Ropes Course which fills the rest of their evening. The second is an evening presentation, a forty-five-minute presentation put on by a Naturalist followed by an evening activity which is set up by Naturalists but lead by chaperones or teachers. These evening activities range from night hikes to paper making and end between 9:00 and 9:30pm when students return to their dorms and head to bed, with the option of astronomy extending further into the evening. The day kitchen patrol reports at 7:00am and breakfast is served before the morning three-hour class that brings them to lunch, which is where the cycle repeats from when they arrived minus the liaison welcome and moving in.

Focus Question

My focus question was, What issues and barriers are schools and Lead Teachers facing and overcoming when bringing groups to Wolf Ridge ELC?

My sub-questions are the following:

1. To what extent are teachers incentivized by the school/district to visit a RELC?
2. How do schools find funding for an RELC trip?
3. What do schools' value in a visit to an RELC?
4. What is the biggest barrier in making a trip happen?

CHAPTER TWO

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

RELC's, Students, Teachers

Schools visiting Wolf Ridge as a part of their school year has been happening for over fifty years. Throughout the history of this relationship, RELCs provided a service to schools that they cannot provide on their own: A multi-day experience away from home where students are immersed in outdoor education, an immersive experience that addresses standards, ties in environmental education, and social emotional learning. Schools and communities see such a value in this experience that they fundraise, volunteer to chaperone, spend hours organizing and planning to make this experience happen for their students. In many schools' chaperones and teachers are now returning to Wolf Ridge, their first time being as students.

There are many studies on the impact of RELCs on students and how their visit impacts their learning. Ranging from academic changes to students' feelings on environmental issues and their comfort on being outside. A study by Olson (2006) found that of the students they surveyed on their visit, 47% said the experience improved their ability to challenge themselves more. From 53 students surveyed Olson also found that 70% of students claimed their experience at Wolf Ridge improved their relationships with peers and 47% claimed it improves their relationships with the teachers on the trip. Olson's surveys also found students came away with increased knowledge of the environment.

A Beyer (2015) study found a key benefit from outdoor environmental education, that by giving students an outdoor environmental learning experience it was found to significantly reduce the fear in outdoor play for urban youth. Two other studies done with students who visited the Great Smokey Mountains Institute at Tremont, another RELC, where it was found that the experience increased attitudes, awareness, and intentions of how students perceive the environment, this was found for both short-term (Stern et al., 2008) and three months post visit (Farmer et al., 2007). Students retained information they learned while at an RELC six months after a visit with behaviors, such as not wanting to use pesticides, were found in interviews from students (Farmer et al., 2007). RELC's have been studied for their effect on students for some time, many studies showing benefits for students in their education and social emotional development.

While student outcomes and experiences with RELCs have received significant attention, my study aims to focus on factors that shape and lead teacher experiences with RELCs. (Cincera et al., 2021) claims that teachers' perspectives of outdoor programs have been understudied. In their own study they interviewed 17 teachers who brought students to one of five residential programs in the Czech Republic (Cincera et al., 2021). They interviewed teachers after they had brought students to an RELC. This study explained that the Lead Teachers interviewed had similar duties to ones at Wolf Ridge, organizing, paperwork, commuting with students and parents, etc. What (Cincera et al., 2021) found was that teachers highlighted the social emotional growth of their students and experiences that were unique and not possible in a classroom (Cincera et al., 2021). This was interesting to compare with what school teachers who attend Wolf Ridge ELC value. However, this still does not address quantifying the effort required to

make a trip possible. A study by (Story et al.,2023) looked into the barriers of schools to Environmental Education field trips to the Congaree Biosphere Reserve in Georgia by interviewing both schools and the ELC's is more to the focus of this study. (Story et al.,2023) interviewed both participating and non-participating schools within an hour of the Congaree Biosphere Reserve in Georgia. The most common barrier cited by schools in this study was financial, citing the cost of the trip and especially bussing (Story et al., 2023). Schools that visit Wolf Ridge are often coming from over two hours away, and so I was intrigued if schools visiting Wolf Ridge face similar issues.

In practice I gave out surveys to every lead teacher when they arrived at Wolf Ridge but then reached out to them to ask if they would rather an interview instead. The survey was completed when they are currently at Wolf Ridge. One aspect I incorporated is similar to another study that interviewed teachers is adjusting the questions in the interview based off their responses (Cincera et al., 2020). This allowed for deeper dives at interesting remarks and unforeseen comments to provide better insight into that Lead Teachers scenario. I used both open and close ended questions, with the survey's being more closed ended, so to encourage more responses. The interviews being more open ended in style in order to get deeper responses. This is similar to the methods by another study that also interviewed teachers and allows for more qualitative data by giving the interviewee space to expand and give details (Story et al., 2023). The interview script is not followed precisely and allowed for following up on interesting remarks and exploring moments such as when interviewee laughs can shed details or unveil that you could be misinterpreting the situation (Seidman, 2013). I left space in the interview for those opportunities when they arise.

A key reason for this research is the upcoming bill in Minnesota; Outdoor School for All. This bill would provide funding to schools to allow them to provide an overnight outdoor learning experience to all their students at some point during their education (Let's Get All MN Kids Outside! | Outdoor School for All Minnesota, n.d.). This comes at a pivotal time for RELC's and their schools. Schools with Lead Teachers who have been coming for decades are retiring, or left during the pandemic without passing the torch to another teacher. This research is looking at the work those Lead Teachers put in to make the trip happen as well as make the organizational process easier in order to help new Lead Teachers in the case that this Bill does pass, resulting in an influx of new schools having the means, but not the know-how, to visit. I only asked for responses from teachers who came this year between October 2023 and April 1 of 2024.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Demographics

The group I studied are the individuals classified as Lead Teachers, the people who take on the primary responsibility of making the trip occur from the school's side. This is a single, or small group of individuals who are often, but not always, the teachers of the students visiting. There is not a preferred focus on certain types of Lead Teachers or schools, and the responses collected are done only by teachers willing to complete either the survey or interview. Because of this I received data from public, private, and charter schools from districts across the state of Minnesota. Though I am not collecting data on Lead Teachers in terms of their years of experience in leading trips to our ELC. Wolf Ridge already has this information and it will be referenced for any themes. There are some Lead Teachers who have led the trip for over twenty years, and teachers who have been leading for less than five years' experience. One individual who is now assisting the Lead Teacher had been coming since 1979 and another Lead Teacher was leading their first trip and knew of Wolf Ridge because they came as a student. The majority of Lead Teachers visiting Wolf Ridge are elementary educators who are typically one of the primary teachers for the grade level attending. The most common grade levels attending Wolf Ridge are 5th and 6th grade, but extends downward to 4th grade and a mix of groups whose grade levels vary from 7th through 12th. These schools are typically led by a classroom teacher that teaches primarily the grade level visiting.

While at Wolf Ridge teachers are often busy throughout the entire day. Though many schools have a significant amount of help from chaperones, Lead Teachers often are still on duty in a variety of ways. They help organize the kitchen patrol (a group of students who help with food service at breakfast, lunch and dinner) and also want to attend the classes they signed their students up for and see their students in this experience. Often the teachers will attend with the groups to the Animal Signs class, Birds class, or the Snowshoeing courses. They also help with recycling patrol as school are in charge of their own recycling in buildings. Lead Teachers also still serve as a resource for behavior management and other issues within a group.

During the course of surveying, responses came from teachers of a wide variety of backgrounds. Most responses came from elementary educators with their groups coming from either 5th or 6th grade classes. There were several groups that break this norm. Some teachers came with high school groups and were bringing their class over the weekend. These were often science teachers that had either a specific high school class come (an example would be an Environmental ethics course that would be an elective) or brought their entire grade level. When discussing with these teachers, though this was not part of my study, they mentioned they preferred to bring classes over the weekend so the students wouldn't miss other courses and the schools wouldn't have to find substitute teachers. This may easily be an unforeseen barrier for high school groups looking to access an RELC experience, where their low representation may be overlooked in the response data.

Data Collection and Analysis Strategies

The two methods used to collect data are a survey with open and closed ended questions as well as an in-person interview of Lead Teachers while they were at Wolf Ridge ELC or after their visit. I used both data sources to answer my four sub questions (Table 1).

Table 1. Data Triangulation Matrix.

	Data Collection Methods	
Question Being Asked	Survey	Interviews
Main Research Question: What issues and barriers are schools and Lead Teachers facing and overcoming when bringing groups to Wolf Ridge ELC?	X	X
Sub Question #1: To what extent are teachers incentivized by the school/district to visit a RELC?	X	X
Sub Question #2: How do schools find funding for an RELC trip	X	X
Sub Question #3: What do schools' value in a visit to an RELC?	X	X
Sub Question #4: What is the biggest barrier in making a trip happen?	X	X

The surveys and information on the study (Appendix A) were given to Lead Teachers when they arrive at Wolf Ridge. A Naturalist or I checked in on the Lead Teacher to see if they

had interest in the interview (Appendix B) instead of a survey. The research methodology for this project was ruled exempt by Montana State University's Institutional Review Board and compliance for work with human subjects was maintained (Appendix C). These instruments were reviewed by Wolf Ridge staff and feedback was given by Montana State University professors, giving a degree of validity and reliability to the data.

The purpose of asking for interviews is to get more detailed responses and the ability to ask follow up questions in order to better understand the teacher's views, barriers and reality of the field trip. Using strategies from (Seidman, 2013) such as following up points the teachers make, exploring hunches, and giving space for the interviewee to speak I looked to gain insights from the interviews that surveys are unlikely to obtain. The interview questions are much more open ended, but ask for similar information as the survey. By giving the survey as an option as well as the interview the goal is to get as many respondents as possible in the time given (September 2023 through March 2024). Surveys were to be completed on their own time and submitted to the Wolf Ridge office when they checked out or sent in digitally after their visit.

If teachers expressed interest in the interview but did not have the time while on campus I organized an interview at a later date, the soonest after the visit they would allow. Interviews were conducted in person, and via a video conference. Both interviews and surveys are designed to gather the same basic information, with the two options there to suit the teacher's preference and time availability. The interviews provided the opportunity to get more in-depth information when possible. The Survey Questions are split into two parts, the first portion of the survey focuses more on the outcomes of this study, looking to find how schools fund the trip and what Lead Teachers perceive to be the biggest barrier of the trip. It also asks what kind of

compensation Lead Teachers receive, in order to find if teachers are incentivized by their schools to lead a trip.

Because of the opportunity of having professional educators observe the classes provides Wolf Ridge, the survey and interviews both have questions regarding feedback for the classes. These include “Why do you chose the classes you do?” and “What are we missing from the programming or support?” Though this is not the primary focus of this study it is an opportunity for the program to improve that cannot be overlooked. Wolf Ridge trips are not mandatory for most schools and so the teachers bringing them are usually highly motivated and passionate about the trip, and not receiving their feedback would be a missed opportunity. These are found in second part of the survey while some of these questions were used in the study, others were added purely for the benefit of the staff at Wolf Ridge. Some of these questions that won’t be found in the study but were included in the survey (Appendix A) are “What are we missing from our programming?” and “What can we most improve on?” These questions are also found in the Interview (Appendix B) with similar wording.

CHAPTER FOUR

DATA ANALYSIS

Results

From the surveys and interviews I received 24 total responses (fifteen surveys and nine interviews) over the course of the study. Of those, 22 gave information on financial compensation. Sixty eight percent (15) of teachers received no financial or other incentive to come on the trip, while 18% received over a thousand dollars stipend or incentive. These are cash values and rounded to the whole percent. There is a wide array of incentives. Below represent the cash incentives, though some Lead Teachers did not respond to the questions with a measurable value or did not indicate whether or not they received compensation (Table 2). An important note is that two of the schools where teachers received a stipend of over \$1500 had that value in the teaching contract and both schools are from the same district (Prior Lake Savage). Though the mean value of stipends is \$381, the median and mode value of teacher's stipend for planning and leading the trip is \$0. Another note is this is the compensation value per Lead Teacher from the school, some schools such as Onamia have two Lead Teachers that receive \$1400 each. They were placed in the 1000-1500 range. This overall lack of financial incentive indicates that there are others reasons take on the responsibility to make the trip happen. Many of the reasons listed by teachers spoke to the benefit of the experience for their students.

Table 2. Cash incentives for Lead Teachers paid by school, ($N=22$).

Cash Amount	Number of schools
0	15
1-500	2
500-1000	1
1000-1500	1
1500+	3

The average time spent planning before arriving at the ELC is 38 hours, this was an average from the cumulative time spent preparing by teachers from the school. From interviews and surveys, it was learned that this time includes night meetings with chaperones, booking busses, organizing fundraisers, collecting donations, applying for grants and scholarships, acquiring appropriate gear for students, answering questions from families, assigning dorm rooms, making schedules and sending out information and forms. The 38 hours does not include the hours spent on the trip, which is an overnight, all day intensive commitment of its own. When asked in interviews about admin support or finding time teachers reported that they were free to use contract time to accomplish these tasks but nothing else was typically taken off their plate. Another note is that this is the cumulative preparation time per school, if multiple teachers were working on the trip this is their total hours spent.

Funding for the trip came from a variety of sources, the two primary sources were grants/scholarships and fundraising both of which were used by 61% of schools to help fund the trip. I found 83% of schools used multiple methods to fund their trip with one school relying solely on their school budget and another only on fundraising (Table 3.)

Wolf Ridge helps facilitate some of the scholarship money with our Program Coordinator helping to award LCCMR (Legislative-Citizen Commission on Minnesota Resources) This represents a bulk of the scholarships and grants represented below. Wolf Ridge's Program

Coordinator reaches out to applicable school and helps facilitate the process. This scholarship has been around for three years and has helped several schools make the trip for the first time.

Table 3. Funding Sources for an RELC trip, ($N=24$).

Type of Funding	Percent of Schools Using That Funding	Total Schools Using That Funding
Grants/Scholarships	63%	15
Fundraising	58%	14
Families pay	29%	7
School budget	42%	10
Donations	21%	5

When teachers were asked “what do you want students to get out of the trip?” This was an open-ended question and teachers listed an many novel aspects and experiences such as “living in dorms” explaining that for many of their students this will be the first time away from without their parents. Team building and problem solving were also mentioned multiple times. In interviews Lead Teachers spoke to giving experiences to students that otherwise never have the opportunity one teacher stating “this is the closest most my kids will ever get to a summer camp” and another “until this trip most my students have never seen Lake Superior”. Others spoke about building a relationship with their students and the changes they see in the students. One teacher spoke about students struggling in a traditional setting, “we get some boys and girls that aren’t doing very well in school and we bring them up here and they’re just angels, they love it.” These experiences they speak to are not found in state standards but are a major reason they make the trip happen. When asks more specifically “What are you looking for in the classes you

chose?” in the survey they had several options to “select all that apply” as well as the option to write in their own response (Table 4). Environmental Education was the highest chosen option at 94% (Table 4) but all options were selected by more than 50% of the responders. Showing that school teachers generally look to bring students for an encompassing experience.

Table 4. What are teachers looking for in classes, ($N=18$).

Class provides	Percent chose	Total chose
Meets standards	56%	10
Social emotional learning	56%	10
Adventure	78%	14
Connection to landscape	72%	13
Relationship building	83%	15
Environmental Education	94%	17

In terms of the biggest barrier 55% of Lead Teachers claimed funding for the trip, with many citing the cost of bussing students to be a large hurdle to clear (Figure 1.). The schools that listed bussing costs were groups in with responses citing financial barriers their largest hurdle. In their responses 4 Lead Teachers cited bussing costs specifically which would represent 18% of the total sample. Three teachers stated that there are grants and scholarships to pay for the cost of being at Wolf Ridge or other RELCs but not to cover the cost of bussing, which is where much of their fundraising costs go towards. When asked in an interview a teacher claimed that to take a single coach bus from Minneapolis and back cost them “\$4,200”. Making the cost of bringing two coaches for larger groups \$8,000, which was reported from larger schools. I then began asking schools about the bussing costs as an additional question, and found wide ranging value. Schools in Duluth, MN had costs of around \$1000 where some small school districts near

Hinkley MN used their school busses and the district just footed the bill. Schools from over 2 hours away were often forced to use coach busses because at certain drive distances they were required to have a restroom on board. I found that the most common response from these schools were \$4000 per coach bus. Scholarships and grants often cover much of the cost that Wolf Ridge charges, but the other costs such as bussing become another barrier for the schools. Other barriers that were noted was staff buy in, and gear for the students, as Wolf Ridge operates with groups year-round.

Staffing was another issue, one response stated this was in regard to recruiting chaperones for the trip while the another who was a middle school teacher mentioned for middle school they teach multiple classes to several grade levels making it hard for teachers to lead trips as substitutes would need to be found. For elementary teachers they may still have to have subs depending on how their school rotated classes. For schools like Onamia who have been coming for over 40 years, it has become part of the school culture and other teachers covered for the ones going on the trip, as a way to ensure the trip could occur.

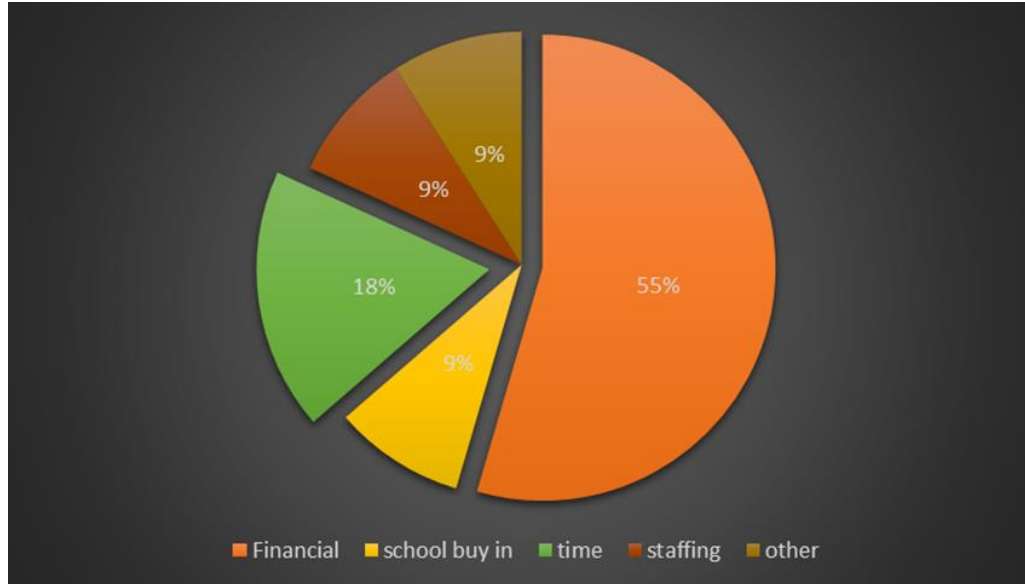


Figure 1. The largest barriers to teachers in making a Wolf Ridge trip happen ($N=22$)

In both the survey and interviews, I asked Lead Teachers if and how the administration supported the trip. From 22 responses there were 18 that said yes (82%) and 4 that said no (18%). Among the “yes” responses there were a wide range of how the administration at the school supported the trip. Four Lead Teachers stated that administration supports by “letting them come” but 7 Lead teachers spoke about how principals help with planning, fundraising, or come on the trip themselves. One Lead Teacher spoke about how much easier getting the trip approved by the school board became once children of the board members went on the trip, and then members became repeat chaperones as well.

CHAPTER FIVE

CLAIM, EVIDENCE, AND REASONING

Claims From the Study

From the teacher's perspective leading a trip to Wolf Ridge for an RELC is a lot of work for little reward in terms of financial gain. With an average prep time of 38 hours of additional work beyond normal teaching expectations with the majority of teachers (68%) leading trips receive no financial gain. Those two statistics together support two claims. First is that RELC trips for students have such a value for students, that teachers, parents, and administration at schools are willing to make sacrifices in time and energy because they see that it is worth it for their students. The schools that already come to Wolf Ridge see its value for their students and parents see the value for their children and deem it worth the fundraising, planning, travel, and time. In the interviews giving students an outdoor experience is at the forefront of their minds. From one interview the Lead teacher spoke about the student's lifestyle and the opportunity that a Wolf Ridge trip provides. "Our students are living a very urban lifestyle" and when he brings them up to Wolf Ridge he said "I'll take them down to Wolf Lake on a night hike and that's the first time they'll see stars or the Milky Way." Another Lead Teacher spoke about the community building the experience brings and how it brings the students together speaking about the ropes course class "I don't think there is a better way to build community within the class than ropes" The same teacher spoke about coming to Wolf Ridge so their students can "continue building their science identity". There is clearly a passion from the Lead Teachers and the community surrounding them about what effect bringing the students to Wolf Ridge has on them. In the surveys and interviews teachers chose environmental education most frequently when asked

what they want students to get out the classes. However, this is far from the only reason and only a small part of the experience.

The second claim is that teachers are not fairly compensated for their additional efforts in making this trip happen. The vast majority of teachers spend almost a full work week of hours pre-trip in prep work to then go on the trip. This means in addition to planning riding the bus up, then sleeping and staying on campus for several days all while receiving nothing more than their standard pay. The schools that do pay their teachers, two of which are from the Prior lake school district, have leading a Wolf Ridge trip written in their contract similar to that of being a coach or leading a club. The lack of financial incentive is unequitable in the labors of the Lead Teachers who become organizers, fundraisers, and even grant writers to make the trip happen. Wolf Ridge is in a tricky situation with funding the teachers from a political aspect. Because Wolf Ridge is reliant on students paying, through grants, scholarships, fundraising or school budget, in order to come, it becomes awkward when navigating paying a Lead Teacher to bring students as it would be then using the students bill to then turn and pay the teacher. Currently the Outdoor School for All bill is written that the state would pay teachers an extra stipend if they are the ones organizing the trip. Wolf Ridge would struggle to pay the teachers without then raising tuition costs. As it is Wolf Ridge acting as a private non-profit works to keep prices down so that schools can afford to come.

Schools come in spite of the cost, but it is the largest barrier. This is seen in the surveys and interviews as the biggest barrier to the schools who still come and represents as a clear avenue to making the trip easier for the Lead Teacher. With the recent addition of the LCCMR (Legislative-Citizen Commission on Minnesota Resources) scholarship helping many of the low-

income schools. One teacher referencing it in the interview “we were awarded \$5,000 this year and that was incredible.” Creating more avenues of financial assistance will help recruit new schools, as this year shows. North Metro Flex is a school in southern Minnesota that came for the first time this year because our Program Coordinator reached out and told them they qualified for 100% of their tuition to be covered by LCCMR. This made the trip feasible for them but still left them paying transportation. Within the financial aspect bussing was a major hurdle cited by many of the Lead Teachers, with one lamenting “Our district won’t let us take a school bus” leaving them no other option than paying for a coach. Another teacher quoted the cost of a single coach bus at “\$4,200” while larger schools estimated the cost of two coaches being around \$8,000. When asked what the biggest barrier in making the trip happen a Lead Teacher didn’t hesitate to answer “the obvious answer is money”. With many schools using several methods from fundraising, scholarships, to collecting donations, finding consistent reliable funding for RELC visits would save Lead Teachers and schools time and headache of looking for funds. This would help make funding the trip more equitable across the state of Minnesota for schools, and save teachers the time of organizing and running fundraisers. Every student should have an equitable opportunity to visit an RELC and this would help to address the two largest barriers. Funding would help offset the financial barriers schools face as well as the barrier of time (the time it takes to prepare for a trip) and staffing, which was mentioned both in getting chaperone and teachers to go as well as finding subs. As it stands Wolf Ridge offers calendars by local photographers each year as a fundraising option to the schools. Other schools use spaghetti feeds, or sell candy bars to fundraise for the trip. Taking that off the plate of teachers would significantly reduce the pressure and time it takes to gather funds and make the trip more

accessible. Further utilizing the grants and scholarships available is one avenue that can provide immediate support but state funding for the trip would greatly relieve the barriers in place.

In the current state of RELCs it presents a challenge for recruiting new teachers without taking advantage of the altruistic nature of many educators. Wolf Ridge already helps to find and award scholarships. For teachers feeling the stress of working in a modern classroom this will likely not be enough. To convince new teachers to take on this challenge of adding 38 hours to their work load, learning how to fundraise, organize and lead a trip with no prior experience is daunting. With the goal of giving students an outdoor learning experience in mind, this is a major hurdle. Providing teachers fair compensation for the work they do in regards to field trips will be a hurdle in ensuring an RELC experience for all students. One concept being discussed is to create a Wolf Ridge trip workshop, where teachers can meet with seasoned Lead Teachers and Wolf Ridge staff to help them plan a Wolf Ridge trip. This was an idea brought up by multiple Lead Teachers who suggested this as well as a mentorship program to pair new Lead Teachers with experienced ones.

Teachers bring classes for the environmental education, but that is far from the only reason. Ninety four of Lead Teachers stated that chose their classes specifically for Environmental Education, however many teachers listed a wide array of reasons for bringing their group. The experience Wolf Ridge provides is not isolated to the classes that students take, but the wide array of experiences and challenges they get to face in staying at the Wolf Ridge campus. Teachers referenced staying in dorms and the independence students learn while being away from home. The novel experience surrounding the trip to Wolf Ridge is a large part of why groups keep bringing students each year. As well as coming to meet standards, and build

relationship which are the major focuses of the Lead Teachers in this survey. Many of the things they look for happen within and outside of the classes. With some even mentioning the bus ride as they come through Duluth, one teacher stated “for three quarters of them it was their first-time seeing Lake Superior.” Teachers also used the trip as an anchor point throughout the year with one teacher stating “I reference the Wolf Ridge trip about once a week” and others referencing the Voyageur class and the Ojibwe classes as anchoring points for their social studies curriculum.

To conclude, schools and RELC’s rely heavily on Lead Teachers who are tasked with finding funding, organizing, planning and executing the trip while often receiving little to no benefits for completing the trip. Some schools provide excellent added pay to the teachers for the added work load but these instances are in the minority. Most schools rely on the combination of fundraising, scholarships, and grants to fund the trip with some supplementation of funding from the school budget. Teachers take on the extra workload regardless of the lack of financial payoff because they see value in the RELC experience for their students, putting in on average an extra 38 hours on top of their normal work load along with supervising the trip itself to ensure their students the opportunity of this experience. The schools and their community see the value in the trip for their students as many schools have been coming for decades, fundraising year after year and volunteering to chaperone. RELCs serving students currently hinges on the work of a few passionate teachers who see the value of the trip outweighing the lack of personal gain for the effort put in to ensure students a residential outdoor learning experience. In order for the opportunities these schools get to provide their students the system must be improved and changed so that all students can have this opportunity. This brings us to the upcoming bill in Minnesota; Outdoor School for All. This bill would provide the schools funding that would go

towards an RELC experience of their choosing. In its current form it would provide funding for bussing, the cost of being at the ELC and compensation for teachers. This would have a dramatic impact on the workload involved in planning the trip and compensate for the efforts put in by the Lead Teachers.

Value of the Study and Consideration for Future Research

This study gave a dive into the variety of situations that schools and Lead Teachers face when planning a trip to Wolf Ridge and the reliance on a lot of community support. The insight of how much energy and time goes into the planning of an RELC trip contrasted to the lack of payouts for the teachers themselves really shows the disparity in their compensation to labor. It shows it takes a highly committed individuals or groups in order to for the trip to happen. This study focused on the teachers who are already coming to Wolf Ridge in order to see what barriers they face and the situations they are in. The other group that would be pertinent to study would be interview teachers who would like to make an RELC trip happen. This may show us other barriers that are keeping them from attempting the trip. This would also help Wolf Ridge and other ELC's find resources for those prospective teachers and use what we learn from teachers who already make the trip happen. Another interesting area would be to investigate are the chaperones who volunteer to help observe students and take time off of work to help. These individuals get a full RELC experience as well and can have valuable insight into helping make the trip more accessible to more schools. They are also often individuals who help fundraise and are motivated to make sure their child is getting to go on this trip. Learning what the value they see in an RELC trip would strengthen the case for supporting these endeavors. There are five

others major RELCs in the state of Minnesota that operate in similar aspects to Wolf Ridge. Interviewing and collecting data from those ELCs may provide insight into methods that they employ with their Lead Teachers that may be beneficial to all other ELCs. Coordinating information with them may provide insights into overcoming the barriers and make the trip easier for teachers, regardless of the RELC they visit.

Because this study looked at the general state of teachers and schools making a trip to Wolf Ridge, it opens the door to many other studies that could build upon this. There is a lot of data available with the schools that visit an RELC because much of the information is recorded or public knowledge. Deeper dives into comparing public, charter, and private schools could provide insight into discrepancies and access to resources. Information on travel distance and the ability to visit may shed insight on barriers in bussing cost across the state. Focusing on high school students who are dramatically underrepresented and RELCs and looking at the impact that it has on those who visit and ways to overcome the barriers high schools face in making trips happen all would be valuable in better understanding the world of RELCs and their relationship with mainstream education.

Impact of Action Research on the Author

This research really helped open my eyes to the effort involved to make a trip happen and these teachers while often thanked by parents and administration, often go without any compensation. On one hand, this has made me further realize how valuable this experience must be for the students in order to go through all of the efforts and not receive any compensation for it, what RELCs provide is that important, to the teachers and communities that support the trip year after year. There are also many unquantifiable aspects to the experience that Lead Teachers

see as important that aren't listed in state standards. These include the social emotional learning to the novel experience of being somewhere new and having to be independent from your parents, interacting with other students and adults over the course of days and experiencing new things. It also gave me the ability to make more personal connections with the Lead Teachers, rather than names on a sheet often after the interviews we would talk for longer than an hour to hear personal stories, memories, and thoughts on the program. I was able to get to know them personally, how they became a teacher, why this is important to them and how they see the trip and the passion they have. These personal connections are so important to organizations like Wolf Ridge and I look forward to meeting with Lead Teachers in the future and getting to know such a passionate group of individuals. This research showed me that we need to find more ways to get resources to the Lead Teachers, and make their planning as easy as possible in order to ensure they are able to make the trip happen in years to come.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

SURVEY INFORMATION & SURVEY

Survey Information

Hello Lead Teachers, this is coming from Charlie Pavlisich, the STEM Coordinator at Wolf Ridge. Thank you for taking interest in this survey!

It has some implications for the future of Wolf Ridge. Firstly, the information on this sheet is being collected as part of my Master's thesis, looking into the situation of Lead Teachers across schools. The data you will provide will give a better understanding of your role and how Wolf Ridge can support you, as well as it will provide insight into how we can improve our programming.

The survey is one option, there is also a short interview that would be even more beneficial. If you would like to be interviewed please let your liaison know, it would take about 20 minutes and we would likely try to fit the interview in around meal times or right at the beginning of classes!

Thank you for all you do

Lead Teacher Survey

Associated school: _____

Who is tasked with organizing the trip? Is it one person or a group? Please list the position(s) they hold with the school you do NOT need to use names. (teacher, admin, parents of students)

How do you fund the trip to Wolf Ridge? Circle one or more.
School budget, fundraiser, scholarship, grant, other

Please provide a brief description

Do the trip organizers receive any type of compensation for bringing a group? If so please explain what kind and the amount; financial, comp time etc....

Yes No

Please describe the form of compensation if there is any.

What takes the most time when preparing for a visit? About how much time is spent preparing for the trip by staff?

Do you have admin/district support for coming and in what way, they give you time to prepare, they come as well?

Does the local community support the visit to Wolf Ridge?

If possible please explain how they support the visit.

What is the biggest barrier in making a Wolf Ridge trip happen?

Category two visiting Wolf Ridge

What do you want your students to get out of visiting Wolf Ridge?

What are you looking for in the classes you chose? circle all that apply or write in reasons if you chose "other" in the space to the right.

Meeting standards

Social emotional learning

Adventure

Connection to the landscape

relationship building

Environmental education

other

What are we missing from our programming or support?

What can we most improve upon to make your visit easier or experience better?

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Category 1 (prep and planning)

Who is in charge of organizing the trip? What positions are they in, is there a team?

How do you fund the trip to Wolf Ridge? (budget, fundraise, scholarship, grant)

Do the trip organizers receive any type of compensation for bringing a group?

What is done to prepare for a visit? (organize groups, time spent)

Do you have admin/district support for coming and in what way, they give you time, they come as well?

How does the community feel about visiting? (do parents strongly support the visit?)

How do you prepare students for a visit?

What is the biggest barrier in making this visit happen?

Category two visiting Wolf Ridge

What do you want your students to get out of visiting Wolf Ridge?

Why do you choose the classes you do?

Do you involve the visit in your curriculum before and after?

Would you like to have more contact with wolf ridge before and after?

What are we missing from our programming or support?

What can we most improve upon to make your visit easier or better?

APPENDIX C

IRB EXEMPTION

Hello Pavlisich, Charles,

Your protocol was reviewed by the IRB and has been approved.

PI: Pavlisich, Charles

Approval Date: 10/31/2023

Title: the matrix that schools work within to execute overnight field trips at wolf ridge environmental learning center

Protocol #: 2023-1003-EXEMPT

Review Type: Exemption

Expiration Date: 10/31/2028

Work described under this protocol may now commence. The PI is responsible for ensuring that the protocol accurately describes research practices being conducted.