

As travel opportunities increase, travel managers are finding increased risk, preparations and duty of care quotient.

Travel stress can exacerbate mental health issues such as depression, anxiety and behavioral disorders, which are growing among adolescents.

Advanced vetting, managing medicines, affordability and accessibility are all top concerns right now.

# TRIPPED UP

New challenges populate the decision-making maze of independent school travel programs.

BY STACEY FREED

If school issues aren't keeping you up at night, they might wake you up. Josh Abrams will never forget the late-night call he got a couple years ago from teachers leading an international trip to a rainforest. "They were crying," said the head of school at Meridian Academy, a grades 6-12 independent school in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts. A student had run away from their accommodations. "It was pitch black, and they were scared to even look for the student because they themselves might go over a cliff," he explained. Ultimately, they found the student, and Abrams called the parents, who took a flight the next morning to get their child.

As at many independent schools, leaders at Meridian Academy felt that every student should have the opportunity to go on a school-sponsored trip. The rainforest incident set off a change in policy. "We don't feel that is a reasonable thing to do anymore," Abrams said.

The school created a form for parents that allows them "to reflect on where [their] kid is emotionally"; it asks about hurdles and potential fit. "I think it helps them be part of that decision, even if we [administrators] have made up our mind on a particular student. You want to engage the family in getting to that place." When a big trip isn't appropriate, a smaller one might be. "Honestly, in many cases, a kid who's extremely anxious about travel is often relieved" when they get the official response and an "excuse" not to go, Abrams said.

Mental health challenges are just one of many in trip management today. Post-pandemic, issues such as political upheaval, climate events and

disease have come to the fore in international travel, according to Bill Frederick, director of Lodestone Safety International, a consultancy for health, safety, security and training programs overseas. And these larger issues are in addition to the already myriad trip management concerns school leaders face.

Yet while the concerns are many, so are mitigating strategies to face them.

## Advanced Vetting

Mental health challenges are rising in student travel, said Justin Kollinger, senior risk management consultant with United Educators, which provides liability insurance and risk management services across the education spectrum. While some students have traveled with their families and know how to handle themselves abroad, "there are many who, for varying reasons, are particularly unprepared for the challenges and stresses of experiencing a different culture," Kollinger said.

About a decade ago, Bobby Riley, senior vice president, national K-12 practice leader, Assured Partners/Fred C. Church, based in Massachusetts, saw that international travel was shifting at independent schools. Schools began to expand their program offerings in "locales where common travelers weren't going. They were lesser known, less developed, and they typically didn't have the same type of emergency services or health care" as in the U.S. "Simultaneously, the standard of care for schools with kids traveling internationally was being raised."

Worldwide, mental health issues are on the rise, particularly among teenagers. According to the World Health Organization, globally, one in seven 10- to 19-year-olds experiences a mental disorder, accounting for 15% of the global burden of disease in this age group; depression, anxiety and behavioral disorders are among the leading causes of illness and disability among adolescents, and suicide is the third leading cause of death among those aged 15 to 29.

For more on managing mental health risk in independent schools, see "Riding the Waves" from the Jul/Aug 2023 Net Assets.

These trends combined place a burden on school professionals and trip leaders. Mike Ciuni, director of fellowships in global citizenship at Hathaway Brown, an all-girls K-12 day school in Shaker Heights, Ohio, advised school leaders to identify students who may not fare well abroad during the application process. It is difficult to tell students they are waitlisted to go on a trip, he acknowledged, but in HB's case, the decisions are made by a committee. Accepted students fill out an information packet, and the committee asks for transparency. "We need to learn how best to support a student. You need to build trust and be articulate about why they may not be going on a trip."

## Medical Management

Medical-related challenges such as administering medication may include mental health but also expand beyond to other conditions.

Viktor Panchak, security director at International SOS, which does risk management and travel security consultancy, relayed the story of a traveler he worked with who brought his teenage son on a business trip to India. The boy had type-2 diabetes. "They brought a lot of pills and tablets without their original packaging and prescriptions. It's unauthorized to bring medication without the original packaging and the prescription," Panchak said. (Although it's not essential, Panchak recommends having prescriptions translated into the local language.)

"You can't always assume that the medications taken by students in the U.S. are legal or prescribable in other countries," Kollinger added. Families should provide schools with a list of all their child's medications and help families determine whether those medications can be taken abroad. Additionally, families need to work



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with their doctors to evaluate alternatives in case they need emergency access in their destination.

## Civil Liberties

In recent years, as more students have been open about their sexual orientation or gender identity, schools are facing decisions on where to house students and how open students should be in public when traveling.

Erica Thompson, assistant head of school for equity, diversity and inclusion at Saint Patrick's Episcopal Day School in Washington, D.C., said that creating overnight travel has become more complicated. "Traditionally, we've had boys' cabins and girls' cabins or used single-sex hotel rooms. It was always very gender specific." Trip managers now ask students who they want to room with. "I think because they couldn't imagine that we'd do anything differently, for the most part they still wrote down just girls names or just boys," she said.

Thompson has called around to other schools for advice but "nobody has really figured it out." One option was sleeping in sleeping bags in a gym. "That helps with the sleeping part but not necessarily with the bathroom part, which is a whole other issue," she said. "Particularly when they're changing clothes, I feel like that's when parents worry." If the trip involves hotel rooms, housing a transgender, nonbinary or gender-questioning child in an individual room "just feels exclusionary," she said. "Half the fun of field trips is that you're traveling with your buddies."

Traveling internationally to places with different cultures and values adds yet another level of stress for gender-expansive students or those with a sexual orientation that falls outside the cultural or legal mores of the destination country or locality. "Are you putting your students in harm's way? And depending on the student, how willing are they to try to fit in?" Thompson asked rhetorically. "Sometimes students can be vocal and not recognize the danger they might face."

School leaders talk about these issues at meetings, but there don't seem to be good answers for how to handle these situations. Said Thompson, "We take all of our children's needs into consideration on a case-by-case basis, which means each time, we're just trying to figure it out."

## Affordability

Affordability and equitable access to trips are also top of mind for business leaders. Post pandemic, accommodation and transportation costs have risen. Many schools base their travel aid formula on the percent of financial aid a family receives, but in some cases that is not proving to be enough.

St. Ann's School in Brooklyn, New York, has a non-tuition fund for trips as well as other fees such as yearbook, said CFO Bianca Roberson. She surmises the fund may be tapped more than in the past because the school has a "growing number of families who are right in the middle, where they can just pay the [full] tuition. It may be that a family member, like a grandparent is helping out with the cost," Roberson explained. "It would not surprise me if we see more families who aren't getting aid for tuition apply for aid for an international trip because of the cost and because they're right on the line."

Maret School in Washington, D.C., typically runs an international trip every year, supported by a special travel budget, said Assistant Head of School Trey Holloway. "Historically, we've been able to assume that the percentage of financial aid needed for the trip is roughly the same as what we generally need for tuition. About 25% of our kids receive financial aid."

This past summer, however, Holloway noticed that many full-pay families seemed interested in accessing international travel outside of school-led trips. "This led to a much larger financial aid need for trips," he said.

In response, leaders are adjusting travel offerings. "The trip that used to run to Sanibel and Puerto Rico was focused on ecology. We're close to the Chesapeake Bay, so we're going to do something local this year as it relates to ecology." The slightly shorter trip that is unique to the local area may generate more interest. "Some families can get on a plane and spend weeks in France in the summertime. But can they create an ecology trip that's focused on the Chesapeake Bay? We're trying to provide experiences that are harder for families to replicate."

## Expanded Research

The list of possible challenges grows longer every year. Educators can't know everything when it comes to trip management. But as school's duty of care increases, leaders should make every effort to keep up, Frederick said.

While schools have traditionally gathered information from the U.S. State Department and the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, other resources are available. Frederick reported that some schools are working with organizations such as ISOS, CISI (Cultural Insurance Services International) and Geoblue for reviews of school policies and analysis of the facts on the ground.

He also suggests turning to Factual or Sybelline for real-time information. Using AI, these organizations collect stories from around the world and analyze and curate them before sharing them with clients. "Analysts confirm

Photos courtesy of Meridian Academy.

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## NEW GUIDANCE

In October 2024, specific to youth travel, the International Organization for Standardization released *ISO 31031 – Managing Travel Risks – Guidance for Organizations*. The updated standard gives guidance on two components: how to manage travel-related threats for children and youths; and how to prevent incidents by providing a structured approach on handling the risks associated with students, universities, and school travel – both domestic and international,” said Panchak, ISOS’s international security director. It covers:

- Guidance on developing plans to identify and address emergencies
- Guidelines for assessing and treating travel risk
- Ongoing risk management
- Assessment of current adherence to the standard
- New standards on inclusivity and environmental sustainability

Using the strategies highlighted in the new standard, Panchak said, “will help you develop a robust plan in house or hire external service providers to do that as they are best positioned to assist you in identifying, addressing and mitigating risks and threats related to a travel.”

and cross reference information for more accurate knowledge,” Frederick said. (See box at right for more details.)

These organizations can provide extremely specific location information, Kollinger pointed out. They can provide reports not just on South Africa, but specifically the Eastern Cape province, for example. “It’s even down to the city level. When a school has access to that level of granularity, we strongly encourage it,” he said.

## Hiring Help?

While a third-party provider can help manage the mountain of rules and regulations, planning, logistics, mitigation issues, insurances and risk, their use adds costs to any trip. For Meridian Academy, it is worthwhile. Abrams said his teachers have been “really clear that it is so much less stressful for them to have people on the ground with connections. It means there are extra adults, medical care will be readily accessible because you have an organization that can tap into it and knows how to organize travel on the ground.” The “significant cost” also “adds a lot to peace of mind, and I’m fine with that.”

It also adds another layer of research for your school travel planners. “Meet the providers and communicate your expectations. If they have a language or geography professional but they don’t know how to work with mental health issues, find someone who does,” Frederick said. “Get references from past partners and clients of those third-party planners,” Kollinger added. “Get a sense of how they handle a crisis or an emergency. How did that process go, and how prepared were they?”

The decision to create travel plans in-house or hire a third party, depends on your goals, Kollinger explained. School leaders should know whether a particular trip is aligned with their school’s mission. “It sounds like a basic and obvious step. But there certainly have been trips in the past where a parent requests it, or a teacher comes up with the idea, and nobody stops to question what goal this trip might help us pursue or achieve. And that can be taking on unnecessary risk if the trip doesn’t actually do something the school wants it to do.”

The best way to prepare for any travel-related issues is to plan ahead yet also be flexible. Consider “each single element of your itinerary and ask whether it’s safe. And if it isn’t safe, ask how you can mitigate it, or eliminate it,” Kollinger said. After doing your research, if you’re not comfortable with the probable outcomes, you need to be willing to cancel a trip. And recognize that you may have to change or cancel a trip midway if safety becomes an issue.

## TRAVEL ORGANIZATIONS

**CISI (Cultural Insurance Services International):** Insurance provider.

**GeoBlue:** Independent licensee of Blue Cross Blue Shield Association, specializing in international travel and healthcare coverage.

**International SOS:** Travel and risk management firm.

**Factual and Sybelline:** Providers of real-time global intelligence.

**U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:** Advice on travelers’ health and advisories for countries with health risks to international travelers.

**U.S. Department of State – Bureau of Consular Affairs:** Updated travel advisories for nations around the world.

**World Health Organization:** Information on infectious disease risk.

Make sure you are comfortable with contracts for liability insurance, travel insurance, third-party provider’s cancellation policy, and have a communication plan in place. All of this, of course, takes time.

If the pace of trip management seems to have quickened, it may be interesting to know that one trend in students trips these days is slower travel. Ciuni reported that at Hathaway Brown post pandemic, he sees students needing more downtime on trips, more reflection and a more gentle approach to travel. “We want to go places where the pace of life is slower. School trips tend to look like tours. We don’t even call them trips, we call them ‘programs’ because we want our student travelers to think about the experience as more than just seeing a place. It’s also about what they come to understand about themselves.”

As with most things business leaders do for their schools, the operational considerations are complex, but the payoffs are immense when they are in line with the mission. School trips are no exception. **N**



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