

Making the Grade



An Analysis of California State Parks' School Group Program Evaluation 1998-2002



Prepared by California State Parks' Interpretation and Education Division. To obtain additional copies of this report or if you have any questions, call (916) 654-2249.

Introduction

Through our interpretive programs for school groups, California State Parks provides a valuable service to students, teachers, parents, and the state in general. As field trip destinations, California's state parks are invaluable to schools interested in getting students out of the classroom and into the world beyond the school boundaries. Ask anyone who grew up in California to name the most memorable event of

This was the best field trip I have ever taken my 3rd grade cherubs on (and I've taught a million years). I'm grateful to all of you.

- 3rd grade teacher, Pacific Grove

their school years and you're likely to hear "Seeing the elephant seals at Año Nuevo" or "Touring the State Capitol and the Railroad Museum" or "Living 1860s-style at Fort Tejon for a weekend." So much of what students learn in school fades with the passing years that what usually stand the test of time are the exceptions--the grand events. From day trips to environmental living overnights to in-school programs, California State Parks, which serves over 15,000 school

groups a year, offers opportunities for students to learn about our natural and cultural history through hands-on experiences and interaction with trained staff and volunteers. Encompassing a mind-boggling array of natural and cultural resources, California's state parks are the places where lasting school memories are made.

Because we play such an important role to so many teachers and students, it should be no surprise that California State Parks has conducted a School Group Program Evaluation survey (SGPE) annually for the last five years. The purpose of the SGPE is to assess the effectiveness of K-12 school group programs as determined by teachers. After all, without feedback from our customers, in this case teachers, improvements can only be made using an internal perspective; in other words, we can guess about what needs improving, but how do we really know without asking those who use us? Thus the SGPE allows us to collect from teachers data and anecdotal feedback that will, ideally, give us insights we can use to improve our programs.

Background

The SGPE was developed as a result of the State Legislature's interest in Performance Based Budgeting (PBB). California State Parks responded to the PBB challenge by establishing goals for Core Program Areas, identifying Interpretation as one of the core areas. The outcome measure "Degree of congruity with educational curricula for educational experience for K-12" was established as one measure for this core area. After being entered into a database by headquarters staff, original survey forms are returned to the respective District Interpretive Coordinators to be shared with appropriate supervisors and staff and copies are retained in the Interpretation and Education Division. Survey results are shared internally with Superintendents and District Interpretive Coordinators and through articles in *The Catalyst*, the newsletter dealing with issues related to interpretation in California State Parks.

Thank you for making this program available to 4th grade students. It ties together the state standard with historical sites in an experiential learning experience that's exciting and valuable.

- 4th grade teacher, Escondido

Methodology

Survey Form and Period

Jack Shu acted as lead in developing the SGPE, and the original survey was developed with the input of several individuals. These included Donna Pozzi, Chief of Interpretation, Bill Andrews, Environmental Education Chief in the California State Department of Education, and Jim Hastings, Los Angeles Office of Education. Jack Shu also involved local San Diego area teachers in creating the survey. The survey form (see Attachment A) has remained essentially unchanged throughout the SGPE's five years. It asks teachers to give letter grades (A, B, C, D, and F) to the educational content of the program in the first five questions and then to other issues (pre-trip information, logistics, accommodations, and safety) in the four questions on the second page. Teachers are also given an opportunity to provide written comments in response to a number of prompts. Teachers return the surveys by postage-paid envelope and are sent a free gift as thanks for completing and returning the survey.

Every year since 1998, the SGPE survey period has run from January 1 through May 15. This year, we extended that time frame by a month in order to allow for more surveys to be collected and therefore give us more statistically valid results.

We stopped making this trip 5-6 years ago because we never got a docent; we decided to try again and were delighted with the quality of the program.

- 4th grade teacher, Tiburon

Survey Distribution

For the first three years of the SGPE, 1,500 survey forms were distributed to teachers each year. Each of those years, the then-Gold Rush District was to distribute 500 surveys, with the remaining 1,000 surveys being divided among the remaining districts (Off-Highway Vehicle districts are not included) based upon how many school programs they presented during the previous fiscal year, per data reported on the DPR 918 forms. Districts were then directed to distribute the surveys through their various park units based on the numbers of school groups served in each unit during the previous fiscal year.

It is wonderful. That's why we plan on it every year and put up with the long curvy bus ride. It's well worth it!

- 3rd grade teacher, Crescent City

With the reorganization of the Gold Rush District, the 2001 and 2002 SGPE moved away from this distribution formula and simply directed each district to distribute surveys to 10% of the total number of school groups served by the district in the previous fiscal year. The total number of surveys distributed in each of these two years was slightly higher than the 1,500 surveys distributed in 1998-2000.

Arriving at Statewide Averages

Because the Gold Rush District was distributing only a third of the survey forms in 1998-2000 while presenting about half of the total programs, during those years the statewide average for responses was arrived at by averaging the Gold Rush District's results with those of the rest of the state, thereby

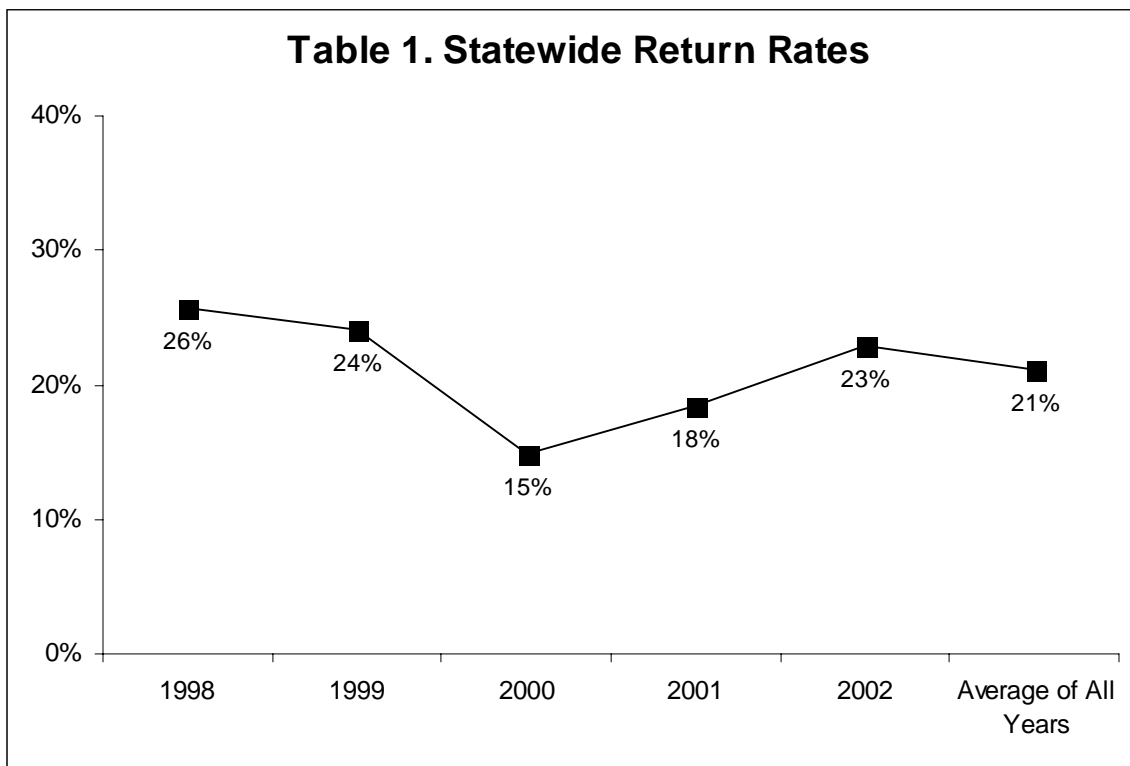
doubling the “value” of the Gold Rush District’s results. However, because the 10% formula was used in 2001 and 2002, the statewide average for these two years was simply an average of all surveys returned from all districts. This change in methodology does not, however, affect our ability to compare statewide average results across all five years the SGPE has been conducted.

Methodology Concerns/Issues

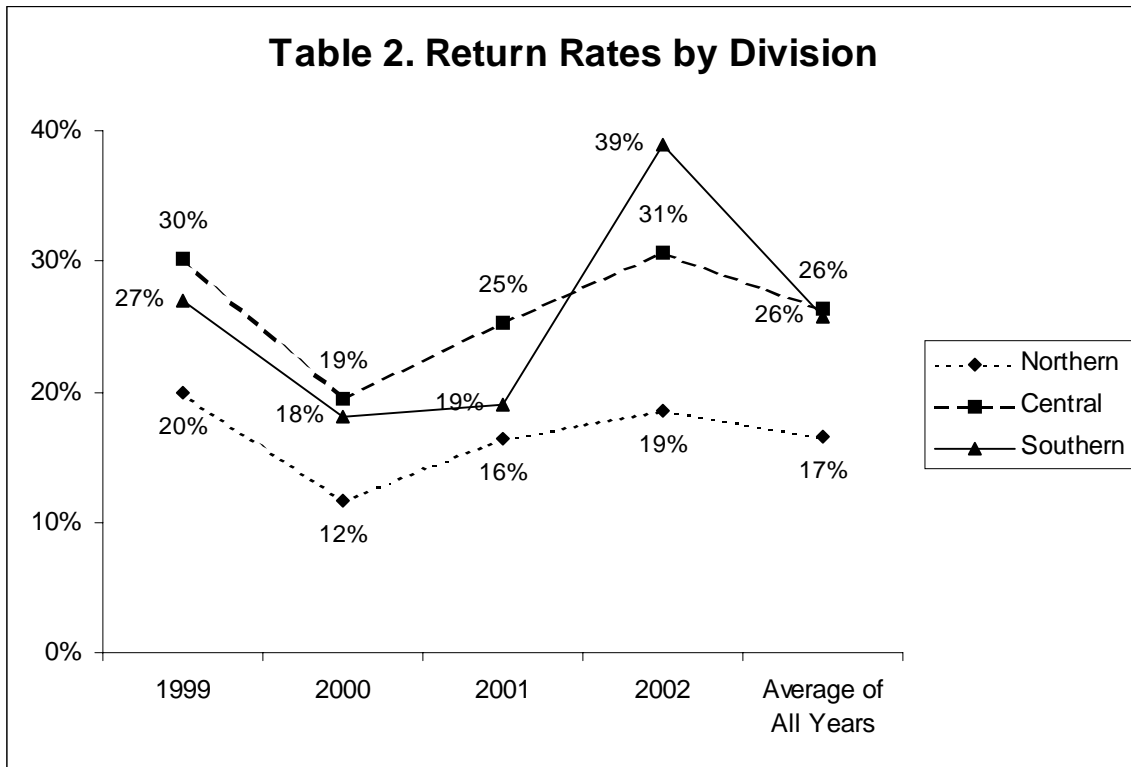
As with any survey with a broad geographic distribution, the SGPE has run into a few problems with its methodology. Primary among these is the apparent failure of some districts and park units to distribute the required number of surveys, or any surveys at all in some cases. Table 1 shows that our statewide return rate fell to below an acceptable level in 2000 (20% is an adequate return rate, and 25-30% would be ideal) and has basically been steadily climbing ever since. Full distribution of all surveys, and continuing to give a worthwhile gift to teachers who return surveys, should help us maintain and even improve our return rates in the future.

I recommend this program to everyone! It was well organized, informative, engaging, and enjoyed by all! The docents were extremely kind, patient, and informative.
 - 4th grade teacher, Santa Maria

Table 2 is included to show the variations in return rates over time for each division. Because the Northern Division distributes the vast majority of the surveys (1,207 in 2002, versus 316 for the Central Division and 167 for the Southern Division), it is understandable that the park staff in that division would have a more difficult time distributing all their required surveys and therefore end up with a lower return rate. Additionally, teachers coming to the Capital District (which distributes the most surveys of any



district) are often moving from one park unit to another and therefore are more likely to be distracted from filling out and returning surveys by the logistics of herding groups of students and parents between locations within an urban area. However, if the department could take steps to increase the return rate for that division, it would serve to give us more statistically valid statewide results in the future, as well as enable us to establish valid results for the Northern Division alone.



Another issue relates to the need for random distribution, which in some cases appears not to have happened. Often a high number of surveys will come in from one park unit all referencing the same day of visitation, even though that unit (or even that district) only had a few surveys to distribute over the entire survey period.

Finally, although this isn't a "problem" but rather a caveat, it should be made clear that no district or division can individually have statistically valid results through the SGPE. For the most part, districts don't distribute enough surveys to represent the population they serve. Those that do distribute enough surveys, don't have enough returned to be able to generate statistics below a ten to twenty percent

The flora and fauna visible on the nature walk and the depth of information given by our guide helped enrich our children's awareness.
- 3rd grade teacher, Los Angeles

margin of error, too great a margin to rely on such data. Thus the SGPE is only statistically useful as a statewide survey and should not be used to make district by district or division by division comparisons. However, because all original surveys are returned to the respective District Interpretive Coordinators, to then be shared with supervisors and staff, they can prove immensely helpful as anecdotal feedback, particularly the comments sections

Survey Results

There are three primary ways the survey results can be used by California State Parks to make improvements in our programs:

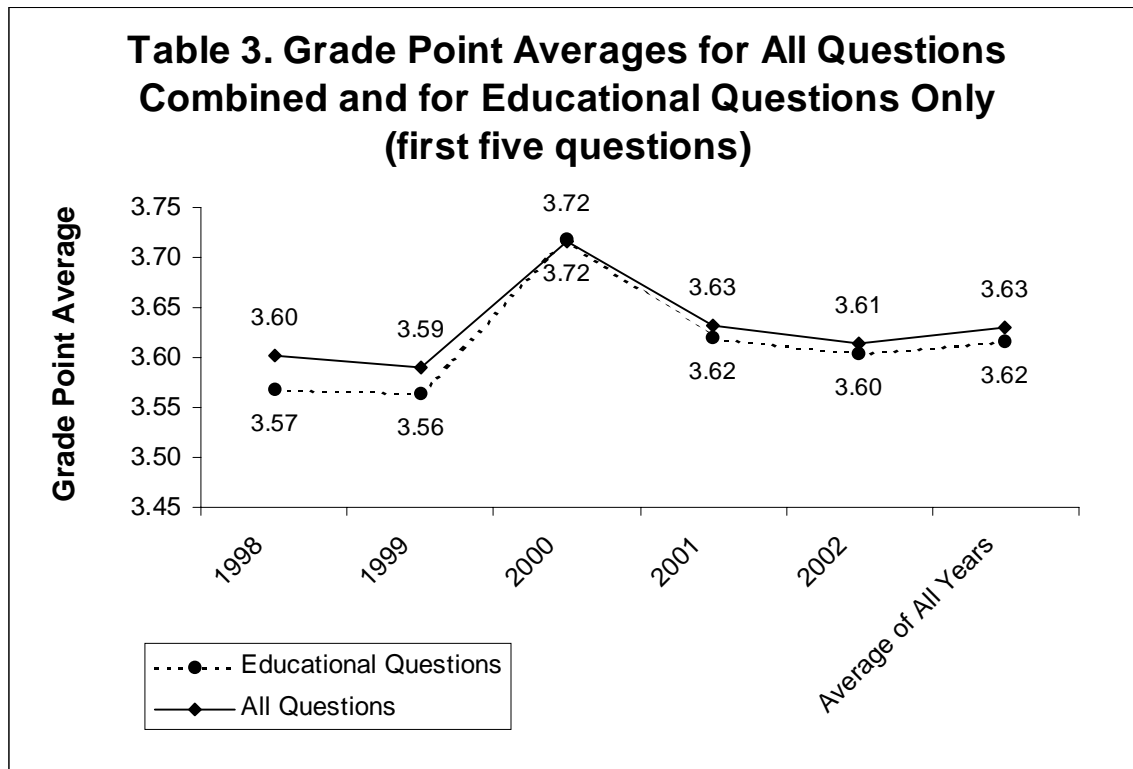
- To know if and how we're meeting teachers needs, based on the grades teachers give in relation to certain questions;
- To know more about our audience in terms of grade levels and what types of programs they're coming for; and,
- To get feedback on what we're doing well and on how we can improve.

I continue to be impressed with the educational value of the State Parks programs.

- 4th grade teacher, Santa Cruz

How Are We Doing?

In analyzing our grade point average over the past five years, there are two ways of viewing the data: Comparing average grades for each year and comparing grades for each question. As can be seen in Table 3, we've maintained a GPA in the B+/A- range over all five years of the survey. It is unknown why there is what looks like a dramatic increase in overall GPA for the 2000 survey year. But this jump isn't outside of control limits and probably shouldn't be given much weight because we weren't doing anything different that year, which then changed by 2001, that can be pointed to as a reason for this increase. Rather 2000 should be viewed as an anomaly, since the 2001 and 2002 results are more in line with earlier years.

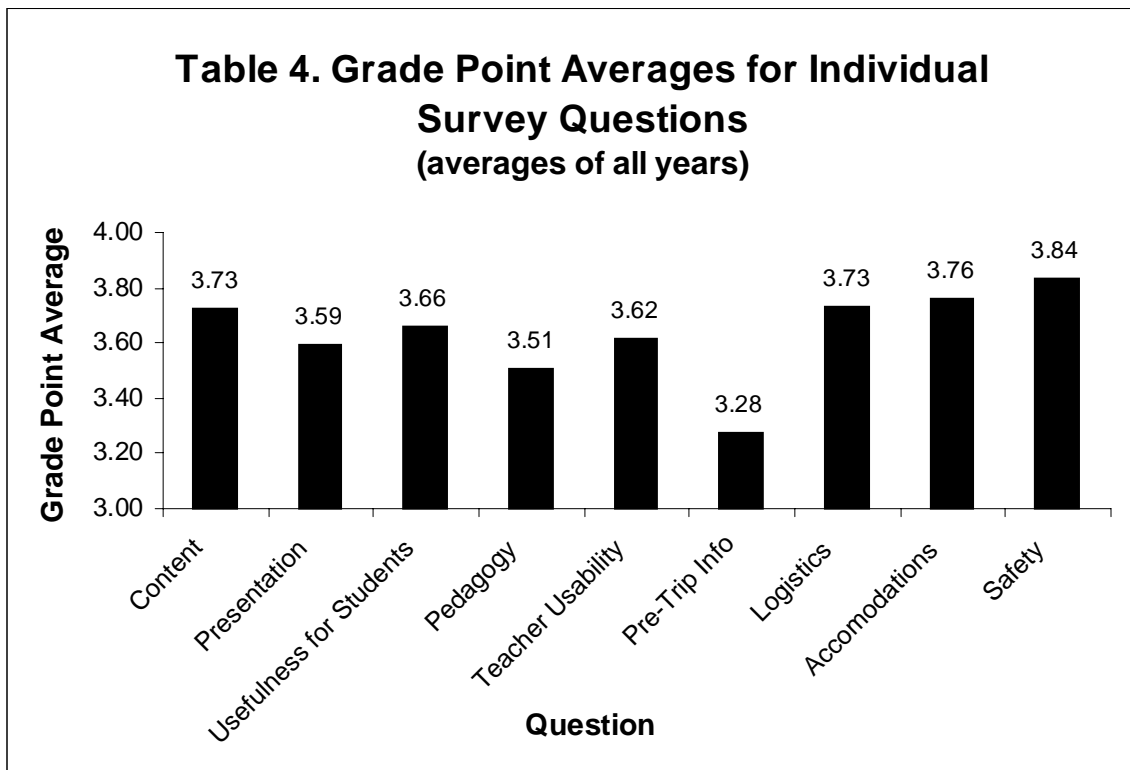


Comparing the average of grades over all years by question yields some insights that could prove useful in making improvements to programs. First, Table 4 readily conveys the fact that our pre-trip

It was a great field trip that the children will remember for a long time!
 - 1st grade teacher, San Juan Capistrano

information could be improved. While a B/B+ GPA is nothing to sneeze at, it is definitely lower than the GPA for the other questions asked on the survey. This is despite the fact that this is the question most often left blank on the returned surveys (non-answers are not factored into the grade point averages) because so many teachers receive nothing and therefore consider this a non-applicable question. Unfortunately, our

second lowest scoring question is the one that deals with our use of current educational pedagogy; specifically active learning techniques, group learning, and sensitivity to diversity. Perhaps as we improve our program content through our growing emphasis on educational content standards, we'll also see an increase in the use of techniques that will improve our results in this area, such as using more group and interactive activities (often cited as a "biggest contribution" by teachers, as will be discussed later in this report). It's also fairly obvious that we're doing great when it comes to logistics, accommodations, and safety--our three highest GPAs.



Who Are We Serving?

If we assume that returned surveys are representative of the school group population as a whole, survey results can also show us the grade levels of classes coming to our parks and what types of programs they're attending. Table 5 shows that 43% of returned surveys identified their classes as being made up of 4th graders. (It should be pointed out that a few surveys indicated they had groups made up of multiple grade levels, and this is why the percentages in this table total more than 100%.) After 4th

graders, 3rd and 5th graders make up another 30%. High school students are by far our smallest group, which makes sense considering the greater restraints placed on teachers trying to manage taking students out of multiple courses to be able to go on a field trip.

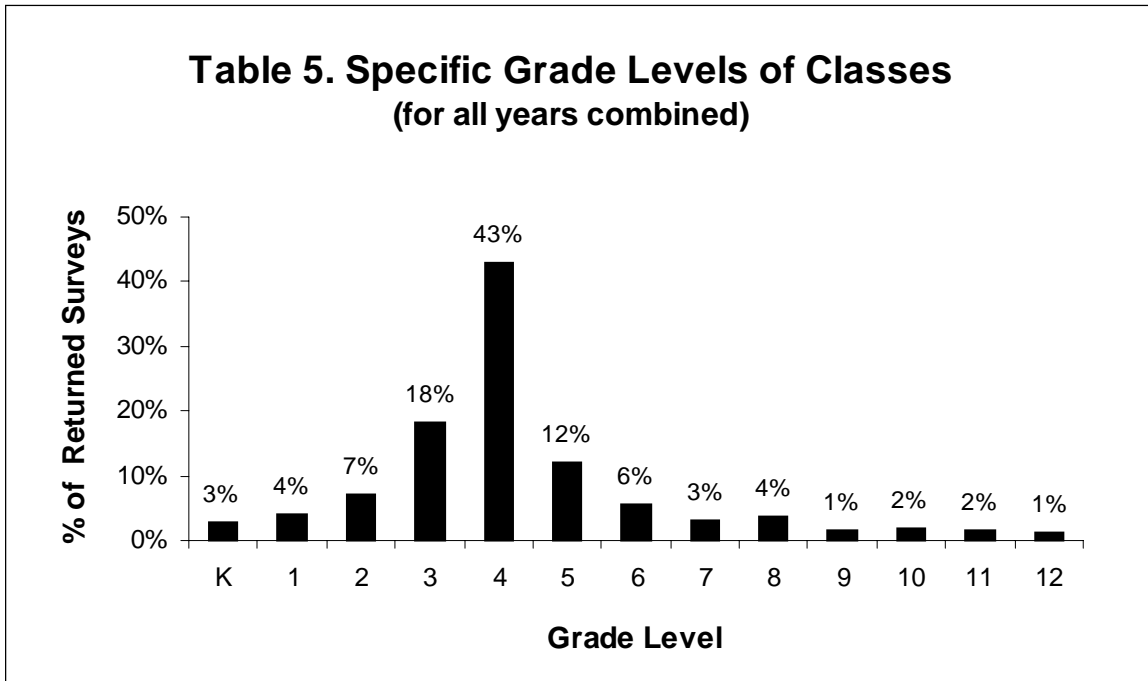
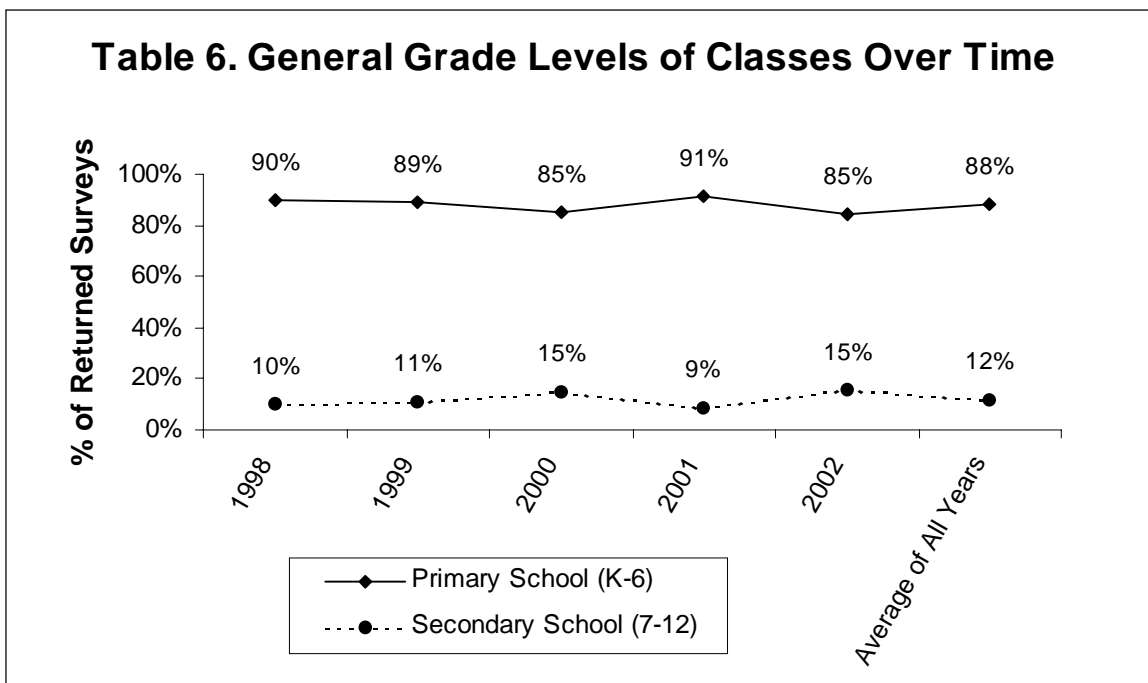


Table 6 further emphasizes the disparity between primary school classes (grades K through 6) and secondary school ones (grades 7 through 12). Over time, the surveys returned indicate a fairly constant disparity between the two schooling levels, with the percentage of primary school classes never dropping below 85%.

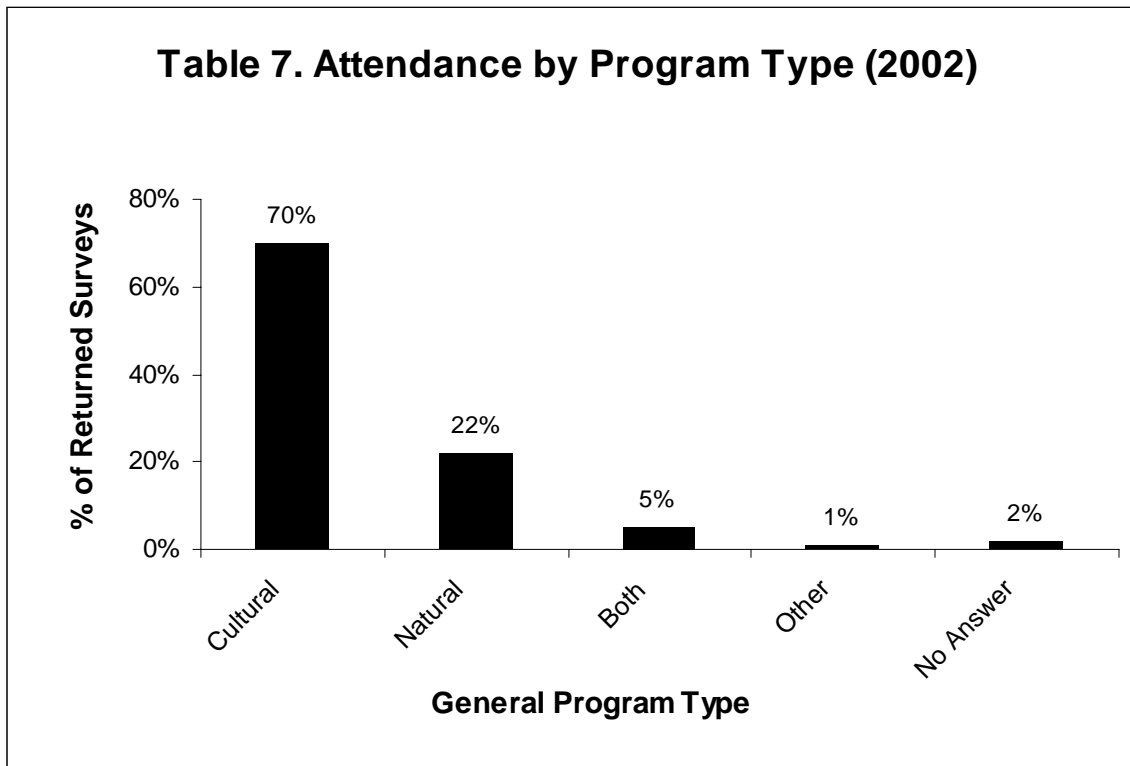


Results from the 2002 evaluation were also tallied in relation to the types of programs the teachers filling out the surveys indicated they had attended. Because this item was a write-in answer, Table 7 may not accurately reflect the actual nature of the programs given.

We are so fortunate to have an authentic Yurok village so near our school and a ranger so well adapted to so many grade levels.

- 4th grade teacher, Cutten

There are probably many programs that did include aspects of both cultural and natural history, but the teacher merely wrote, for example, “Mission Life” or “Tidepools.” Given these constraints, it still appears that the majority of programs school groups come to our parks to experience focus on cultural history.



What Can We Do Better and How?

By generally categorizing the comments received from teachers who returned surveys in 2002, we can make some suppositions about what we can be doing to continue delivering high quality programs to school groups and even improve them.

Table 8 shows what types of comments we received from teachers, by percentage of surveys returned, regarding what they felt was the biggest contribution to their students’ experience (the percentages in the table total more than 100% because some teachers listed more than one item in response to this prompt). State Parks staff grouped these comments

Please continue this program. I have been an educator for 23 years and this had to be the BEST field trip I have taken students on.

- Elementary School Teacher, Santa Maria

into general categories in order to determine if there were any conclusions that could be drawn from them. The two categories that received the highest number of comments were the quality of the interpreter/guide and the interactivity of the program, or, as many teachers stated, its being “hands on.” Obviously, many of our interpreters for school groups are doing a great job, and teachers realize the value of having an informed guide who can relate to students, a far different type of group than the standard visitor or commercial tour group.

We all feel so fortunate to have a great park with such informed and energetic docents. They know how to educate and motivate our young students. Thanks so much!
 - 1st grade teacher, Lakeport

Providing more training in the theories and techniques of working with school groups, especially primary school students, will help improve the programs we give in units that get a lot of visitation by such groups and could lead to greater visitation in those parks that aren't at this time receiving many school groups. Additionally, building in more interactive and hands-on experiences for our school group programs would certainly improve their effectiveness, as many teachers feel this is an important factor in information retention.

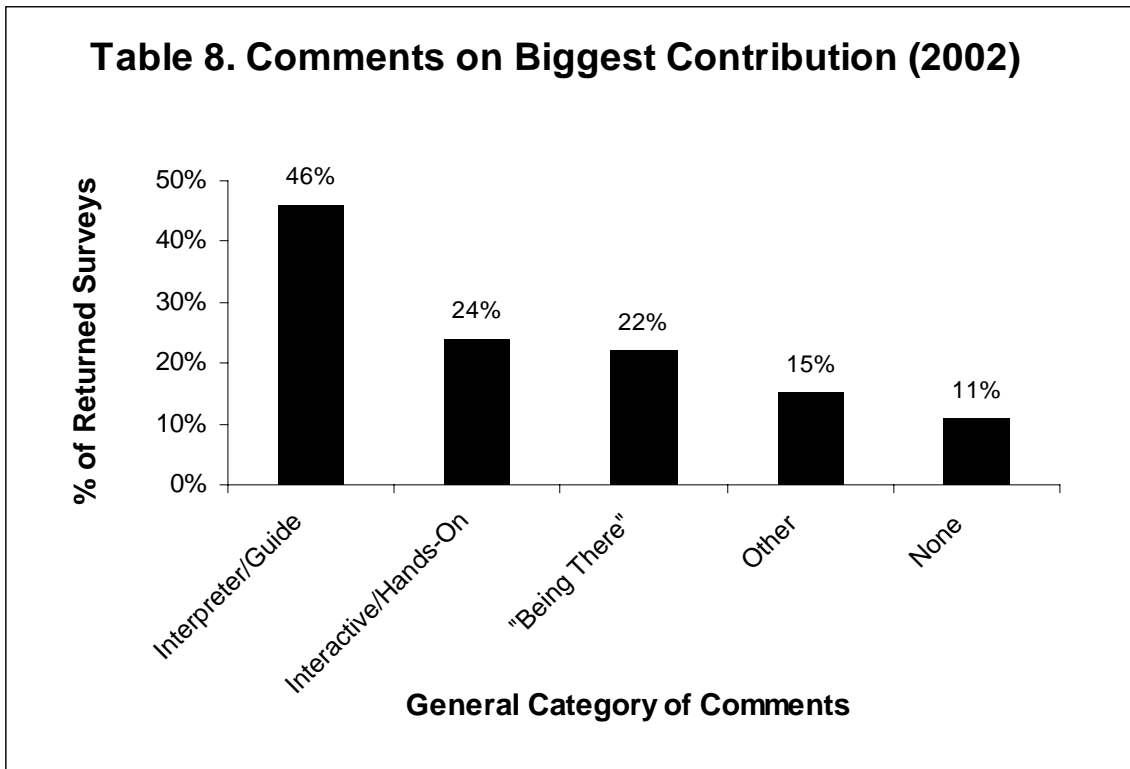
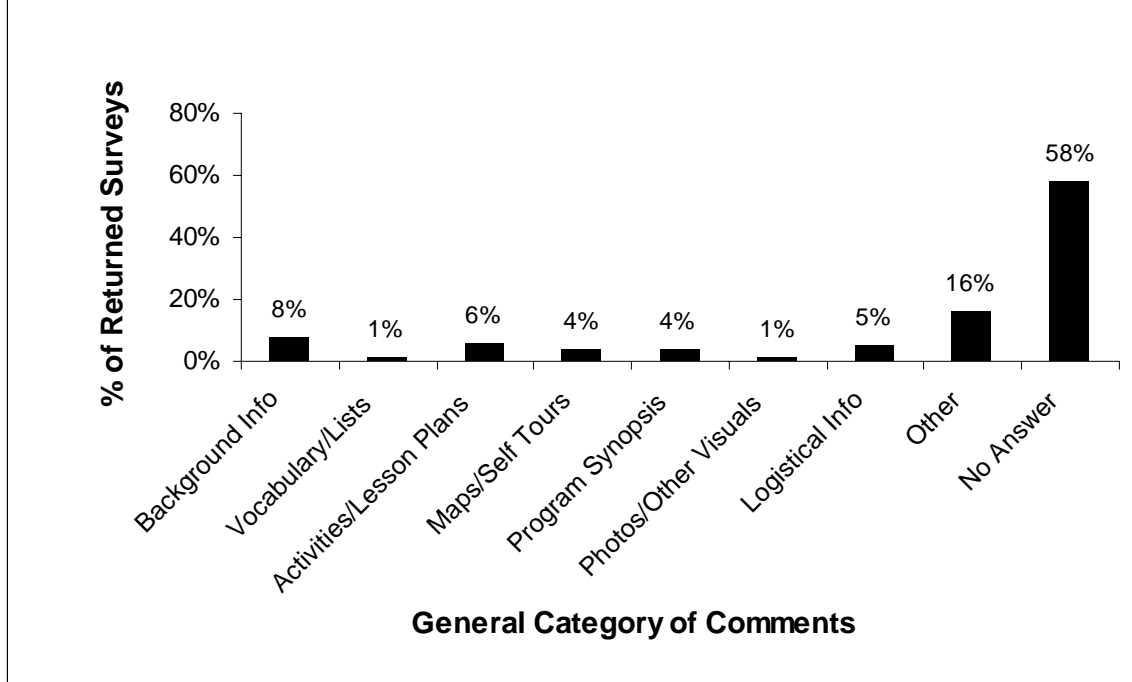


Table 9 has been included in this report because it specifically relates to the survey question on which we have traditionally scored lowest: Pre-trip information (as discussed earlier). Although some conclusions can be drawn from the survey comments as to what we could do to improve this part of our school group program, such as developing background information and pre-trip activities or lesson plans, this table may be even more telling in that the majority of surveys returned had no comments whatsoever in relation to this issue. Perhaps changing the survey in a future year to focus specifically on pre-trip information will lead to more useful feedback on this important aspect of the school group program.

Table 9. Comments on Ideal Pre-Trip Information (2002)



Recommendations

There are two types of recommendations that result from analysis of the SGPE for the last five years. One relates to how we can use survey results to make improvements to our programs, and the other deals with what form the survey itself should take in future years.

Based upon our high average scores throughout the life of the SGPE, it's obvious that we're doing something right when it comes to the programs we provide for school groups. If we are to target our resources in terms of improvements (which is an undeniable fact considering current budget constraints), a focus on improving pre-trip information for teachers (which many parents and youth group leaders may also appreciate) would seem to be appropriate. Additionally, we should provide more training to interpreters and guides who work with school groups, or at least periodic information through the interpreter email listserv and *Catalyst*, on current pedagogical trends (like building critical thinking skills, group learning, interactive techniques, etc.).

The docents were fabulous! They maintained student interest, respected and valued bilingualism. The pace was great. The children had fun and learned a lot!
- 2nd grade teacher, Paso Robles

The survey results also offer insight into how we can improve and change the SGPE in the future. First, if divisions or districts want to achieve statistically valid results, a much greater distribution of surveys must occur. Additionally, although our high marks may be due to the quality of our programs, they could also reflect a need to change the structure or wording of the survey questions. Perhaps a

I grew up in Lancaster PA and never studied local history, flora or fauna. I think our parks are a very integral part of teaching our children who they are and where they come from.
- Elementary School teacher, Eureka

different scoring scale with more steps would be appropriate, or we should further explain what each question is asking. Conducting a few informal focus group sessions with teachers and/or parks staff may lend some insights into this issue. Finally, it appears that we are doing quite well in relation to logistics, accommodations, and safety, so consideration should be given to using the second page of the survey to focus on a particular topic of interest in each survey year; e.g., include detailed questions on pre-trip information or the reservation

system used by the teacher or a particular program type, such as cultural resource programs one year and natural resource programs another.

In conclusion, California State Parks should be proud of the consistently high grades and positive anecdotal comments we receive from teachers participating in the SGPE. But, like all endeavors, improvements can always be made, and the survey results of the past five years can help us target our efforts at improving both our programs and our evaluation process. Congratulations to all our staff who make our parks such a wonderful resource for teachers and students.

This was a fantastic program! My parent chaperones were very impressed, as was I. The students all had a wonderful time. I want to come next school year!

- 4th grade teacher, Salinas

Attachment A



District #:	_____
Unit(s) #:	_____
Code:	_____
Staff, please circle below: Permanent Seasonal Volunteer	

2002 SCHOOL GROUP PROGRAM EVALUATION

Date(s) of Visit: _____ Name of Park Program: _____

Teacher: _____ Grade(s)(circle): K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12

Primary Subject for the trip: _____ Number of students: _____

School: _____ Phone #: _____

School Address: _____ City: _____ Zip: _____

Other Information: _____

For each section, please circle an appropriate letter grade, A, B, C, D, or F, like a report card

Educational Content of Program	Grade: A B C D F
Issues to consider: Did the program present unifying theme(s) and big ideas rather than just facts? Were ideas presented logically and connected to curriculum? Was the program connected to the students' lives and society?	

Presentation to the Student	Grade: A B C D F
Issues to consider: Were the roles of environmental ethics or responsible citizenship explored? Did the program promote respect and caring for the society or the environment, without being dogmatic? Were personal and societal values and conflicting points of view explored in a context that students could understand?	

Usefulness to Students	Grade: A B C D F
Issues to consider: Were instructional materials easy for students to use and understand? Was the program accessible for all students regardless of special needs such as those with limited English proficiency or learning disabilities? Was the layout of instructional materials for students interesting and appealing?	

Using Current Educational Pedagogy	Grade: A B C D F
Issues to consider: Did the program have the students engaged in active learning? Did the program base the students' learning on their constructing knowledge through research, discussion, and application of their findings? Were the instructional materials and presentations sensitive to social, economic, and cultural diversity? Were group or cooperative learning strategies used?	

Teacher Usability of Materials and Presentations	Grade: A B C D F
Issues to consider: Were the learning objectives or outcomes clear and appropriate? How well did the materials integrate into established curriculum? Were the background materials and/or additional resources useful to you?	

General Issues

1. **How useful was the pre-trip information (directions, pre-trip activities, resource materials, what to expect, etc.) provided to you?** **Grade: A B C D F**

• What would you have liked? _____

• What did you receive? _____

2. **How suitable were the logistical arrangements (timing, meeting with people, etc.) for the trip at the state park?** **Grade: A B C D F**

• What would have been ideal? _____

• What actually happened? _____

3. **How suitable were the accommodations (restrooms, parking, meeting space, etc.) at the park site(s) you visited?** **Grade: A B C D F**

• What would you have liked? _____

• What did you find? _____

4. **Were the safety concerns for the trip adequately addressed?** **Grade: A B C D F**

• Comments: _____

What aspect of the program contributed the most to your students' education? _____

Please make any additional comments you have on the program: _____

THANK YOU! We appreciate you taking the time to give us feedback on your experience.
Please return this form to: Interpretation and Education Division, California State Parks,
PO Box 942896, Sacramento CA 94296-0001

**2002 SCHOOL GROUP PROGRAM EVALUATION
FY 01/02 DISTRICT DISTRIBUTION TABLE**

Distribution of surveys is based on the number of in park school group programs given by each district in 2000/2001 as reported on the district's Annual Interpretive Summary (DPR 918).

District	# of Programs 99/00	# of Programs 00/01	# of Surveys 01/02	# of Extra Surveys
Northern Division				
American River***	226	0	0	0
Capital/670	0	5,886	589	5
Gold Fields/690	0	3,085	308	5
Gold Rush***	8610	0	0	0
Marin/655*	577	584	58	2
Mendocino/641**	231	203	10	1
North Coast Redwoods/635**	279	346	35	1
Northern Buttes/645*	453	602	60	2
Russian River/640**	0	0	10	1
Sierra/685**	235	228	23	1
Silverado/660	1089	1,140	114	3
Central Division				
Bay Area/710*	533	515	52	2
Calaveras/725*	750	435	44	2
Four Rivers/735**	82	92	9	1
Monterey/720	859	1,083	108	3
San Joaquin/730**	130	183	18	1
San Luis Obispo Coast/745**	177	244	24	1
San Simeon/740**	204	242	24	1
Santa Cruz/715**	694	370	37	1
Southern Division				
Angeles/915*	371	508	51	2
Channel Coast/910**	41	86	9	1
Colorado Desert/920**	155	126	13	1
Inland Empire/930**	157	121	12	1
Orange Coast/925**	201	233	23	1
San Diego Coast/935*	701	591	59	2
TOTAL	16755	16,903	1690	41

Important: The "Extra Surveys" are to be used only if needed due to loss or damage of Interpretation and Education distributed surveys. ***Districts should only distribute the number in bold print.***

* Districts that should consider distributing additional surveys in order to have a sufficient number of evaluations returned to provide a district measure.

** Districts that must distribute evaluations to almost all of their programs to obtain a district measure.

*** Districts that were realigned into Capitol District and Gold Fields District.