



DEPARTMENT OF PARKS AND RECREATION

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State Park and Recreation Commission Meeting

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STAFF REPORT: PORTS: Parks Online Resources for Teachers and Students ®
2019/2020 Program Report

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SUBJECT: PORTS Creates a Lifeline to Parks During COVID-19

Summary

In response to the COVID-19 disruption in school instruction in March 2020, PORTS: Parks Online Resources for Teachers and Students® (PORTS) provided vital public education to over 100,000 students and families during the Spring. PORTS began offering new PORTS Home Learning Programs, in addition to the existing PORTS On-Demand Programs for classroom instruction. These programs were offered to K-12 students learning at home and in virtual classrooms across California, the United States and internationally. Through the PORTS Home Learning Programs, California State Parks' interpreters broadcasted live from parks across the state, connecting with students through Zoom webinars on a set schedule. The PORTS Program was fully equipped to make this quick pivot to provide continuity of learning opportunities for families and teachers wanting to fill their student's days with educational activities. It is widely known that PORTS was the first to provide free distance learning programs during COVID-19, with many agencies and organizations across the country closely following our lead. This ability to pivot is attributed to the vast network of partners that PORTS has built throughout its tenure. Private industry, park partners, and educational community members all played a role in providing resources, marketing and capacity building. Furthermore, teachers who previously relied on PORTS in-class programs were also able to quickly pivot. Collectively, not a moment was lost in providing an educational connection between California State Parks and home learners including both students and families. The connection PORTS provided to the thousands of participants after mid-March who were in quarantine, was a lifeline of hope to the outside world. The rapid increase in PORTS social media followers and the sincere emotional and positive feedback received directly from the public was overwhelming. PORTS was recognized during COVID-19 by social media influencers, state and local officials, and was featured by California's First Partner, Jennifer Seibel Newsom multiple times in her social media feeds.

Background

PORTS is an innovative K-12 education program that leverages digital tools, specifically live interactive videoconferencing, to break down geographic, social and economic barriers. The program provides teachers and students free digital access to California State Parks and engages them in meaningful, educational conversations about relevant park topics. PORTS provides K-12 students the opportunity to connect with experts in the diverse cultural, natural and historic resources of California State Parks.

PORTS was initiated to provide equity and inclusion for California's K-12 community in 2005 and has been instrumental in showcasing transformation goals of expanding park access for underserved communities and engaging younger generations. PORTS connects people to California State Parks by working with diverse community organizations to build an awareness of park resources and recreational opportunities among underserved communities. The program also creates links between visitors and park values. Since its inception in 2005, PORTS has engaged over 670,000 K-12 education students with live interactive videoconference programs.

PORTS is an established model with proven success in building partnerships with education institutions in rural and urban areas that serve disadvantaged youth. The goal is to connect those students with California State Parks, both digitally and when feasible in-person as well, while providing relevant and educationally structured programming. The program is designed to be readily scaled and replicated statewide.

PORTS continues to see most students participating from low-income and underserved communities. The continual growth and success of PORTS is built upon the professionalism of California State Parks' interpretive staff and the relationships with California's large and diverse K-12 education community, educational organizations, partners, and private industry.

Discussion

2019/2020 PORTS Program Statistics

During the 2019/2020 school year, PORTS served approximately 170,000 students and delivered 3,250 presentations to teachers and students in K-12 classrooms/remote classrooms as on-demand programs or through PORTS Home Learning Programs to students/families. For perspective, prior to COVID-19, PORTS annually served approximately 50,000-75,000 K-12 students during the school year.

The PORTS Home Learning Programs connected with over 70,000 students/families during March-June 2020. As a result of the launch of this program, 11 new parks joined the PORTS platform increasing the number of parks offering programs to 40 different parks. The Boating & Waterways Education Outreach Team also joined up with PORTS to deliver AquaSmart Live programs on the Home Learning Program platform to provide important messaging about water safety.

PORTS On-Demand Programs connected with nearly 100,000 students during the 2019-2020 school year. Prior to COVID-19 beginning in March 2020, On-Demand

Programs were delivered to 50,000 students. During the COVID-19 response period, programs were delivered to 48,000 students.

Data shows PORTS programs continue to be delivered mostly to California's K-12 communities, with some participation in other states and internationally. Students in third through fifth grades also continue to be the highest participants in PORTS programs.

PORTS Resources

PORTS offers a Digital Content Library of diverse digital resources available to students and teachers hoping to connect their learning to California State Parks. These resources are in addition to and can be used as an enhancement of On-Demand Programs and Home Learning Programs. The Digital Content Library includes media such as, a curated list of Park YouTube Channels, previous broadcasts and videos, Padlets, Flipgrid, 360 virtual tours, live streams, apps, a live cam, and Smithsonian Learning Labs.

PORTS has been active on social media including Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. During COVID-19 there was a rapid increase in followers on social media platforms. For example, Facebook followers increased from 1,800 to 12,000. Social media is also a digital platform for live streaming opportunities with park interpreters for general interpretive programs, virtual tours or simply sharing the beauty of park resources. The focus audience of interpretive live streaming engagements has been families and individuals sheltering in place during COVID-19, not the virtual K-12 classrooms with students. Content for these live streams focused on sharing messaging regarding flattening the curve for COVID-19 at parks, practicing social distancing, recreating responsibly, and sharing engaging opportunities with visitors to find a respite amongst the chaos and uncertainty of society. Interpreters started many live streams by sharing a simple phrase such as, "We know because of COVID-19 you aren't able to be here in our parks to enjoy this beautiful sunset on the beach, or the wildflowers in bloom in this canyon, or listen to the birds in the redwood forest, but we are bringing the parks to you instead... please stay healthy and safe and enjoy today's program learning about your California State Parks until you can visit us again." PORTS staff have traditionally delivered live streaming presentations on social media because of the similarity of the method and content creation; however, education entities and teachers did not engage with PORTS via social media prior to March 2020. With the onset of COVID-19, schools, teachers, families, and students all turned to social media platforms to help fill in educational content and share information. PORTS staff were there to engage and connect with them.

A parent from Illinois wrote saying "Thank you so much for providing professional, child safe, consistent, age-appropriate, quality programming for kids to learn about ecosystems and the environment. The local in-person programs we've attended here in Illinois in past summers are closed or unsafe this summer. It's been challenging for me to find online replacements. Knowing that we can rely on your great program content week after week is a bright spot that my child and I look forward to after just one session. In a world currently full of health, political and social chaos, we all need

consistency and something we can rely on right now. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for giving that to my daughter and many other children.”

Partnerships

PORTS has built a vast network of partners over the years which allow for an increase in programmatic impact with the public. Private industry, park partners and educational community members all play a role in providing resources, marketing and capacity building.

A key partnership for PORTS is Zoom Video Communications (Zoom), which provides the main video communication platform for digital engagement with both On-Demand Programs and Home Learning Programs. Zoom provides PORTS with secure accounts to provide programming for up to 1,000 students/home learners with some programs. PORTS received a prestigious Innovation Award from Zoom in 2019 and the PORTS Program was featured as a leader in K-12 education at Zoom’s annual user conference.

PORTS partners with CUE, Inc. (Computer-Using Educators), a non-profit dedicated to innovation and technology in the classroom. CUE and many of its member educators are advocates for the PORTS program and are actively using PORTS in their remote classrooms. CUE members and regional affiliates provide marketing and promotion of the PORTS program through their network of social media influencers and accounts.

Parks California has already established itself as a leading supporter of the PORTS Home Learning Program, raising awareness through outreach campaigns and providing direct support to field interpreters producing content. Their valued support includes securing technology devices and accessories (26 bundles) for State Parks’ interpretive field staff and the expansion of internet connectivity.

A new PORTS program which is being promoted for the 2020/2021 school year is called passPORTS. This program uses a combination of digital instructional materials embedded with quality teaching practices to empower teachers and students to play, learn, serve, and share in California State Parks. It creates a blended access (blending the digital with the physical) approach to parks and is made possible through a partnership with CUE, Inc. and Parks California.

Other key PORTS partnerships include Microsoft Skype in the Classroom, which provides a platform of digital engagement for classrooms to interact with interpreters in the parks; Timelooper, a private business contractor, helps sponsor our department-approved Interpretation Technology and Innovation (Interptech) training for interpreters, as well as bringing innovative digital technology to our parks; and Flipgrid, a Microsoft Education digital platform, empowers social learning in classrooms from Pre-K to college. California State Parks currently offers over 180 topics on Flipgrid with more added every week and has over 1,700 hours of response videos from students across the world.

Exploration of better collaboration with public educators in the California Department of Education and County Offices of Education would help to formalize a partnership with California State Parks. Although California State Parks staff frequently meet with these

entities, a systematic effort to collaborate on curriculum, content distribution, and school site requirements would be a welcome step in a partnership with public educators. To date, most contacts happen at the teacher to interpreter level, whereby a great increase in scale could be realized by leveraging statewide and county resources, standards and contacts.

PORTS staff also lend their expertise regarding digital engagement and distance learning to other organizations. The California Coastal Commission and the California Department of Fish and Wildlife contacted staff to partner on several digital projects. Multiple state agencies and large organizations across the country have also requested the expertise and assistance of our PORTS staff to help them develop a distance learning program, as they adjust to the ramifications of COVID-19.

Conclusion

California State Parks has an obligation to be relevant and accessible to the changing demographics of the state, including diverse communities and underserved areas. The Department's efforts to provide underserved communities access to the natural and cultural environments, high-quality outdoor recreation and educational programs has not reached its full potential. Participating County Offices of Education, school districts and partners are eager to strengthen current programming and partnerships and expand the PORTS program to other underserved areas. Since its inception, the Department has lacked permanent funding for district staff to implement and deliver PORTS programs. This has resulted in varying degrees of commitment from park districts and a reliance on short-term grants and other funding sources for staffing. PORTS is implemented in the parks by many seasonal and permanent intermittent staff who have limited funding for their positions. Current demand for existing PORTS educational access programming exceeds interpretive staffing capacity. This is compounded by the expectation that the demand for PORTS programs will continue to increase in the future.

The PORTS program has made a significant impact in K-12 education by providing access to California State Parks over the last 15 years and especially now during COVID-19. The collective PORTS program was perfectly positioned to pivot and seamlessly continue to offer virtual programs through strong partnerships with private industry, non-profit partners and the K-12 education community. Interpretive staff continue to engage with the public, even while families are still at home and when our parks, museums and visitor centers remain closed. The comments from the public engaging with interpreters through virtual programs during COVID-19 have been emotional and full of sincere gratitude for offering a connection to parks during this time.

The most effective interpretive programs are those that are relevant to their participants. During COVID-19, PORTS programs became much more than just an educational resource to the public, they were a lifeline of hope for many people across the country. A School District Administrator of Community & Parent Support wrote a letter of gratitude for PORTS to our Departmental Director saying:

“You all were able to be the light during some awful, scary and dismal days. You brought education, but even more, again, you brought hope. Hope that we would all be able to enjoy these beautiful and amazing places again... all because your program brought the outdoors, indoors. We don’t know what COVID is bringing for this next year, but we sure hope you will continue bringing us this amazing program so that we can lift spirits, enrich education and inspire our youth to take care of our planet.”

The California State Parks’ PORTS program and staff exemplifies the professionalism, adaptability, training, and dedication of our interpretive and guide staff across the state. I am very proud of the accomplishments of the staff who implement this program and the positive impact they have made to the people of California, across the country and internationally during COVID-19.

Commission Action

For information only

Attachments

None