

Mobile Museum of Tolerance Brings ‘Experiential Learning Opportunity’ to Illinois

Image



An hour at the [Mobile Museum of Tolerance](#) (MMOT) can spark connections that last far longer, according to West40 ISC director of professional learning Suzy Dees.

“It connects them to their teachers and their classmates in a way that they may not have been connecting before,” Suzy says.

The mobile museum, designed by the [Museum of Tolerance](#) in Los Angeles, California, is a bus outfitted with large video screens and tablets. Chairs can be reconfigured into different workspaces. It can accommodate up to 32 students; about 15 with physical distancing protocols.

Illinois is the only U.S. state that has an MMOT. Canada has a trailer designed by the same museum around similar themes.

Suzy says the legislature funded building the bus and that more funding partners can help keep it on the road, ensuring the MMOT can visit any Illinois school, community camp or library, and be used for Illinois professional development.

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Teachers choose a 10-minute video on the Civil Rights Movement, the Holocaust, or a video called “Ordinary People” that examines how people choose to act during times of crisis. Each video, designed for grades six through 12, uses live footage.

“The sixth through eighth grade video centres around Anne Frank and her story, and is told in a very narrative way,” Suzy says. “Kids of that age can relate, because they’re her age.”

Before and after each video, students discuss what they know about tolerance, and how the videos relate to their lives.

Suzy says one student learned about the Jewish faith tradition for the first time. Other conversations examined cyberbullying or feeling isolated during the COVID-19 pandemic. “Being able to relate to that experience and learn from it is very powerful,” Suzy says.

It’s an “experiential learning opportunity” that is well-suited for schools that may be using a hybrid education model, where some students spend part of their time learning remotely. For example, students can have their chat comments show up on the MMOT’s large screen.

Suzy says that Intermediate Service Centers (ISCs) like [West40](#) support school districts through professional learning, licensure and compliance, and providing programs for at-risk youth.

“We’re that go between — between the state board of education and the local school districts,” she says.

Furthermore, “we like to think of ourselves as capacity builders,” Suzy says. “This is an area where districts are wanting support. They’re wanting thought partners. They’re wanting people to co-facilitate these conversations.”

Each district has its own characteristics, needs and interests.

“When you’re in a diverse state, like we are in Illinois, you have neighbours who have completely different ideas of what tolerance looks like and even if tolerance is a word that they should be saying,” Suzy says.

Since last spring, Suzy says more educators are talking about hiring practices, and choosing diverse classroom resources.

The MMOT can spur further discussions, with web resources, “tools and strategies and ready-to-use lesson plans” available before and after classes visit.

“It’s not just kids who want to talk about this,” Suzy says. “Teachers want to talk about this and they don’t know how. They want to have these conversations first with each other in a safe space.”

Since the mobile museum started touring in February, community members and local representatives have also been eager to look and discuss, Suzy says. Two Illinois counties will pilot a professional learning program for educators in June using the MMOT as a resource.

At West40, “our heartbeat is our students,” and Suzy says teachers learn from them.

“We talk a lot about not being a bystander but being an ‘upstander,’” she says. Before leaving the MMOT, each student decides on a personal action, from eating lunch with a student who is alone to learning more about a topic.

In each district, there are students who are already making a positive difference.

At one school, students asked administrators to develop a Black studies class. “They’re seniors; they’re going to graduate never having profited from being in that class,” Suzy says. “The students behind them will get to, because they advocated for it and it’s a course offering now.”

The MMOT is also a place to honor those decisions. “Once you see it and touch it, you want to be part of it,” she says.