

December 21, 2021

Dear Stratford Board of Education,

I am requesting permission to travel with the band to Chicago and Milwaukee in May of 2022 (May 14-16, 2022 returning late on 5/16 or very early 5/17). I have made a number of changes to our travel procedures after the spring of 2020 and the cancellation of our last trip.

In the past, the band has travelled with Educational Tours, Inc. (ETI) out of Michigan. Their service has been top-notch, the experiences overwhelmingly positive and they provided excellent customer service. Our longtime travel coordinator Lisa Wyskowski left ETI and joined Southwestern Travel Group, a respected tour group with over one hundred years' experience. Lisa contacted me, presented some travel options and I am very impressed with what this company can offer us.

In addition to the amenities that Stratford has always enjoyed (a full-time travel director with us for the duration of the trip, business class accommodations, nighttime hotel security, and premium motor coach service), Southwestern Travel offers additional benefits to our families. The most significant is an online account portal for each family, giving up-to-date account balances and a secure online payment platform. This removes the burden of collecting, accounting for and dispersing trip funds from the school staff. Families will make payments directly to Southwestern Travel and will be able to track their account balances from any device. Additionally, the size of the travel group gives them additional buying power in a competitive market, providing experiences at a great price point for our families.

In the past, travel insurance was an opt-in program for families travelling. Historically, I don't recall an instance where a family opted for travel insurance, including our last trip in 2020. It took many months of phone calls and emails to obtain refunds for our travelers in 2020. Moving forward, the cost of travel insurance is presented as a part of the total cost and travelers will be highly encouraged to take out that coverage. The insurance provided is through a 3rd party and families are welcome to take out additional insurance if they so choose.

Southwestern has strong health and safety protocols in place and will work with us to meet safety standards as set by the district. With the emergence of the Omicron variant, the situation remains fluid and any adjustments to protocols will be made as required by the school district, health officials and state and local governments.

I have been in contact with families and have so far received positive feedback. We are aiming for 40 travelers and to date (December 21), I have 24 students and parents interested. I set a reply-by date of January 3 and will present updated information to the board on January 10th.

Scanning the QR code below with your cell phone camera will take you a detailed list of trip activities.

Student travel is a real highlight of our band program. I hope to be able to offer this opportunity to our students and families. I will be present at the January board meeting to answer any questions you have. Please contact me with any questions, clarifications or comments before the meeting if you have concerns that I can address.

Sincerely,

John S. Rickinger
Director of Bands

