

Missing the Point – Elementary school field trips to Topgolf?

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Waiting with classmates for the school bus to take them to Topgolf. (Shutterstock)

So, last week, I'm hanging out with a friend of the family, talking about this and that. He'd been in Baltimore for the afternoon, visiting with a friend of his. They're golfers and decided to catch up while driving golf balls over a beer or two at Topgolf in downtown Baltimore. It's the relatively new, very snazzy driving range/club – and by “club” I mean bar, not the kind you play golf with – that opened near the Horseshoe Casino. Just head downtown and look for the tall poles that hold up the nets to prevent balls from hitting people driving by. Good luck to the birds that fly around the harbor.

“What’s Topgolf like?”

Well, I believe this screenshot from [Topgolf.com](https://www.topgolf.com) says it all...

100% GOLF

100% NOT GOLF

We've got a bunch of stuff that makes us **golf**: clubs, balls, tees, turf, a ball-picker-upper-cart thing, etc. We also have a whole bunch of stuff that's **not golf**: loud music, giant targets, giant TVs, and a hand-crafted food & beverage menu.

Put all these things under one roof, and you've got yourself a good time. So consider this your formal invitation to grab the fam, a few friends, or some coworkers and **Come Play Around.**

Screenshot from Topgolf.com website taken by author.

Topgolf is in the new entertainment district downtown which is being developed, in part, to save the Horseshoe Casino which is the only one of Maryland's three large casinos whose volume is down over last year. The casino was supposed to save the downtown, but now the city has to save the casino.

"Why does a casino need saving? I thought casinos were licenses to print money?"

Good question. The answer is "BECAUSE IT'S IN DOWNTOWN BALTIMORE!" Because you need to solve the overall economic and social problems that plague the once great city of Baltimore first, so people will feel good about going there *before* you build the casino. As for the new Topgolf and other entertainment district clubs and restaurants? Well, they're just a few armed robberies, shootings and other crimes away from not breaking even themselves. And then who or what is going to save them?

And, of course, all this assumes that saving the downtown is a reasonable objective for any city government when roughly two-thirds of the people that government represents struggle every day to get by.

Apparently, Mayor Scott believes that saving the city of Baltimore starts first with taking care of the handful of people who own the Horseshoe Casino and now the Topgolf franchise next door. Sometime later, I guess, he'll get around to helping the 400,000 or so citizens who need grocery stores, Targets and Walmarts where they can buy the food and other necessities that too many of them can't afford. Safe, crime-free streets would also be nice.

What about all the jobs Topgolf and the other entertainment district venues will create? Well, for one thing they're mostly relatively low-paying, non-career positions, many of which are only part-time. And, for heaven's sake, the next time Mayor Scott talks about jobs creation, will someone in the media puh-leeze ask him where the people taking all these new jobs live? How many of them are un- and under-employed

residents of the city? How many are commuting from Baltimore County and other nicer places to live?! ...Same question for the developers of Port Covington.

In any case, I have nothing against Topgolf per se. Good luck to them. It's certainly not their fault that the Mayor of Baltimore cares more about campaign contributions than he does about his constituents.

So, it turns out that my friend and his friend who lives in Baltimore had never been to Topgolf, but had heard a great deal about it from his son *who is only six years old*. He goes to a Baltimore City public elementary school where he is in the first grade. How does his son know about Topgolf? From a field trip he and his first grade classmates made there.

"What?!"

Yeah, from a public school, elementary school field trip. You know. Your parents sign a form giving you permission to go. You hold hands with the kids in front and back of you so you stay together on your way off the bus. And so on.

As it turns out, Topgolf – because ["Field Trips are *more fun* at Topgolf."](#) so the Topgolf website tells us – has a formal field trip program, including both educational and non-educational options. They're scheduled Mondays through Fridays, between 10:00 AM when Topgolf opens through 3:00 PM. The educational options for children in the third to twelfth grades are either \$12 or \$18 per kid, the difference being whether or not food and drinks are included. Both options include two hours of "game play."

By "educational," they mean that some of the field trip is related to "*TopScience*" for third to fifth graders, "*TopMotion*" for sixth to eighth graders and "*TopPhysics*" for ninth to twelfth graders. These "*TopTopics*" (my terminology) are what Topgolf says are related to "science lab curriculum workbooks."

These field trips may be good will and good marketing for Topgolf, but are they a good idea for the city's elementary school children?

Now, I like the idea of field trips and have no doubt enjoyed a good number of them in my time, but I'm asking myself... With all the wonderful places to experience nature, science and the arts in the Baltimore metropolitan area, is a driving range/bar the best venue to teach the city's elementary and older children what they're not learning in school? What's next, a class trip to the local pool hall? Think of the physics that is involved in clearing the table in nine-ball? Or maybe a trip to the Horseshoe Casino itself where eager little minds can learn the mathematics of winning and losing your allowance at table games and poker?

What's really bothering me? Two things... The first is location. The title to the [2017 article by CBS News](#) Baltimore says it all. "*Maryland Schools Cancel Field Trips to Baltimore, Citing 'Escalating Violence.'*"

The second is considerably more profound. It's that [Baltimore City Schools are ranked](#) last in the state, behind all twenty-three counties. What that means is that Baltimore City children who graduate from public schools won't be able to compete with graduates from other counties for college admissions and jobs.

[Test results](#) show that overall math proficiency is only 7% for Baltimore City public school students – with twenty-three public schools in the city having no students, zero, not one student proficient in math.

In the best of times, were Baltimore City Schools ranked first the state and among the top in the country, in a Baltimore where all parents of public school students could afford the costs of field trips, maybe then field trips to Topgolf would somehow be okay. But not now, given the pathetic lack of quality public school education in the city and the desperate urgency of doing something about it.

Maybe field trips to Topgolf make sense for the CEO (Superintendent) of Baltimore City Public Schools and her team to unwind after a long day at the office, but not for the elementary school kids whose futures the CEO should be doing her best to assure.

One other thing... The CEO of Baltimore City Public Schools makes \$352,292 per year [according to Comparably.com](#). That's more than the Superintendent of Schools in New York City [who makes \\$284,197](#), I guess because you need to pay qualified professionals a premium to move to Baltimore and take on a school district in this much trouble. And it's more than most of the city's public school students will ever dream of making.

[Dr. Sonja Santelises](#), the CEO of Public Schools, has held her current position since May of 2016, for more than seven years now. I like that she's a CEO and not a Superintendent. Being a "Chief Executive Officer" is more businesslike. But on what planet does a company's stockholders and Board of Directors ("Commissioners" in this case) keep their senior executive when the company is continually in last place behind all its competitors?

-Les Cohen

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