

The Economics Behind Student Group Travel

Student group travel represents a unique and often underestimated segment of the travel industry. Ranging from grade school field trips to high school overnight adventures, this market provides significant economic opportunities for destinations, attractions, hotels and restaurants.

By understanding the size, scope, and dynamics of the student group market, travel suppliers can better position themselves to attract and accommodate this rising demographic.

This whitepaper explores the economic potential of student travel, starting with an overview of the market and then going on to explain some of intricacies of the sector and how different segments of the industry can influence student group trips.



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Understanding the Student Travel Market

Market Size and Growth Potential

The student travel market in the United States is expected to grow into nearly a 2.5 billion dollar industry by 2030, encompassing millions of students participating in educational, recreational, and extracurricular trips each year. The demand for student travel is both consistent and resilient, driven by schools' commitment to experiential learning and parents' willingness to invest in enriching opportunities for their children.

Key Stats:

- More than 50 million students are enrolled in K-12 education in the U.S., with a majority participating in annual field trips or extracurricular travel.
- Student Travel Market size was valued at USD 1.2 billion in 2022 and is projected to reach USD 2.5 billion by 2030, growing at a CAGR of 9.2% from 2024 to 2030. ([source: Verified Market Reports](#))
- The average student takes two to three field trips per year, with a significant portion including overnight stays.
- In cities like Washington, D.C., student travel accounts for nearly 30% of annual group tour revenue.
- Demand for STEM-related student travel has increased by over 35% in the past five years.
- According to a state of the industry report issued by SYTA (the Student & Youth Travel Association), the average age of participants on trips operated by professional tour operators is 15.
- With teacher turnover rates at an all-time high, a new generation of educators is embracing out-of-classroom experience more so than the previous generation.

24 million travelers

An estimated 24 million students participate in field trips and educational travel each year.



STEM & History

Field trips related to STEM and history have seen the highest increase in demand over the past decade.



Group business

Some destinations have reported that student groups make up 30-40% of their annual group travel business.



Scope and Types of Trips

Student travel encompasses a variety of trip types, each with unique characteristics and requirements:

1. Day Trips:

- Typically within a two-hour radius of the school.
- Focused on local attractions, museums, science centers, events, or historical sites.
- Generally lower-cost and easier to organize directly by a teacher or admin staff.

2. Overnight Trips:

- Often tied to significant subject matter covering educational destinations, cultural events, or recreational activities.
- Examples include Chicago and Alabama for history tours, Washington DC or Cancun graduation trips, Orlando or San Francisco STEM programs, or New York City or Toronto for performing arts trips.

3. Extracurricular and Performance-Based Travel:

- Includes band, choir, and spirit team competitions or performances.
- Requires specialized accommodations and venues equipped for large group performances.
- Examples include Anaheim, Orlando, Branson, and Myrtle Beach.

4. International Trips:

- Geared toward high school students, these trips focus on cultural immersion, language learning, and global awareness.
- Higher cost and planning complexity, often involving third-party tour operators.



Demographics

Age Groups:

- Elementary School (Grades K-5): Day (field) trips focusing on interactive and hands-on learning.
- Middle School (Grades 6-8): Combination of field trips and overnights with a mix of educational, performance (band, choir, orchestra), and recreational activities.
- High School (Grades 9-12): Overnight or international trips emphasizing career readiness, cultural exchange, and specialized subject interests.



Decision-Makers:

- Teachers and administrators typically initiate trip planning and approvals.
- Parent-teacher organizations often play a key role in building excitement and funding.
- Tour operators and travel advisors frequently serve as intermediaries for longer trips.



Economic Impact of Student Travel

Revenue Potential

For travel suppliers, the economic contributions of student travel extend beyond ticket sales at attractions or admission fees at museums. School groups spend money on services such as transportation, lodging, meals, and supplementary activities, creating a ripple effect across local economies.

Average Group Size:

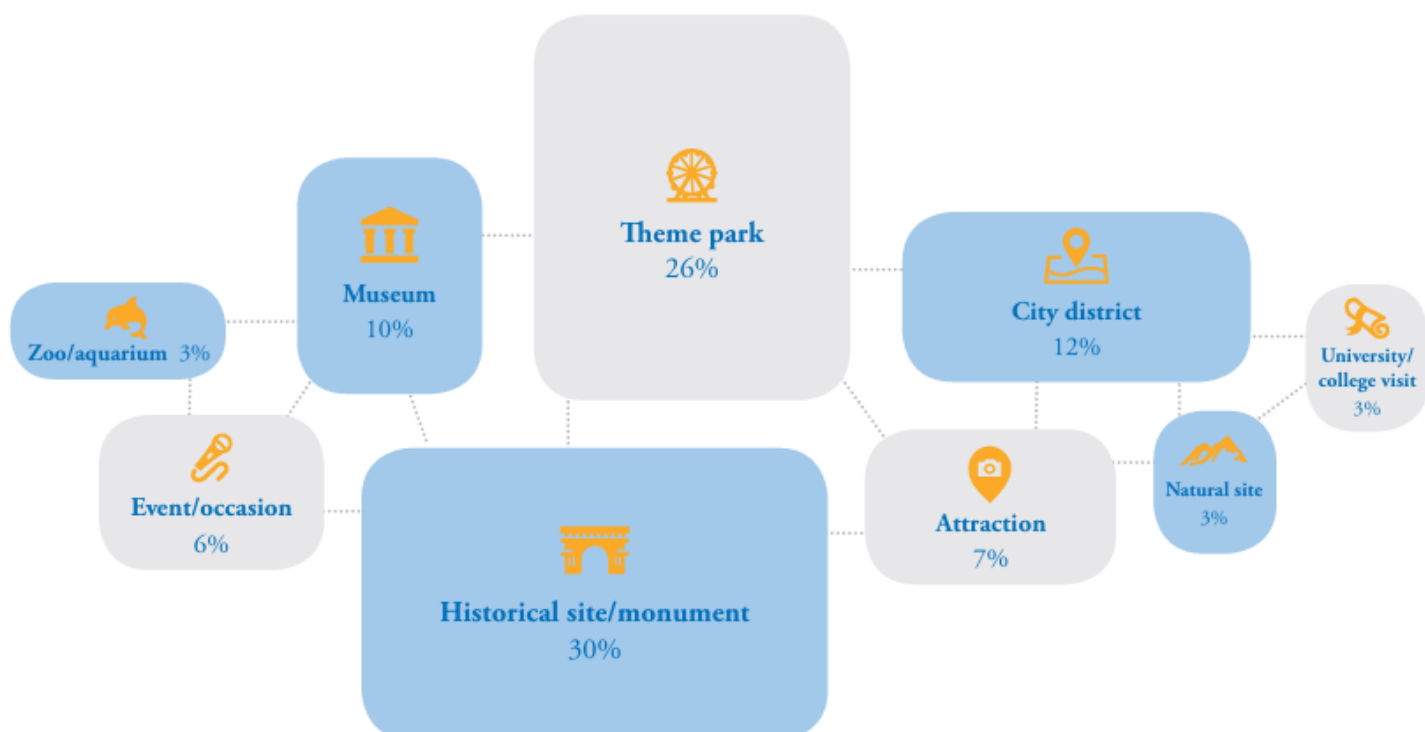
- Student travel groups typically range from 20 to 120 participants, often including chaperones, teachers, and bus drivers. The younger the group, the more chaperones they will have.
- School clubs can travel with as few as 5, including chaperones, while bands are the heavy hitters with large schools carrying in excess of 150 on trips.

Per Capita Spend:

- Day trips: average spend of \$25-\$150 per student.
- Overnight trips: average spend of \$200-\$250 per student, per day, depending on distance and destination.



Key Beneficiaries of Student Group Travel



Source: Student & Youth Travel Association

Destinations

Student travel represents a significant opportunity for destinations looking to boost visitation, particularly during off-peak seasons. Educational institutions and youth organizations prioritize destinations with diverse learning opportunities, interactive experiences, and logistical ease for group travel. Communities with historical significance, STEM-focused attractions, or performing arts venues can position themselves as must-visit locations for student groups.

Tips for Destinations:

- Develop itineraries designed specifically for student groups, incorporating both educational and recreational elements.
- Offer group discounts, behind-the-scenes tours, or special student activities to add value.
- Collaborate with local businesses to create packaged experiences that streamline trip planning for educators.

Attractions and Cultural Institutions

Museums, science centers, historical sites, and performing arts venues benefit from large group visits, often booked well in advance. Student travel is not only a revenue generator but also a chance to engage young minds and cultivate lifelong patrons. Institutions that offer interactive exhibits and hands-on learning opportunities have a greater chance of attracting repeat visits.

Tips for Attractions:

- Design age-appropriate, curriculum-aligned programming that meets your state's Education Standards of Learning (SOL) to appeal to educators and get trips approved easily.
- Provide downloadable educational materials for pre- and post-trip learning.
- Ensure accessibility and logistical ease, such as designated group entry points and bus parking.

Restaurants

Dining is a crucial part of student travel, and restaurants that accommodate large groups efficiently can build a steady business stream. Quick-service and casual dining venues with the ability to process orders quickly are often preferred. Establishments that offer pre-set menus, buffet options, or student-friendly pricing stand out in this competitive market.

Tips for Restaurants:

- Offer meal packages with simple pricing that includes taxes and gratuity to make budgeting easier for planners.
- Provide fast and efficient service options, such as grab-and-go meals or mobile ordering.
- Create special themed dining experiences tied to local culture or history to enhance the overall trip.



Transportation Providers

Reliable transportation is the backbone of student travel, whether by charter bus, train, or air. Safety, affordability, and convenience are top priorities for schools and travel planners when selecting transportation providers. Companies that cater to student groups by offering flexible scheduling and special group pricing will have a competitive advantage.

Tips for Transportation Providers:

- Offer group discounts and flexible cancellation policies to accommodate school budget restrictions.
- Equip buses with Wi-Fi and entertainment options to enhance the travel experience.
- Provide clear safety policies and certifications to reassure schools and parents.

Hotels

Hotels that cater to student groups can fill rooms during off-peak periods. Spring is the most popular travel season, from mid-April to mid-May. Student groups can also fill rooms on weekdays and non-holiday seasons. Properties with group-friendly amenities like free breakfast, large communal spaces, and secure room configurations are ideal for youth travelers.

Tips for Hotels:

- Provide group booking perks, such as free or discounted chaperone rooms or meal vouchers.
- Offer student-friendly amenities like indoor pools, game rooms, or study lounges.
- Ensure safety by assigning student groups to designated floors, having clear curfew policies, and employing private security if needed.



Trends and Opportunities

Experiential Learning

Experiential learning has become a cornerstone of modern education, with schools increasingly seeking hands-on, real-world experiences to supplement classroom instruction. Student travel programs incorporating STEM activities, historical reenactments, and career exploration opportunities are in high demand. Destinations and attractions that align with educational objectives can establish themselves as go-to locations for student groups.

Tips for Capitalizing on Experiential Learning:

- Develop immersive programs tied to school curricula, such as science experiments at museums or history-based scavenger hunts at landmarks.
- Offer student workshops led by industry professionals to enhance career readiness.
- Create pre- and post-visit lesson plans to reinforce learning outcomes and encourage repeat visits.

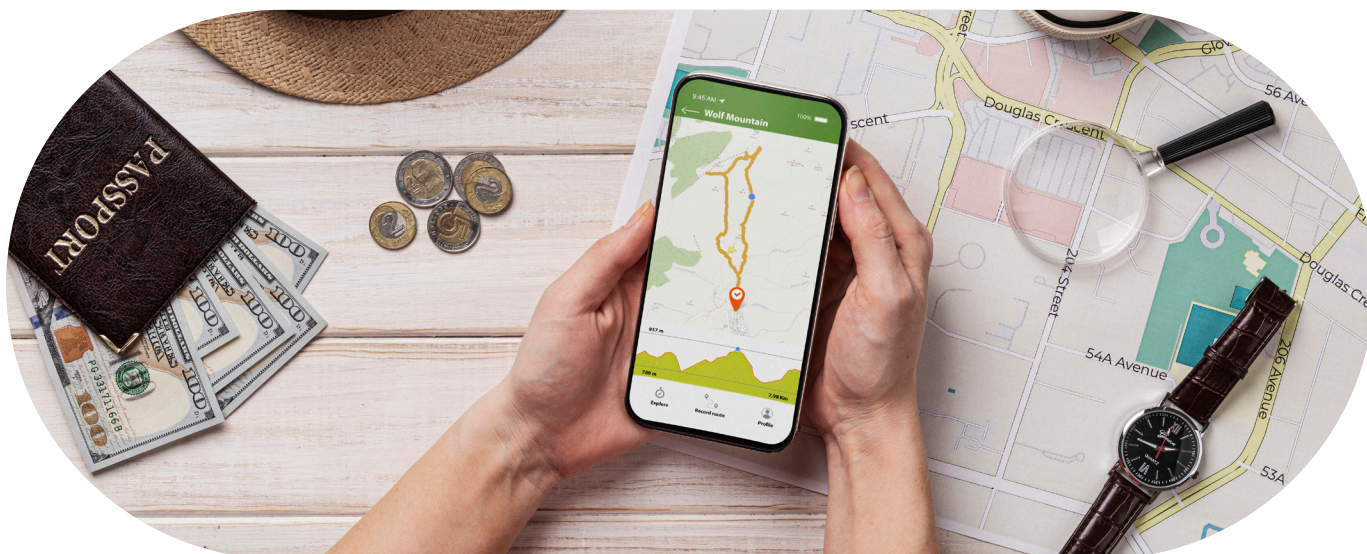
Sustainability

With growing environmental awareness among students, teachers, and parents, sustainability has become a key factor in travel decision-making. Schools are increasingly interested in destinations and businesses that prioritize eco-friendly practices, from reducing single-use plastics to offering educational programs on conservation. By integrating sustainable initiatives into their offerings, travel providers can appeal to socially conscious travelers.

Tips for Promoting Sustainability:

- Implement green initiatives such as compostable food packaging, recycling programs, and water conservation efforts.
- Partner with local environmental organizations to offer eco-education programs and sustainable tourism experiences.
- Highlight sustainability efforts in marketing materials, showcasing how visits contribute to conservation efforts.





Technology Integration

Technology is reshaping the way student travel is planned and experienced. Schools and tour operators rely on digital platforms to streamline trip coordination, while students expect tech-enhanced engagement during their travels. Interactive apps, augmented reality experiences, and virtual field trips can elevate the student travel experience and set destinations apart from competitors.

Tips for Leveraging Technology:

- Develop mobile apps with itinerary management, real-time updates, and interactive educational content.
- Integrate Augmented Reality and Virtual Reality experiences at attractions to provide deeper engagement with historical sites and exhibits.
- Offer virtual pre-trip experiences to build excitement and enhance learning before the actual visit.

Packaging Student Travel

Customized packaging is key for student travel, as school groups have unique educational goals, budget constraints, and logistical needs. Local travel providers who can band together and offer flexible, all-inclusive packages tailored to SOL specific subjects, age groups, and extracurricular interests will have significant appeal to this audience.

Bundling accommodations, meals, transportation, and activities into seamless packages simplifies planning and increases booking appeal.

Tips for Creating Custom Packages:

- Develop packages catering to different budgets and interests, from basic educational trips to premium experiences.
- Tier your pricing structure, offering a lower price for tour operators, with a slight increase for group leaders/educators. This allows the tour operators to realize a margin for their efforts in organizing the trips.
- Work with local businesses to create exclusive student-friendly experiences, such as behind-the-scenes museum tours, hands-on workshops, or company headquarters visits with meet & greets scheduled with staff.
- Recommend group leaders use [easy online planning tools](#) and offer dedicated customer support to facilitate smooth trip planning.
- Above all, remember that student travel planning is not a teacher's primary responsibility and often comes with additional stress. The more you can do to ease that process, the better the trip will operate.

The Long-Term Benefits of Student Travel

Student travel doesn't just provide an immediate economic boost—it creates lifelong connections between educators, young travelers, and the destinations they visit. Field trips and overnight journeys often become annual rite-of-passage trips. The student group you book once often becomes a travel annuity, returning year after year with a fresh group of hungry minds.

Moreover, when students experience a new city, museum, or cultural site, they form lasting impressions that can influence future travel decisions. A positive school trip can spark excitement and curiosity, leading to return visits with family, future educational pursuits – like college, or even professional opportunities.

Tips for Encouraging Repeat Visits:

- Provide teachers with a special “Come Back With Your Family” pass that includes discounts on future visits or a welcome gift that signifies the area with a thank you note on behalf of all the suppliers that were involved in the tour.
- Offer follow-up engagement through newsletters or social media, encouraging students to share their experiences. Consider a smaller welcome gift for each student that's a reminder of their visit. Fridge magnets and stickers are a great way to remind them of the tour and put the destination in front of the parents, daily.



How to Get Started

The student travel market offers untapped potential for many destinations, attractions, and restaurants willing to adapt to its unique requirements. By understanding the market's size, scope, and economic impact, travel suppliers can create targeted strategies to attract and accommodate this niche audience.

Investing in student-friendly offerings today can yield significant returns and foster a generation of lifelong travelers.

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