



How to Plan Great Learning Tours for School Designers

There is growing recognition that we need to do school differently. More and more, educators seek examples, ideas, and inspiration that can fuel innovative school design. At Springpoint, we help educators across the country design and launch new high school models. We've led hundreds of educators on learning tours across the country, which is a key lever for informing great practice and shifting mindsets.

Our latest [Schools to Visit guide](#) lists **innovative school sites** across the country that educators may want to learn about. Here, we've outlined the ways in which we help them intentionally explore exemplary learning environments and process their observations through structured debrief and planning time.

Start with Learning Outcomes

As educators think about which schools to visit, a great first step is to identify a set of questions to drive the overall design and planning of the learning tour.

EXAMPLES ARE:

- ⊗ What aspects of practice should all participants be exposed to?
- ⊗ What questions are participants hoping to investigate based on their existing practices?
- ⊗ What will they concretely take away from the learning experience?
- ⊗ How will they spend their time debriefing and engaging with their observations outside of the specific school visits?

From here, educators can craft a set of outcomes, which will help prioritize the ideal host sites to reach out to for a visit. Here are snapshots of sample outcomes and how they inform site and participant selection.

Example 1 – Sample outcomes

1. Our team will learn about different approaches to primary person models through the effective use of advisory that brings positive youth development practices to life in a school.
2. Our team will understand flexible scheduling that provides opportunities for leaders to build additional time for advisory into the daily schedule.

What you should look for: Multi-grade advisory structure in a full 4-year sequence.

Who should attend: Principal with a thought partner including an Assistant Principal or lead teacher, students, and anyone whose primary job will be to accelerate the inclusion of positive youth development into the school model.

Example 2 – Sample outcomes

1. Our team will learn about college and enrichment supports in an alternative school context.
2. Our team will understand innovative approaches to human capital and college access programming in schools.

What you should look for: Content teachers overseeing student case conferences and teaching college navigation courses, direct instruction of collaboration, self-advocacy, and other habits of success.

Who should attend: Grade team leaders, students, student success personnel, college counselors.

Invite your participants

We recommend selecting learning tour participants with the visit outcomes in mind. Based on the learning outcomes, identify team members who can best leverage the learning tour experience.

Participants should also understand that the learning tour will be an opportunity for the team to both examine and bolster their own model or current set of practices. It may be worthwhile to take time at the outset to socialize the idea of adopting a learner's stance as they visit and observe other learning environments.

On our learning tours, we ask participants to embark on school visits with open-mindedness, enthusiasm, and respect.

WE PROPOSE THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS TO OUR GROUPS AS VISIT NORMS FOR OUR TIME TOGETHER:

- ⊗ An appreciation for each other's time away from our buildings and homes, and the commitment we've made to this shared experience by remaining fully present and entering each learning experience with a beginner's mind.
- ⊗ A willingness to challenge personal beliefs, perceptions, and practices, and an open and receptive attitude while doing so.
- ⊗ A professional, respectful, and transparent environment in which it is safe to converse, question, and discover, and one that fosters new relationships.
- ⊗ A belief that every school is a work in progress and has valuable lessons to impart.
- ⊗ A common understanding of the vision, mission, goals, and expected student outcomes driving the work of your model, to best internalize observed practices that you may want to implement.



Bring Students!

We always recommend that our partners include students on their design team, which means that students often attend our learning tours. Having students join these learning experiences can be a robust and enriching way to embed them even more deeply in their own school's design process. It can connect the dots for students in tangible ways, expose them to new cities and ideas, and make them feel like an equal member in their school's design work.

Plan the Visit Thoughtfully

Our team understands how to navigate the many moving pieces of planning a trip for any group, be it an existing school team, a design team, district or charter staff, or students.

HERE ARE SOME TIPS WE HAVE DEVELOPED AS A RESULT OF OUR ROBUST WORK IN THIS AREA:

- ④ **Assign roles.** Determine which team member will be the point of contact for the host school to coordinate with all parties and respond professionally and promptly to requests and changes. Also decide who will organize the visit logistics, including arrival and sign-in.
- ④ **Scheduling.** Identify any blackout dates for visitation, cross-checking the availability of your team and coordinating closely with the host school to avoid holidays, testing days, trips, and other school-wide events. We have found that the optimal time of year for most schools to host visitors is early October to Thanksgiving and end of January to mid-March.
- ④ **Sending the ask to potential host schools.** Send an introductory email to the leader of the host school expressing interest in visiting the school, along with a brief description of what you hope to see. Include specific dates for a proposed visit. When setting an agenda, be sure to include:
 - burning questions and areas of interest
 - any requests for specific policies or work products that would be helpful for your team to reference as additional context and pre-work (e.g., one-page overview

of the school model, master schedule, student and staff recruitment materials, grading policies, etc.)

- any requests for specific stakeholders to hear from, for example, a STEM teacher, a mastery specialist, or students (we strongly recommend including a student panel in the agenda)

Remember to reach out to potential host schools as early as possible. Making contact four months out is safe and generous. We recommend giving one month at the very least. Be clear with the host school about your overall group size, and classroom walkthrough group size, so the visit is minimally disruptive. As we say in our [Schools to Visit guide](#), most smaller schools can accommodate at least five people, while larger schools may be open to 10-15 visitors. Discuss this with your point of contact early on as it might affect the planning process.

Once you confirm a visit date, consider setting up a brief planning call with the principal or point person. Providing a high-level sample agenda to react to in advance can make the planning call more efficient. We use this [sample school visit template](#) when coordinating with host schools to help concretize the ask.

Develop an Outline for the Tour

Sketching out the structure of a learning tour requires strategic planning and close coordination. We work to ensure that teams are engaged and get a practical, robust view of the schools they visit.



THE FOLLOWING FOUNDATIONAL ELEMENTS OF A SPRINGPOINT LEARNING TOUR ARE DESIGNED TO GUIDE ATTENDEES THROUGH A LEARNING CYCLE:

- ④ **A welcome and framing presentation** by the host school leader to open the school visit and set the context.
- ④ **Classroom observations** across content areas and grade levels (if applicable). Participants can capture observations and learning with a common observation tool that has flexibility for customization. (See a [sample observation tool here](#)).
- ④ **Robust Q&A sessions** with students and teachers.
- ④ **A thorough debrief discussion** with the school leadership team.
- ④ **Structured planning time** to make meaning of observations and insights from each school visit.
- ④ **A presentation segment** at the end of the tour, so that participants can give and receive feedback on the action plans that have resulted from examination of the observed school model elements, and how these can live in their own school context.

Bring back the Learnings

We have found that dedicated blocks of planning time are crucial so that educators can digest what they see and figure out how to adapt relevant practices and systems to their own contexts.

Our learning tours generally include multiple school design teams. We use the planning time to facilitate a robust session for these teams to engage in conversation, explore key questions, work in small groups, and collaborate across teams.

Each team develops a brief slide presentation showing how they will bring learnings back to their community and shift practice in their school or classroom. School teams present to the larger group and receive feedback and we help them itemize next steps toward implementation. We have found it most valuable to hold these sessions on the same day as the visit, generally in the afternoon following a morning tour. However you decide to structure the debrief and planning time, be sure to think about the structure and process well before the visit starts.



Meals, Networking, and Special Accommodations

It's important to remember that your group will need access to three meals a day, breaks to rest and check-in with their teams and at home, and snacks, water, and caffeine to sustain them through the afternoon's debrief and planning sessions. We try to balance the number of collective meals that our groups eat together for networking and general camaraderie, with those that they can have independently so that everyone has a bit of individual time as well.

We also always ask up front whether participants have any special accommodations that we should be aware of, including food allergies, trouble with walking long distances or stairs, required proximity to a screen or audio, print size, or any other need. Our goal is to make participants as comfortable as possible while they're with us.

Iterate the Process

We always collect participant feedback at the end of a learning tour to address our partners' requests and ideas for future agenda and/or facilitation modification.

Our network support team thinks of every detail, planning for everything but remaining nimble based on needs and changes. We have run dozens of learning tours and continue to refine our approach to make sure each trip is a valuable use of educators' precious time away from their buildings, teams, and their own families back at home.

We consistently get positive feedback from our partners on their participation in our learning tours. Cleveland Metropolitan School District leader, Darcel Williams, said: "The Springpoint network enriches our principals, who each have had the opportunity to visit schools across the country where the very design principles they are implementing are being lived out, richly." Nancy Rosas from Internationals Network for Public Schools has said, "the school visits that Springpoint organizes for our staff expose us to innovative ideas that we can adapt and implement within our own context. These visits also energize our leaders and teachers who always return wanting to try new things they've seen."



We would like to acknowledge Victoria Crispin, Senior Director, for her dedication to this work and [her blog post on this topic](#), which served as the basis of this resource. We also want to thank our partners and the students and adults at our generous host schools. As we continue to learn from our partners and host schools we will update this resource, as appropriate.



ABOUT US

Springpoint is a national nonprofit that partners with districts, charters and networks to design and launch innovative high schools that can meet the needs of all students, preparing them for college and career “success. We help partners “do school differently” by providing school design and planning workshops, implementation supports, tools and resources, customized coaching, and unique learning experiences.



Please reach out with any questions, or if you are interested in additional resources: info@springpointschools.org



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