

Attending Schools in the United States

“Attending Schools in the United States” is the second topic in the English Learner Family Tool Kit. This tool kit is meant to support families of English learners (ELs) in the U.S. education system. Each topic has five parts: (1) Overview, (2) Family and Student Rights (3) Questions to Ask School Staff, (4) Tips, and (5) Resources.

Overview

Public schools in the United States may be different from schools in other countries. For example, U.S. public schools generally have three levels: elementary, middle or junior high, and high school. Some states may offer public education until age 18. States may also have preschool or pre-kindergarten programs at the public school. Early learning programs may be free or may require a fee; and may be either partial-day or full-day programs.

Students may have more than one teacher and may have classes in different rooms. Schools may ask students to wear uniforms and eat lunch at school. Each school has rules that provide a safe environment for students and teachers. The rules may be different for each school. For example, in some schools, students must raise their hand to ask questions and line up in a row when leaving the classroom. Girls and boys are often in the same classroom. Students may work together in small groups at times. In middle, junior high, or high school, students may be allowed to use cell phones.

Teachers, principals, guidance counselors, and other people in the school will help you and your child learn more about school. Your child’s teacher may ask you to attend a meeting to learn about how your child is doing in school. In addition, several times a year, you may receive a report card about how well your child is learning English, mathematics, science, social studies, and other subjects.

Family and Student Rights

As a family member with school-aged children you have certain rights. This is very important. A parents’ national origin, citizenship, or immigration status does not change this right. For example:

- Under Federal law, all children, regardless of their citizenship or residency status, are entitled to equal access to a free public education.¹
- Schools and school districts can ask for immunization records and proof of age from a clinic or doctor, as well as proof of residency (for example, a utility bill that reflects your current address). Check the school and district websites to learn about the documents required to enroll your child in school. All students must provide this information.
- Schools cannot ask for documentation that would prohibit or unlawfully discourage a student from enrolling in or attending school.
- Schools may not share information that may reveal a student’s personal information, unless permitted by law or if you give them written permission.²

¹ Students with F-1 or M-1 non-immigrant visas attending private schools are responsible for paying tuition, while F-1 visa holders attending a public secondary school are responsible for paying the full, unsubsidized per capita cost of attending school (see <https://studyinthestates.dhs.gov/kindergarten-to-grade-12-schools>).

² Information about the *Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)* can be found at https://studentprivacy.ed.gov/sites/default/files/resource_document/file/for-parents.pdf.

- Parents or guardians may choose for their child to receive services to learn English if their child is identified as needing these services. School districts and schools are required by federal law to provide these services.
- Schools must ensure meaningful communication with limited English proficient parents in a language they can understand. They must notify limited English proficient parents of information about any program, service, or activity of a school district that is called to the attention of parents who are proficient in English.
- Schools should provide a safe and helpful environment, free from bullying.

Suggested Questions to Ask School Staff

The following are sample, optional questions you may ask school staff to help regarding attending school:

1. How do I find out what school my child will attend?
2. Who do I ask to provide me with an interpreter when I go to the school?
3. How old does my child have to be to start preschool or kindergarten in my state?
4. What is the maximum age under which I can still enroll my child in high school in my state?
5. Does the school require a uniform? What if I cannot afford to buy the uniform?
6. Who is my child's guidance counselor, and what is this person's contact information?
7. What does my child eat for lunch? When does my child eat lunch? Where does my child eat lunch? What are the rules for lunch? Do I pay for the lunch?
8. Can you explain the attendance policy? How should I tell the school my child will be absent?
9. What will happen if my child must miss school?
10. My child was in ____ grade in their previous school. Will my child be in that same grade at this school?
11. What is expected of my child and me when it comes to homework?
12. If there is homework in my child's grade, what help can we receive if my child can't complete the homework?
13. Is there someone in the school who works with families?
14. Does this school have a family-teacher organization? If so, how do I join?

Tips for Families

- Some schools may want families to help out in the school, playground, or cafeteria. Families may also volunteer to support sports teams or join a parent-teacher association (PTA). Helping out at your child's school will give you a chance to learn more about schools in the United States. Do not be shy about asking how you can help or volunteer in your child's school.
- Before you visit the school, check the school's website. You may find answers to your questions there.
- Most schools charge for meals, supplies, or uniforms. Ask the school about financial assistance if you cannot afford to pay for these things.
- Schools often send families important information by text messages or email. If you have limited proficiency in English, ask how the school will notify you of the same information that is given to parents who are proficient in English. Be sure that the school has the information that it needs in order to contact you.
- Make sure you understand all of the information you receive. Do not agree to or sign anything until you understand fully what is being asked of you.

- In addition to a report card for your child, each year, all families must receive another type of report card: a school report card. The school report card provides important information about your child’s school. This is a good way to learn how well the school is performing, and enables you to compare your child’s school with other schools in the district. School report cards must be posted on the district’s website.

<p>Information That May Be on a School Report Card</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student demographic data • School safety and climate information • Academic performance in mathematics, reading, language arts, and science • Number of English learners achieving English language proficiency • School graduation rates • Teacher and staff information • Postsecondary preparation information • Financial data

Resources

Adult Learning Resource Center. (2012). Enrolling in school. In *A Guide to Your Children’s Schools: A Parent Handbook*, pp. 4-6. Des Moines, IL: Illinois State Board of Education.

Retrieved from <https://www.isbe.net/Documents/PGuide-english.pdf>

This is a guide developed by the state of Illinois to help parents learn how to enroll their child in school. There are some items that are specific to the state, like specific documents needed for proof of residence, but some of the information is more general.

Bridging Refugee Youth and Children’s Services (BRYCS). (2018). Children's Books about the Refugee/Immigrant Experience. Retrieved from <http://dev.brycs.org/clearinghouse/Highlighted-Resources-Children-Books-about-the-Refugee-Immigrant-Experience.cfm>

This website provides titles of books, some in different languages, about coming to the United States and attending school. These books are suitable for students in preschool, as well as elementary, middle, and high school.

International Rescue Committee (2007). *Educational Handbook for Refugee Parents*. Retrieved from <https://brycs.org/clearinghouse/2554/>

This handbook helps families understand schools in the United States. The handbook is available in Burmese, English, French, Somali, and Spanish.

Refugee Center Online. (2018). “Public School in the USA.” Retrieved from <https://therefugeecenter.org/resources/public-school/>

This web page is meant to help new arrivals navigate the public school system, and includes questions and answers about enrollment.

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