

Starting School in the United States

A Guide for Newcomer Students' Families



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Getting to Know the U.S. School System

Public education is free.

All children go to school, generally from age 5 to 18. Depending on the state, the maximum age varies (often, it is 20).

When your child misses school, you must notify the school's attendance office or front desk staff.

Typically the school year begins in August or September and ends in May or June.

Most children attend classes for about six hours a day, Monday through Friday.

Students who need to catch up in their learning may attend summer school in June and July.

Learning English: Schools teach English to newcomer students in different ways. Many offer special classes. Others provide a special teacher inside the classroom. Your child should have a teacher specifically trained to teach English to newcomer students. Ask your school how and from whom your child will learn English.

- Some schools group English learner students together and either pull your child out of class or have a special teacher join the class.
- Some schools will have two teachers in the classroom or have a single teacher who teaches English and other subjects.
- Some schools offer bilingual or dual-language classes in which your child can learn to read, write, speak, and understand English and another language—often your home language—at the same time.

Getting Started | Registering



Registration is how new students are enrolled in U.S. schools. Registration may happen at the school or district office, and it usually includes welcoming students and their families, collecting and sharing information, and orienting students and their families to the school.

During registration, schools collect important information about your child, including their name, birthdate, previous learning, proof of residency, and vaccinations. You may also be asked to complete a home language survey. All this information is private. Schools should notify you prior to sharing this information with anyone.^{1,2}

Names

It is important to make sure both your name and your child's name are correct on registration forms. Carefully check each name and ask a school staff member to write them out for you. You can also tell the school what name your child prefers to be called.³

Previous learning

Schools will ask you to share your child's education records or school transcripts. This information will help ensure your child is placed in the correct grade and does not have to repeat courses. If you do not have this information, ask for assistance. If your child has not attended school for a while, notify their new school so they can receive the support they need to succeed.^{4,5}

Proof of residency

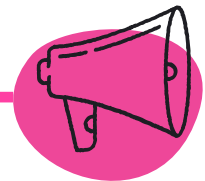
Schools typically ask for limited information to establish whether your child resides in the district. Schools will ask for a document (such as a utility bill or lease) that proves your child lives in the district. Some schools might ask for a social security number, but if you or your child does not have one or you choose not to provide it, a school can still enroll your child.^{6,7}

Vaccinations

When students do not have the required vaccination documents, schools can collaborate with refugee or government agencies to obtain records and help ensure they meet the state's requirement.⁸

Home language survey

Schools may ask you to complete a home language survey, which asks you what languages are spoken in your home. If your child speaks or is exposed to a language other than English, they will be tested to determine their English language abilities. Home language surveys differ by state and district, and they help schools identify students who may be eligible for language-related support. It is important to answer this survey accurately so that your child receives the support they need.⁹



Getting Involved | Advocating

In the United States, families have many opportunities to be involved in their child's education, which can help improve attendance and academic achievement.¹⁰ Additionally, when families learn about their child's school, teacher, and course(s), they are better equipped to help their child address challenges. Put another way, informed parents/guardians are the best advocates for their children.¹¹

One important way to be involved in your child's education is to attend parent-teacher conferences. These meetings are typically arranged by the school once or twice a year and provide an opportunity for you to discuss your child's progress with their teacher(s). However, you can always ask to meet with your child's teacher(s) whenever you have questions or concerns—and you always have the right to have an interpreter.¹²



Here are some other ways to get involved in your child's education¹³

- Attend an orientation to learn about your child's school experience
- Listen to your child talk about school and ask them questions
- Help your child with their homework
- Chaperone a field trip
- Attend school events (such as family night)
- Volunteer at your child's school
- Help with an extracurricular activity or school sports team
- Offer to give a presentation on your home country to your child's class
- Join the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) or attend school board meetings





Getting Access | Services

In the United States, every child has the right to access free K–12 public education—regardless of race, nationality, sex, religion, language, or immigration status.¹⁴ All students and their families may also access the following:

English language development *and* grade-level content

English learner students need access to the same curriculum as their non-English learner peers, which means schools should remove any language barriers to learning this content. In other words, English learner students should be taught the same math, social studies, and science as students who are not English learners in a way that enables them to learn (for example, in their home language or by a teacher who is prepared to teach English learner students).^{15,16}

If your child is identified as an English learner based on a home language survey (see the “Getting Started” section), their school will inform you of the following within 30 days of the start of the school year:

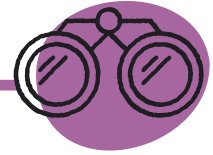
- **Your child’s English proficiency level**
- **Programs and services available to meet your child’s educational needs**
- **Your ability to opt your child out of these programs and services**

Interpretation/translation services

As a parent or caregiver, you can access translation and interpretation services at any meeting with teachers. In addition, public schools provide language supports to families that request them, and school programs, services, materials, and activities should be communicated in multiple languages.¹⁷

School services and education programs

Your child can participate in all federally funded education programs and school services for which they qualify. These include special education, free or reduced-price meals, English learner services, programs that support homeless children and children of migrant workers, advanced courses (e.g., honors, Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate), talented and gifted programs, and early childhood pre-kindergarten programs (such as Head Start). Immigration status does not affect eligibility for these federally funded programs.¹⁸



Getting More Information | Resources

As you learn more about the U.S. education system, the following resources may be helpful:

Welcome to the United States: A Guidebook for Refugees | <https://bit.ly/3d8zFcy>

Developed by the Cultural Orientation Resource Center,¹⁹ this resource (which includes a DVD) is available in 10 languages. It will help you prepare for your first few months in the United States. For example, it tells you what to expect as you find a place to live, look for work, and adjust to U.S. culture and society.

Parent Guide for English Learners | <https://bit.ly/2UMCJ7Y>

Developed by Education Northwest,²⁰ this resource describes how students are identified as English learners, taught English and other subjects, and designated as proficient in academic English and moved out of English learner services. The guide is available in English and Spanish.

Parent Orientation Video: English Language Learner (ELL) Programs in New York State | <https://bit.ly/2MYoDw3>

Developed by the New York State Education Department,²¹ this 12-minute video (which is available in multiple languages) describes the English learner identification and assessment process. Additionally, it outlines in detail various English learner program options. Although it includes information specific to New York, the video also provides a good introduction to school in the United States.

The Right Fit: Selecting an English Learning Program for Your Students | <https://bit.ly/2UHCc7l>

Developed by Regional Educational Laboratory Northwest,²² this guide describes English learning programs, types of English learners, questions to ask when choosing a program, and the models most commonly used in Oregon. It is geared primarily toward school and district administrators, but it includes information that may be helpful for families.



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