



**GUIDE**  
**TO THE EDUCATION SYSTEM**  
**IN THE UNITED STATES**

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# HIGH SCHOOLS' CURRICULUM AND COURSE OPTIONS

## Introduction

Public high school education is co-educational and comprehensive. Schools offer a wide range of subjects from which a student sets up a program leading to college/university entrance or to a career in business or industry. Every student must take certain required courses for a prescribed number of years. Required courses include English, mathematics, health, physical education, general science and social sciences, which include US history and government, world history and social problems. Apart from these subjects many students elect subjects according to future career plans. Students who intend to go to college/university elect courses with a special emphasis on academic sciences (biology, chemistry, and physics), higher mathematics (algebra, geometry, trigonometry, and calculus), foreign languages, advanced English literature, composition and social sciences. Students interested in business or industry may take typing, shorthand, bookkeeping, business machines or "business English". It is often possible to take agricultural, technical or fine arts subjects as well.

A student is graded from -"A"-Excellent to "F"-Failing -in each subject he takes throughout his twelve years of education. Grades are based on tests given during the year, participation in class discussion, completion of homework assignments and independent projects. Report cards are issued at least twice a year (generally, schools are on a two semester system and have quarterly academic reports). They show the grades earned in each of the subjects studied. The high school maintains a "transcript" which summarizes these subjects, the grades attained and any other relevant data. Upon satisfactory completion of twelfth grade, the student graduates and receives a "high school diploma".

College-bound students take national college aptitude tests during their last two years in high school. These tests are set up by various independent institutions and are designed to measure aptitude in verbal and mathematical skills. They are not based directly on course work. The tests most often required are the Scholarship Aptitude Test (SAT) and the American College Test (ACT). Both are recognized by accredited universities as a means of evaluating potential students.

## AP Exams and the International Baccalaureate

Some international students with a regular American "high school diploma" will not be admitted to universities when they return in their home countries. Secondary school students who will eventually return to their home countries and are concerned about meeting university entrance requirements in that country might consider AP Exams or the International Baccalaureate.

**AP Exams:** American schools do not train students for external examinations. There is a continuous evaluation system throughout all the grades. In recent years, the Advanced Placement program has gained in popularity in the US and is recognized by many universities abroad. The AP Program is an advanced-level curriculum offered in a range of subjects. The

program is adopted by a high school in addition to its state-mandated curriculum. Most colleges take AP exam results into consideration in the admissions process. Because AP courses are intended to be the equivalent of the first year of college courses, some colleges may grant unit credit which enables students to graduate early. Other institutions use examinations for placement purposes only: students are exempted from introductory course work but may not receive credit towards a concentration, degree, or core requirement. Colleges vary in the selection of examinations they accept and the scores they require to grant credit or placement, with more elite institutions tending to accept fewer examinations and requiring higher scoring. For example, some institutions accept AP scores of 4 or 5, and some accept scores of 3.

**The International Baccalaureate (IB):** Another option for secondary school students who will eventually return to their home country (or who want to take up a more challenging curriculum) is the International Baccalaureate. The IB Diploma program is a rigorous pre-university course of study that allows its graduates to fulfill requirements of various national systems of education.

The IB curriculum comprises the last two years of secondary education. The subjects which make up the core of the IB are arranged according to six groups. Diploma candidates are required to select one subject from each area:

- Language A-includes the study of world literature
- Language B-modern foreign languages
- Study of Man in Society-social sciences
- Experimental Science
- Mathematics
- A "Sixth Subject" elective

Three subjects are studied at the Higher level, three at the Subsidiary level and the candidate is required to complete a course unique to the IB curriculum, "Theory of Knowledge". (The latter reflects the philosophy of the IB, which is that students should be taught "how to learn"- a deliberate compromise between the preference for specialization in some countries and the emphasis on breadth often preferred by others)

### **Additional Resources**

A great resource for parents of high school children is the book:

[What High Schools Don't Tell You: 300+ Secrets to Make Your Kid Irresistible to Colleges by Senior Year](#)

"In What High Schools Don't Tell You, Wissner-Gross reveals 300+ proven strategies to help parents stack the admissions deck in their kid's favor, gleaned from her expertise and interviews with parents of outstandingly high achievers-strategies that most high school guidance counselors, principals, and teachers simply don't know to share. From identifying

exactly which academic credentials will wow an admissions committee to which summer programs and extra-curricular activities can turn an ordinary applicant into a must-have, *What High Schools Don't Tell You* demonstrates how hands-on parental involvement early in a child's high school career is essential to achieving college admissions success."