



GUIDE
TO THE EDUCATION SYSTEM
IN THE UNITED STATES

BY

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ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOL LOGISTICS

Gaining Admission to Public Schools

Foreign national students accompanying parents who are working usually attend public schools tuition-free on the basis of their family's residence in the community. These students' visa status is based on that of their parents.

At the elementary and secondary levels, the school the student will attend is usually the one nearest his or her home. Normally, medical records showing dates of required immunizations and documents showing academic performance at the students' last school are required for admittance. Some schools can offer English as a Foreign Language course: call in advance to ask about any special courses needed.

Gaining Admission to Private Schools

Private boarding and day schools have been established to serve a multitude of special educational needs. Some are "prep schools" geared to prepare students for admission to highly selective colleges; some are single-sex institutions; some are sponsored by religious groups; some are for students with learning disabilities. There are boarding schools that emphasize activities such as music, international education, and outdoor living. In considering a private school, it is especially important to examine the goals of the school to find one whose purposes match those of the student.

Private Schools often have certain admission requirements, such as minimum score on a given standardized test, the writing of one or more essays, etc. Those requirements are generally listed on their websites. Many also have application deadlines. The student should begin well in advance in order to complete the application process before the school's deadline date.

As with Public Schools, normally, medical records showing dates of required immunizations and documents showing academic performance at the students' last school are required for admittance. Some schools can offer English as a Foreign Language course: call in advance to ask about any special courses needed.

Health

In most states, school children must be immunized against a range of diseases before starting school. These may include polio, DTP (diphtheria, tetanus and pertussis or whooping cough) and MMR (measles, mumps and rubella or German measles). Tuberculin screening may also be necessary. (If your children have been vaccinated against tuberculosis, be sure the school knows this, as they will test positive when screening is performed.) Evidence (in English) of the appropriate inoculations, including exact dates, is required when you apply to a school. Each school district may require additional documentation. To find out which school district you live in, contact your city hall. For immunization requirements in elementary and secondary school, visit the Immunization Requirements section.

Enrollment Procedure: Where to go and What to Bring

Enrollment procedures may vary depending on the school district. You can find information about your school district online (most school districts host a website). Contact the main enrollment office for details about its requirements for enrollment. Depending on the school district, there might be a welcome center for new families where you can go to start the process. Otherwise, just follow the instructions about the steps you should follow for enrollment.

Wherever you go, and for all children, be sure to bring a record of their birth certificate (or another official document that verifies the child's Date of Birth – such as a Passport or an I-94 card), proof of vaccinations (see immunization requirements section), and for children that have already been enrolled in school bring their school transcripts. It will be helpful if your child's primary teacher can write a short description of subjects covered and anything specific about your child that might be important for the U.S. teacher. More specific explanation of subjects and grades will be important for the placement of a junior high school or senior high school student. Finally, bring proof of your residential address (utility bill, rental agreement, etc.).

Most school districts in the Twin Cities area have programs for children whose native language is not English. They will direct you on how to arrange language screening and school placement for your child; the latter is based on the results of the test and the availability of an ESL program at a given school.

Schools begin in September, so you should make arrangements ahead of time. However, you can also enroll children throughout the academic year (which runs September to June).

For enrollment in the Minneapolis school district, contact the NewFamilyCenter and Student Placement at 612/668-3700 to arrange for language screening and school placement. The Minneapolis school district website is www.mpls.k12.mn.us/.

For enrollment in the St. Paul school district, contact the English Language Learners (ELL) program at 651/767-8320.

Once You Determine Where Your Child will go to School

Once you have determined where your child will go to school take him/her to see the school before school starts. You can either call in advance or just go to the school. As a rule, public schools offer a variety of after school activities, including sports or other interest groups at the junior and senior high level.

Parents are expected to participate in the affairs of their child's school. Most schools have a Parent Teacher Association (PTA) that meets regularly during the school year to discuss school matters of interest. Parent-teacher conferences are held several times a year and offer parents a chance to meet privately with teachers to discuss their child's progress. Volunteering at your child's school to either help in the classroom or with after-school activities is a good way to support your children and to meet people in the area. Parents are also expected to follow their child with homework and spend some time every day doing so. In many schools, the guideline for parents' involvement is 10 minutes per grade (so, for example, if your child is in

2nd grade, you are expected to spend 20 minutes every day on school homework). Parents' participation with homework decreases as a child gets older; however, parents are still supposed to continually remain apprised of their child's school progress.

Transportation

Many school districts provide transport to school (buses), although it may be provided for certain schools or ages only, and may depend on the traveling distance to school, e.g. there may be bussing only when the distance from home to school is over 2 or 2.5 mi (3 to 5.5km). Some school districts provide buses for children in special education only. Students are mailed a bus schedule at the beginning of each academic year detailing pick up and drop off place and time. The bus schedule can vary from one year to the next, depending on the number of students the school serves and their place of residence. Also, students might have to walk some distance to get to the bus stop. In Minnesota children can attend a school outside of their district. However free transportation is not available outside your district (unless you live in Minneapolis and your family is eligible to participate in The Choice is Yours Program – see the “Information and Resources for choosing a school in Minnesota” section).

Provisions & Meals at school

It's common for children at elementary level to take a packed lunch to school. Most elementary and secondary schools provide a self-service cafeteria where children may purchase lunch. The cost of lunches is set by each individual state. Lower income families are eligible to receive reduced cost or free lunches. Information about this program is usually given to the family at the beginning of each academic year along with other material. Milk is usually sold at elementary schools at snack and lunch times.

High school students are provided with lockers where they can store their books and other possessions. Generally, students are required to purchase their own lock. Sometimes locks are provided by the school for a cost. Schools provide cycle racks for students who cycle to school and high schools provide car parks (parking lots – keep in mind in most states students are eligible to drive when they turn 16).

School Supplies, Books and other Expenses

Every year, before school starts, families are mailed (or can find online on the school's website) a list of school supplies they are asked to purchase. The list can be quite specific and the supplies are meant to meet the student's needs for the entire academic year. Generally, the supplies are placed in a common supply area all students have equally access to on an as needed basis.

Many schools provide lockers for their students to visit between classes and use to store books or supplies. However, students may still be required to carry many of their belongings with them to and from home. Therefore, you might want to consider purchasing a good sturdy backpack. If you're going to be investing in a new one, you may want to consider purchasing a pack with wheels. Parents may want to check with the school first to see if there are any requirements or recommendations at for that particular school.

Here is an example of an elementary school supply list:

<http://www.edina.k12.mn.us/concord/supplylist10-11.pdf>

Books are generally provided by the school to each student at the beginning of the year, with the expectation that the student will return them at the end of the school year.

Some elementary schools do not provide textbooks to students (at least not for every subject); instead, they use handouts that students collect in folders or binders.

Extra costs do occur throughout the year, including (but not limited to): lunch tickets, field trips, PTO membership, room party dues, school pictures, and yearbook.

There are also instances when students are asked to pay for lost or damaged books and equipment. These assessments are made by the teacher, media specialist or principal as circumstances dictate.

Many schools have financial assistance (scholarships) for low income families.

Schools' Dress Code

Each school has its own dress code explained either on their website or in a Handbook provided to students and parents. Most public schools do not require a school uniform, while many private schools do. Some schools do not allow students to wear hats (although headscarves and other attire required by religious beliefs are generally permitted). Other types of clothing may also not be permitted. In general, students are not to wear items that advertise and/or display tobacco, alcohol, or other chemicals, or attire with obscene language or pictures. Also, Minnesota State law requires that shoes must be worn in a public building.

Terms and School Hours

Usually a student has one teacher for all major subjects during his first six years of schooling (elementary) and a different teacher for each subject during the last six grades in junior high and high schools.

Many schools operate on a two semester system and have quarterly academic reports.

Each school has different school day start and end hours. Some schools, for example, might start at 7:00am and end at 2:00, while others might start at 9:00am and end at 4:00.

Generally, the length of a school day in kindergarten is 2.5 hours, elementary school is of 6.5 hours, while junior and high school days consist of 7 to 7.5 hours. Many elementary and junior high schools have before and after school programs that provide quality enrichment and care before and after school and on release days.

Homework

Homework is often used by schools to improve academic performance and to encourage parental involvement in their child's education.

Generally, in addition to daily reading, students are expected to complete approximately ten minutes of homework per day for each grade they have completed. A third grader, for example, should spend approximately 30 minutes each day completing homework.

In high school, the amount of time a student is expected to spend on homework is increasingly higher.

Reporting and Assessment

Generally, students' assessment is a continuous process. Some schools use student portfolios as well as traditional report cards. A portfolio is a collection of student work samples which represent the progress the individual student has made during the assessment period.

Progress reports (report cards) are generally issued several times a year, according to a schedule set by each school.

Generally, a student's Grade Point Average (GPA) is not calculated until high school. The GPA is also used in some high schools to determine a student's class ranking.

Students are also routinely administered standardized tests to certain grade levels. Each year, the district's testing schedule is included in the school directory. Parents are sent test score results along with an interpretation of the scores. The results of these test scores are also used to determine a child's special needs (for example, whether s/he should be placed in a "gifted" education program).

Maximizing Parent-Teacher Conferences

One central aspect of parent involvement within home-school communication is the parent-teacher conference. Depending on the age of the child, the parent-teacher conference is typically scheduled once or twice a year (sometimes more often, depending on the school), starting with the end of the school's first academic quarter. The meeting is an opportunity for parents and their child's teacher to share insights and information about the child and to talk about his/her strengths and struggles in school. At this meeting, parents have the opportunity to develop a relationship with the teacher(s) and present themselves as team players in their child's education. Some schools allow children to be present and participate to the conference, other schools discourage this practice.

Since the average parent-teacher conference lasts 30 minutes, many parents prepare for it in advance because time tends to run fast when one is talking about their child. To prepare in advance, here are some factors parents are encouraged to consider:

Gather Information

Parents should start preparing during the first few weeks of the school year. As a parent, what should you pay attention to?

- Ask the teacher to give you information about the planned curriculum, and explain how the teacher assigns and evaluates work, and what the teacher's teaching philosophy is.
- Check your child's school work. What is the teacher assigning? You also might review your child's completed and corrected work.
- Look for patterns in your child's school work. What subjects (such as math or reading) seem difficult? Are certain tasks (such as writing or computing math problems) more difficult than others? Write down examples of:
 - Ongoing (carryover) problems from your child's previous school years.

- Any new struggles you see emerging.
- Improvement in areas that used to be difficult.
- Listen to what your child says about his school work, as well as his relationships with his teacher and classmates. Ask him what he thinks are the most important points to cover at the conference. Doing this will help you see things from his perspective.
- Note any classroom accommodations and techniques previous teachers have used to help your child succeed.

Organize and Prioritize

From the list of concerns and observations you create:

- Select the most important points to discuss with the teacher.
- Prioritize your concerns so you'll be sure to cover the most critical topics before "your time is up" at the conference. Summarize your top concerns on paper to take with you to the conference.

Find Out Who Gives Feedback

At least a week before the conference, ask the teacher if feedback from other educators will be included. For example, if your child:

- Seems to have problems socializing with adults or students at school, is there a school staff member (counselor or mental health worker) who can give feedback?
- Takes classes in art, music, or sports, will those teachers and coaches comment on his skill, talent, and progress in those areas?
- Is in a special program (i.e. ESL), how will his special education teacher give his report?

Asking for feedback from several people will help you and the school view your child as a "whole" person with strengths as well as needs.

Get a Broad Perspective

As the conference date draws near, remember the meeting is an opportunity for you and the teacher to collaborate. Remember that you're the expert about your child, while the teacher is the expert on teaching kids at his grade level. You'll both come to the table with ideas and opinions. Remember, too, that collaboration sometimes requires compromise; striking a balance of ideas is often in the best interest of your child.

At the Conference Now, you're ready to meet with the teacher. Here are some guidelines to keep in mind during the conference:

- Let the teacher "lead" the conference. Be friendly, open, and appreciative of the positive things she does for your child.
- Allow the teacher to express her views, but make sure your priority concerns are addressed. This should be a give-and-take exchange.
- Hear the teacher out before you make any final requests or suggestions. What she says (new information, insights, or ideas) may alter the approach you take.
- For concerns you and the teacher agree on, ask how you and she can work together. For example, if your child has trouble staying organized, ask the teacher how she plans to help your child. If she offers to create an assignment sheet with due dates for your child to track homework and projects, you can offer to help your child mark his own calendar at home and coach him to check the calendar daily or weekly.
- If you haven't already done so, ask the teacher how — and how often — the two of you will stay in touch. Will you make contact daily, weekly, or only as needed? Will you communicate by notes, telephone, email, or in person? Making such arrangements sends the message you're a team player in your child's education. It also helps you and the teacher plan for two-way communication throughout the school year.

At Home after the Conference

Whether or not your child attended the conference with you, it is helpful to sit down with him/her to discuss what occurred. Depending on his age and maturity level, he may need help understanding what problems — and solutions — were covered. Most kids also want to have a clear idea of what's expected of the teacher, the parent(s), and, most importantly, from him. Parents can point out a child's strengths along with his struggles.

Other Forms of Home-School Communication

Many secondary schools use online electronic tools to communicate with both students and parents. Those tools are used to track progress and keep current on assignments, tests and other academic activities. Generally, these tools: require activation and login to protect the privacy of the information; contain a wealth of information and are updated daily; allow parents to follow a student's school progress on a daily basis; often provide access to additional online resources students can use to enrich their learning. The following is an example of one such tool: [Edline](#)