

# EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES

All children in the United States are guaranteed a free and quality public education.

## Introduction

The idea that all American students should get a quality education is fairly new. Until about 20 years ago, it was a common belief that only some students needed to be ready for college. Most students could take easier classes, graduate from high school, and still get a good job. That is not true anymore.

Today, educators, businesspeople, and elected officials agree that all students need to take the same kinds of challenging classes — even if they do not plan to go to college. Parents know that when expectations are high, most young people have the talent and determination to succeed.

## Public Schools in the United States

Newcomers to the United States will find many differences in our schools. First, schools in the United States are run by local communities and not by the federal government.

Second, U.S. teachers can choose how to teach students and do not have to follow federal rules. Students at the same school in the same grade who have different teachers will learn the same subjects but will likely be taught in different ways.

And third, many parents in the United States have an active role in their child's education. At home, parents can support their child's success in school. At school, parents can work with their child's teacher by going to parent-teacher conferences or school events, or just by calling the teacher or principal to ask for information. Parents can also request to talk or meet with their child's teacher any time during the school year.

## What Parents Need To know About k-12 Education

### Standards, Testing, and Accountability

Since the early 1980s, educators in all but one state (Iowa) have set learning goals for students in grades K-12. Each state has a definition of what students need to know in subjects such as reading, writing, math, and science. These are called standards.

Your child's school is required to make sure that not only your child — but all students — meet the standards in your state. Schools use annual tests to find out if students have met the standards. If students do not meet standards, schools must make changes so that students learn what they need to advance from grade to grade. As a parent, know what your child must learn from year to year and help make sure that he or she has learned it. Your child's teachers and principal should give you information about learning standards. If information is not provided, call the school and request it.

## School Choice

Students and parents have many school options. This has not always been true. In the past, most students attended neighborhood public schools based on where they lived. Wealthy parents had choices. They could move to a community with better schools or send their child to a private or religious school. But most low-income and middle-class families could not pay for tuition. They had to leave their child in the school he or she was in, even if it was not a good school.

Today, most parents — no matter how much money they have — have some choices about where to send their child to school. These options include neighborhood schools, charter schools, magnet (theme) schools, private schools, parochial schools, and homeschooling. The recent federal No Child Left Behind law (see below) gives parents even more choices, especially for low-income students in schools that are not meeting standards.

As a parent, find out what choices your community offers. Learn about your child's school. Talk to other parents. Talk to your child's principal. Read the school's annual report card. Find out if there are better schools your child can go to if he or she is not doing well in his or her school.

## No Child Left Behind and Learning English

In 2002, changes to the U.S. education law were made. The law is called No Child Left Behind (NCLB). It gives parents more choices and more rights regarding their child's education. For example, under the law, schools with low-income students that do not meet state standards must give students:

- The chance to transfer to a school that has met the standards, or
- Extra help in reading and math.

Students who have not yet learned English are known as Limited English Proficient (LEP) or English Language Learners (ELL). Schools should have programs that can help children learn English so they can do better in school.

Under the law, if your child is put into an English language program, the school should contact you in a language you can understand. If you know English is difficult for your son or daughter, and your child's school has not contacted you, call or go to the school and ask what programs are available.

Parents have the right to say no to English classes for their child. But they should understand that children who have problems with English often do poorly in school, fall behind other students in class, and sometimes drop out of school.

You also can ask for your child to attend a different English language program if one is available at your child's school. Finally, you should know that your child will be tested once a year to see how well he or she is learning to read and write English.

## Teacher Quality

Many people say that students are only as good as the teachers who teach them. As part of the No Child Left Behind law, lawmakers said all teachers must be "highly qualified" by the 2005-2006 school year. Teachers in rural areas and small towns have more time to prove they are "highly qualified." The definitions of "highly qualified" will be different in each state. But in general, teachers will need a college degree, a teaching certificate, and proof that they know the subject they teach.

During the school year, parents may receive a letter from school saying their child's teacher is not "highly qualified." If you get a letter like this, you can request a new teacher. But first consider asking your child's principal for more details. It is possible that the teacher has many years of experience, but has not yet passed a required test. Ask the principal for the teacher's credentials, such as years taught and awards received. Find out what the teacher is doing to become qualified. Talk to other parents or students about their experiences with this teacher. Then decide whether to move your child.

## Parent Involvement

No role is too big when it comes to being involved in your child's education. Research shows that children whose parents are involved do better in school. Not all parents have the same resources to be active in school. Some parents may be free to volunteer in the classroom, while others may work two or more jobs and may not have the free time. Here are some of the more common ways parents are involved:

- Support learning at home.
  - Offer your child quiet time and a space for studying.
  - Build on what is being taught at school.
  - Help develop the values and skills children need to become responsible adults.
- Support your children in school.
  - Volunteer in the classroom or chaperone a field trip.
  - Ask the teacher or principal if you can volunteer your skills in other ways.
- Be an advocate.
  - Advocate not only for your own child, but also for other youth, and for changes needed to make the school better.
  - Vote in school board elections.
  - Work with the teacher and principal to solve problems.
  - Take on leadership roles, such as serving on a school improvement team or advisory group.

Any one or all of these approaches are good. Choose the way that is the best for your family.

## What Are Standards?

Learning standards are different from state to state. Included below are examples of what a child might be expected to know in elementary school.

First Grade — A student should be able to correctly spell words like the, but, and in, add and subtract up to 100, read a calendar and tell time, choose and read books aloud, and say and understand the Pledge of Allegiance.

Third Grade — A student should know how to use a dictionary to look up a word, multiply and divide up to 100, identify basic scientific terms, and use a map to identify states and countries.

Fifth Grade — A student should be able to write a short report on an issue he or she researched, solve math problems that have many steps, have a basic understanding of the earth and other planets, and understand the Declaration of Independence and Bill of Rights.



## Keeping Your Heritage Alive

Learning English and attending a U.S. school does not mean that your son or daughter must give up his or her culture. You can help your children honor their background and customs by sharing them with other people in your community. Schools are also good places to share new and different cultural experiences. Teachers and principals often look for ways to help students understand and appreciate different cultures. Your own knowledge and experiences can be very helpful to a teacher.

Check with your child's school to see if there is time during a parents' night, school fair, or school assembly to share pictures, stories, recipes, music, plays, or other experiences with your child's class or school. If you help others understand the value and beauty of your culture, it will also help your child understand and be proud of who he or she is.

## What Parents Need to Know About College

### Why College Is Important in Planning for Your Child's Future

In today's global, high-tech economy, your son or daughter must continue his or her education after high school. Graduating from high school and going straight into a decent, well-paying job today is almost impossible. Some type of additional education or training is necessary, even for manufacturing jobs. It is important that parents, even if they didn't go to college themselves, encourage their children to attend some kind of college or training program.

Research has shown that a person who graduates from college is likely to earn \$1 million more during his or her career than a person who does not attend college. College graduates are not only likely to earn more money; they are also likely to provide more support for their families and give more back to their communities.

### College Is Possible

All students can go to college if they work hard in school. Many programs encourage all students to consider college. These programs are designed mainly for low-income and ethnic minority students, especially those who do not think they can afford college. In 2001, only 34 percent of Hispanic students went to college. This is compared to 46 percent of white students and 40 percent of African American students. To be able to compete for good, high-paying jobs, more Hispanic students need to go to college.

### Preparing for College

After high school, some students may go to a four-year college or university. Others may attend a two-year community college or vocational school near home. As your teenager makes plans for his or her future, make sure he or she knows that to earn a good living he or she must continue to learn after high school.

### There are many ways parents can help their child get ready for college:

- In elementary school, **make sure that your child is learning at grade level.** If he or she is behind other students, work with your child's teacher to help your child. Students who have problems with schoolwork in lower grades will have problems with schoolwork later in school. This will make it hard for them to take the classes in high school that they need for college.

- Beginning in middle school, **talk with your son or daughter about what he or she wants to do after graduation.** Help your teenager understand what is needed to achieve his or her career goals. For example, a child who wants to be a doctor needs to do well in science classes. A student who wants to be an accountant needs to do well in math. A student who wants to become a journalist should have strong reading and writing skills.
- When your son or daughter starts high school, continue to talk about jobs that interest him or her. **Make sure that he or she chooses a class schedule that will help him or her meet his or her goals.** Students who want to go to college need to take classes that will prepare them, such as geometry and two years of algebra. Colleges also like students to have a wide range of nonacademic interests, such as sports, drama, music, and community involvement.
- When your teenager is a junior in high school, **make sure that he or she takes the ACT or SAT.** These are tests that colleges and universities use to help them decide which students to admit to their school.
- Also during your son or daughter's junior year, **help him or her think about where he or she wants to go to college.** What will he or she need to do to be admitted? Before admitting a student, colleges and universities look at grades, academic achievements, extracurricular activities, and a student's ability to pay.

## What Parents Need to Know About Paying for College

### Paying for College

College in the United States is expensive, but there are financial aid resources that can help students and families pay for college. These resources include scholarships, grants, loans, and state-sponsored college savings programs. Here are some ways to find out more about financial aid:

- Meet with a guidance counselor in your child's high school,
- Talk to other parents who have received financial aid,
- Talk with your local community or cultural center, or
- Consult with the financial aid officer at the college where your son or daughter has applied.

### Financial Aid Resources

The Federal Student Aid Information Center — Students or parents can call

1-800-433-3243 seven days a week from 8 a.m. to midnight (EST). Help is offered in both English and Spanish. You can also visit the Web site at [www.ed.gov/prog\\_info/SFA/StudentGuide/2001-2/fsaic.html](http://www.ed.gov/prog_info/SFA/StudentGuide/2001-2/fsaic.html).

College Is Possible ([www.CollegelsPossible.org](http://www.CollegelsPossible.org)) is a Web site with information for students on how to choose the right college, how to pay for college, and what various financial aid terms mean.

At FastWeb ([fastweb.monster.com](http://fastweb.monster.com)) students can search for scholarships or get information about financial aid.

Unfortunately, some resources are only available on the Internet. If you do not have a computer at home, visit your local library, church, or community center. Or see if your child has access to a computer at school.

## Education Timeline

### Birth – 5 years old to kindergarten

**Get your child immunized!** All 50 states have immunization requirements for diseases such as measles, mumps, and hepatitis. Children cannot start school unless they have been fully immunized. Check your state's rules with a local health care provider.

**Get your child ready for school.** Most experts suggest a child should be able to identify at least five colors, count from one to 10, recite the alphabet, and recognize his or her name before entering kindergarten.

**Pick a kindergarten program.** Does your school district offer all-day kindergarten? If so, do your homework and decide if this type of program is appropriate for your child. Some states also offer half-day options.

**Register for school.** Registration dates vary by district, but parents should expect to register their son or daughter the spring before their child is due to start school. Most states require a child be at least 5 years old before starting school.

### 5 years old to kindergarten – 2nd GRADE

**Become a smart school consumer.** In most states, parents have choices when it comes to selecting a school for their child — neighborhood, magnet/theme, charter, private, homeschooling, or others. Learn what types of schools are available in your community and which school will be best for your child.

**Ready to learn.** From kindergarten to graduation, make sure that your child goes to school every day fed and rested (at least eight hours of sleep) — and that he or she understands the importance of school. Your child may be able to receive free or low cost meals at school. Check with your child's principal to see if your child is eligible.

**Attend parent-teacher conferences.** Most schools schedule parent-teacher conferences twice a year (fall and spring). Use this time to learn more about your child's progress. If you think your child is having difficulties in school, do not wait for a conference. Call the teacher and ask to discuss how you can work together to improve your child's learning.

### 3rd GRADE

**Reading at grade level.** Most educators say that if a child is not reading at grade level by the end of third grade, he or she will have difficulty in other subjects and be much less likely to graduate from high school. If your child is having trouble, work with his or her teacher to get extra help.

**Annual testing.** Your child will be tested annually in math and reading (and sometimes science) in grades 3-8. Find out when these tests will occur, how you can help your child prepare, and how your child did.

### 5th GRADE

**The transition to middle school.** Transitioning means a new school, a new schedule, and increased student responsibility. In most cases, your child will be working with three to five teachers, not just one. Toward the end of fifth grade, start preparing your son or daughter for what he or she can expect in middle school.

## 6th GRADE

**Teenage development and behavior.** Stuck between childhood and adulthood, middle school children go through some significant changes. As a parent, know who your teenager's friends are (watch out for troublemakers and bullies), check for drug and alcohol use, and be alert for other physical and emotional changes your son or daughter may be experiencing. Get help if necessary.

**Be career wise.** It is never too early to talk with your child about what he or she wants to do after high school. Start encouraging your son or daughter to explore classes that interest him or her. Not sure what classes your child should be taking? Consult a school guidance counselor.

## 9th GRADE

**Choosing high school courses.** Regardless of your son's or daughter's goals after graduation, he or she should take a challenging English, math, and science course every year. If your son or daughter wants to attend college, make sure he or she is taking the correct college-prep courses.

**Graduation requirements.** These vary from state to state. Find out the rules in your state during your child's freshman year. Then make sure he or she is meeting those goals every year so that he or she graduates on time.

## 10th GRADE

**ACT or SAT?** Students who plan to go to college probably will need to take either the ACT or SAT, typically during their junior year. The school's guidance counselor should know which test is best for your child.

**Financial aid.** Does your teenager want to attend college, but you are not sure how to pay for it? Start asking questions about financial aid during his or her junior year (or before). Academic and athletic scholarships, plus grants and loans, are available. Seek advice from a guidance counselor about financial aid opportunities in your area.

## 12th GRADE

**College or university.** A college graduate is likely to earn \$1 million more throughout his or her career than someone who does not possess a college degree. Attending a four-year college or university will help ensure that your child has the skills he or she needs to be successful beyond high school.

**Job training.** If your son or daughter chooses not to attend college, have him or her explore local job-training opportunities in fields ranging from construction to hotel management. Given today's job market, a high school diploma alone likely will not be enough to ensure him or her a good, high-paying job.

**Community college.** For students who are not sure what they want to do after high school, community college is a good option. Affordable, convenient, and often high-quality, these two-year institutions offer an excellent opportunity for students to continue their education beyond high school.

For more information on planning for college visit: [www.collegeboard.com](http://www.collegeboard.com) or [www.mapping-your-future.org](http://www.mapping-your-future.org). Both sites available in Spanish.

For more information on ENLACE visit: [www.wkkf.org/YE](http://www.wkkf.org/YE)