Understanding and Navigating the Public Education System in the United States

A GUIDE FOR UNACCOMPANIED YOUTH

AMERICANBARASSOCIATION
CILA Children's Immigration Law Academy

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A Guide for Unaccompanied Youth

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Authors: Marissa Barrera, Amelia Friedman, Shalom Hernandez, and Itxel Ramirez

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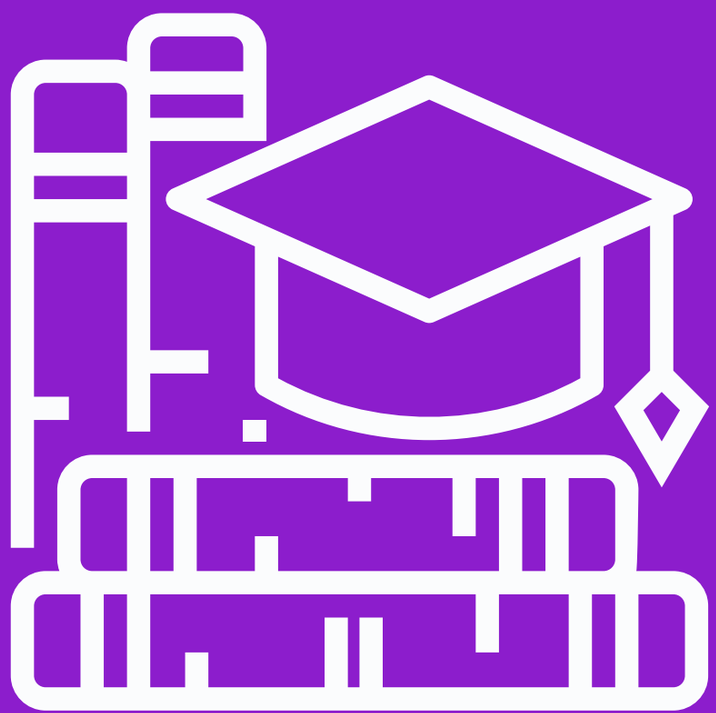
Section I

Introduction



I. Introduction

Navigating the U.S. education system can be a challenging but rewarding journey. This guide aims to inform unaccompanied youth and their families about the public education system and provide them with tools to access opportunities available to them.

Obtaining a high school education and diploma in the United States is essential for setting the groundwork for future opportunities, whether you're aiming for higher education or entering the workforce. In the United States, most jobs require or strongly recommend a high school diploma or equivalent GED (General Educational Development) diploma to receive employment. Completing this level of education can help you access a broader range of opportunities and increase your chances of finding a more fulfilling job or a more successful career.

Your right to a public education, regardless of your immigration status, is protected by the U.S. Constitution. In a case called *Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982), the U.S. Supreme Court held that a state could not deny a child access to a basic public education because the child lacked legal status. This means that in the United States, every child is entitled to equal access to a free public education regardless of their parents' actual or perceived national origin, citizenship, or immigration status. This right also applies to recently arrived unaccompanied children/youth or those who have been here longer, living in local communities with a parent, family member, or other adult sponsor. No matter where you or your parents come from, you have the right to go to school in the United States.

On January 21, 2025, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) announced a new policy allowing immigration officers to enter schools, healthcare facilities, and places of worship to conduct arrests, rescinding prior guidelines that designated these locations as protected "sensitive areas." This change may cause you to experience feelings of fear and anxiety. These feelings are valid, and it's important to know that schools and advocates are working to ensure that schools remain safe spaces for all students. Despite these new changes, remember that under the U.S. Constitution, all students have the right to a public education regardless of their or their parents' immigration status.

Some school districts across the nation have developed guidance on how schools should proceed if ICE agents want to enter their schools. Connect with a trusted school counselor, teacher, assistant principal, or principal to know the safety

measures your school is taking. You can also connect with an immigration attorney if needed, or community immigrant advocacy organizations in your area, for support and guidance on policies and protections in place.

In addition, another protection in school is the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) https://studentprivacy.ed.gov/resources/parent-guide-family-educational-rights-and-privacy-act-ferpa. This law prohibits schools, without sponsor's consent, from providing any outside agency like ICE or CBP with any information about your educational record.

You are not alone and have rights, Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF) (at https://www.maldef.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/IMMIGRATION-ENFORCEMENT-IN-SCHOOLS-1.22.25.pdf) encourages sponsors to contact them with any information about immigration enforcement activity in school. In addition, the National Immigration Law Center (NILC), has prepared a facts sheet that includes Know Your Rights (KYR) information (https://www.nilc.org/resources/factsheet-trumps-rescission-of-protected-areas-policies-undermines-safety-for-all/).

To learn more about your rights and other resources that might be helpful to you, check out the Children's Immigration Law Academy's (CILA) Youth Page: https://cilacademy.org/youth/.

A. About this Guide

Targeted Audience*:* This guide was created for unaccompanied immigrant youth and newcomer students who are interested in learning about and navigating the public education system in the United States.

Purpose: Figuring out the U.S education system can feel like trying to solve a puzzle with a lot of missing pieces. It is tough dealing with things like language barriers and the pressure to help family members back home while also trying to navigate your studies in the United States. Even though it might feel like you are on this journey by yourself, it is important to know there is support for you, and you don't have to navigate the education system alone. This guide is here to help you understand how the system works, address challenges you might experience, and show you how to take steps to reach your educational goals.

Guide Summary: In this guide, we describe the different components of the public school system in the United States with a focus on high school, covering enrollment to graduation. We explore and provide you with resources and

strategies, and help you identify support systems in your school that can make you feel empowered in your educational journey.

Navigating this Guide: We have divided this guide into sections to make it easier for you to navigate and find the information you need. Each section focuses on a specific aspect of the public school system, allowing you to choose which parts you want to learn more about and which parts you might want to skip or read later. These sections cover everything from a general overview of a specific aspect of education to guidance for addressing specific challenges you might encounter throughout your educational path.

The next page has a table of contents that serves as a roadmap for the guide. It shows what is covered in each section and where you can find the corresponding information by page number. Additionally, we've included a glossary of terms to help you understand any unfamiliar words you come across. We've also listed additional resources throughout the guide and provided a more comprehensive list of other resources with helpful information at the end of this guide.

The term "sponsor" in this Guide: You are likely living with your parents, a family relative or friend, or another type of caregiver, or guardian. In this guide, we will use the term *"sponsor"* to refer to anyone responsible for your care, regardless of their specific title/role.

Please note, specific criteria and requirements of the education system can vary by state, school district, and school. This guide aims to provide a general overview. This educational guide contains external hyperlinks to other organizations. This does not constitute an endorsement of or responsibility for the content or privacy practices of these organizations or their websites. Consult local resources for information that is most applicable to your situation and specific to your school.

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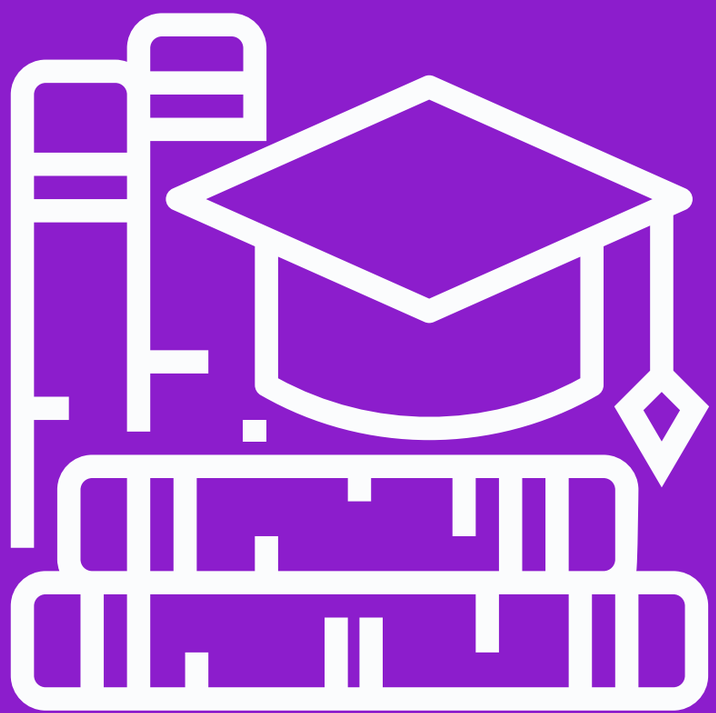
Section II

Glossary of Terms



II. Glossary of Terms

Absence: When a student is not present at school during the school calendar days set by the school district. Schools categorize absences as excused or unexcused. An excused absence is a day or part of a day when the student is away from school for a reason that is recognized by the school. Usually, a note or e-mail from a sponsor, doctor, judge, or an attorney is sufficient to justify the absence. An unexcused absence is when the student is away from school for part of the day or the whole day and no documentation is shown as justification for their absence.

Academic Ranking: A representation of a student's academic standing compared to their peers in the same graduating class. It may also be referred to as "class ranking," and is typically determined by your Grade Point Average, best known as your GPA.

Advanced Placement (AP): A high school class that teaches material at college level. The name is often shortened and called an "AP class."

Career and Technical Education: A type of study that focuses on helping students develop practical skills and knowledge related to specific careers or industries. These programs are designed to prepare students for the workforce by providing hands-on training and real-world experience in fields like healthcare, education, business and many more.

Class Schedule: A plan that each student should receive at the start of the school year showing when and where they will attend classes during the school day. It lists the times and teacher classrooms for each subject class. Students know where to go and what to expect each day as is indicated in their class schedule.

Community College: A two-year educational institution where you can earn your associate's degree and certifications. The cost of attendance is less than at a university, making community colleges more affordable. Community Colleges can be great places for students to start their higher education journey after graduating from high school or after obtaining their GED certificate.

Compulsory Attendance: A law requiring minors to attend school. The specific requirements can vary depending on where you live. For example, in Texas, unless exempted, a child who is at least six years old and under 19 years of age is required to attend school.[1]

[1] Texas Constitution and Statues, Education Code Section 25.085- Compulsory School Attendance, last visited September 12, 2024, available at https://statutes.capitol.texas.gov/Docs/ED/htm/ED.25.htm#25.085

Curriculum: A plan developed by the school for what students will learn in school, including the class subjects that students will study, their lessons, and their activities.

Dress Code: A set of rules set by the school district about what students can and cannot wear to school. Students must follow school dress code rules when attending school.

Elementary School: A school that provides the first levels of a child's education from kindergarten to 5th grade or 6th grade at times.

English Learner: A student who is learning to speak, read, and write in English. The student might speak a different language at home and may need extra help to understand and use English at school.

Extra-Curricular Activity: An activity, like sports, clubs, student council, dance, or volunteering that students do outside of their regular classes at school. These are usually fun, something the student is interested in, and helpful for exploring interests, learning new skills, and making friends.

Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA): This is a form completed by current and future college students in the United States to apply for financial help from the government to pay for college. The information provided on the FAFSA helps determine how much money a student can get for things like tuition, books, and other school costs. Detailed information about eligibility is in the FAFSA Eligibility section.

General Education Development (GED): A set of tests that people can take if they haven't finished high school. Passing the GED tests shows that they have the equivalent subject knowledge as someone who graduated from high school. Those who pass the tests receive a high school equivalent diploma, which can help when applying for jobs.

Grade Point Average (GPA): It is the average of all a student's grades in all of their classes. It helps schools see how well a student is doing in their academic studies. What is considered a "high" or "low" number can change based on what school a student attends. The highest GPAs are usually around a 4.0 GPA on a 0.0-4.0 scale.

High School: A school that provides education for grades; 9th grade to 12th grade, attended after elementary school and middle school. In the United States students are highly encouraged to complete their high school education as a high school

diploma is expected for many job requirements and admission to colleges and universities.

Kindergarten: An elementary grade school level that prepares children for the first grade. A child in kindergarten is typically 5 or 6 years old.

Individualized Education Plan (IEP): A written plan made for students with disabilities that lists specific goals, support, and services that the school will provide to help the student learn and succeed.

In-State Tuition: Students who have established residency in the state (for example most states require students to live in that state for a period of at least 12 months) for students to be considered resident students and qualify for in-state tuition rate to attend college/university. In-state tuition is significantly more affordable than out-of-state tuition. The period of time required to establish residency varies by state. Students can double check residency requirements from the college/university admission webpage they are applying to.

Magnet Program: A special program or school that focuses on a specific subject like science, mathematics, foreign languages, or art. Students receive different opportunities to explore those subjects with a higher focus.

McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act: A United States law that protects the educational rights of youth who are experiencing homelessness or those who are at risk of becoming homeless.

Middle School: A school intermediate between elementary and high school, typically for children in grades 6th, 7th and 8th.

Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR): A program of the Administration for Children and Families within the department of Health and Human Services (HHS) that promotes the health, well-being, and stability of refugees, unaccompanied children, and other eligible individuals through culturally responsive services. https://acf.gov/orr

Out-of-State Tuition: Students who apply to schools out of their state of residence are considered out-of-state students. As a result, they are charged a higher tuition rate to attend the college/university. For example, if a student who is a California resident wants to attend a college/university in Texas, because they haven't lived in Texas long enough to meet residency requirements, they would be considered an out-of-state student and would pay out-of-state tuition. Out-of-state tuition tends to be less affordable.

Private College/University: Private colleges are colleges that don't receive their primary funding from the state government. Their admission criteria and procedures are different as they are not subject to the same rules as public institutions. Private colleges can be for-profit or nonprofit institutions.

Progress Report: Document that tells a student how they are doing in their classes. It usually shows grades and comments from teachers about the student's work and behavior in school. Progress reports help students see how they are doing in their classes and can show what subjects a student needs to improve in.

Public College/University: A public college/university is a higher education institution that is primarily funded by the state and local government. Public colleges are often larger than private colleges, and may have lower tuition costs, especially for in-state residents.

Report Card: Document that shows a student's grades. It usually comes out at the end of the grading period. It shows how the student did in each subject like math, history, science, or English.

Scholarship: A grant or payment made to support a student's education that is usually awarded based on academic merit or other achievement. Students can ask their school counselor if there are any scholarships that they are eligible to apply for.

School Norms/Rules: Agreements, behavior, or social expectations or rules that are set by the school. They often include consequences for behavior that violates the norms/rules. For example, a certain number of late arrivals to class may be counted as an unexcused absence.

Special Education Evaluation: An assessment that is used to show if a student has a disability and needs individual instruction and support.

Standardized Test: State level test administered to students to evaluate student's understanding of the curriculum and that measure student's academic progress. These state tests sometimes serve as criteria for students to advance to the next grade level.

Tardy Mark: When a student arrives late to class, after the bell has rung, that results in the student obtaining a tardy mark on their attendance record. In most schools, three tardy marks count as an absence.

Test: An assessment given by a teacher that is generally used to determine a student's knowledge or skill level in a subject.

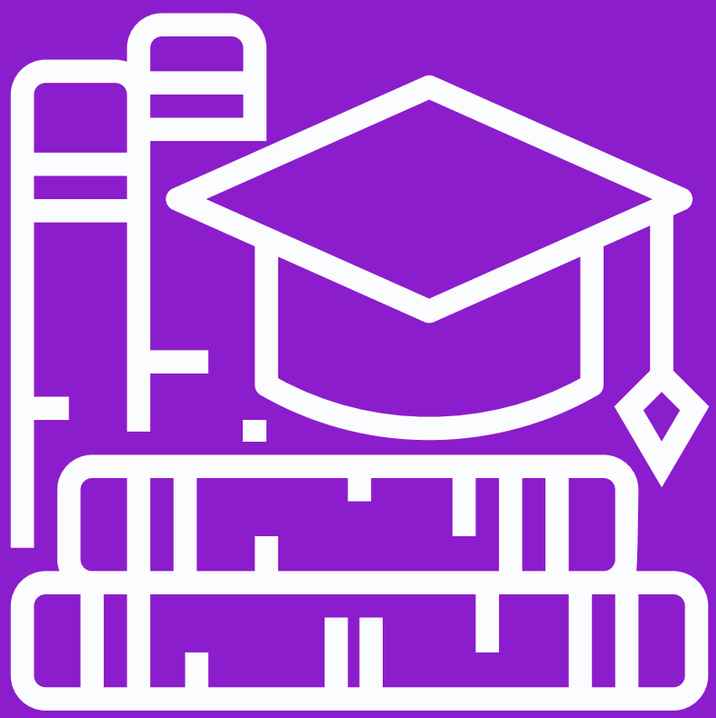
Transcript: An official record of a student's academic performance and progress. It includes a list of courses taken and grades received. It lists your GPA, standardized test scores, honors received and graduation status.

Tuition: Money that students at a higher education institution (like a community college or university) must pay the school to take classes. Private high schools will also usually make students pay tuition too for taking classes.

University: A four-year educational institution, where students can earn a bachelor's degree. The cost of attendance tends to be higher at universities than community colleges; however, universities offer scholarships, grants, and other forms of financial aid to assist with cost. After completion of a bachelor's degree, students can choose to enter the workforce or enroll in graduate school to continue their education and pursue a master's and/or a doctoral (PhD) degree. Graduate school, also known as grad school, is advanced education where students can pursue in-depth expertise and research in a specific field of study. Students can also decide to enter the workforce and enroll in graduate school at a later time, after they've worked for some years.

Section III

Enrollment



III. Enrollment

To attend school and get signed up for classes you will need to "enroll" in school. This is the process in the United States for telling the school that you want to attend and get signed up for classes. Enrollment often occurs during summer break for the upcoming school year, but you can enroll at any point. For example, if you move in November, you can enroll then.

For many schools, you will enroll when you first move to the United States and are ready to begin school. During the enrollment process the school will place you in your educational grade level. You can speak with the school about your preference with respect to your grade level given differences in education systems abroad.

Upon completion of a grade level, some schools may move you up to the next grade level automatically, while other schools may require you to fill out registration forms each school year you attend the school. Your school will let you know what forms are needed as well as the timeline they would like for you to complete the forms by each year.

If you switch to a new school, you will usually need to complete the enrollment process again, or complete transfer forms. Transfer forms are documents used when you move from one school to another. If you move to another school, it's important to be in communication with your previous school and your new school, for you to have a smoother transition. If you maintain open communication with both schools, the new school will be able to obtain information about the resources and support you received at your previous school faster and implement those services sooner, within their capacity.

A. Compulsory Attendance

There are laws in the United States that require you to attend school based on your age. Anyone between the ages of 6-16 years old is required to attend school, and many states require attendance through 18 years of age. It is important that you try and enroll in school soon after you are released from the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) custody to a sponsor or if you move to a new location. These laws requiring you to enroll in and attend school are called "compulsory attendance" laws. Many states also have "truancy" laws too. Truancy laws are laws that make sure students go to school regularly. Usually when you are absent from school, the school requires an excuse note to justify your absence from school. For example, if you go to a doctor's appointment, or have an immigration court hearing, you will need a note from the

doctor's office or the court (or your attorney if you have one) to let the school know where you were and why you were absent that day. Usually, a note or e-mail from a parent, sponsor, doctor, judge, or an attorney is sufficient to justify an absence. If you are absent multiple times without showing an excuse note to the school, you can accumulate unexcused absences. Multiple unexcused absences can lead to truancy, because as a school-aged child/youth you are expected to be in school in the United States. There can be serious consequences for you as a student and for your sponsor if the school sends a truancy letter due to unexcused absences. You may have to appear for a court hearing if you receive a truancy letter.

B. No Cost to Enroll

There is no fee or cost to enroll in public elementary, middle, or high schools in the United States. State laws require public K-12 (kindergarten through 12th grade) schools to offer free education for anyone up to a certain age. The age range for the requirement to provide free public education varies state by state. You can learn more by checking out this table from the National Center for Education Statistics which provides compulsory school attendance laws by state: 2020 : https://nces.ed.gov/programs/statereform/tab1_2-2023.asp

C. When to Enroll

The school year in the United States usually starts in August or early September and ends in May or June. The exact dates will depend on where you live and what school you attend. New students can enroll in elementary, middle, or high school at any time, even if it is during the school year. The school may make you wait to attend classes if there are rules or laws in the state about starting school in the middle of the school year.

D. Where to Enroll

The first step for enrollment is finding your school. You will usually be assigned a school to attend based on where you live. You may hear that you are "zoned" to attend a certain school, which means all youth living in that area or "zone" must attend the elementary, middle, and high schools assigned to that area. For example, you can search online by typing your residence zip code, followed by elementary schools, middle schools, or high schools in the area to find your school and schools nearby where you live. If you are having trouble finding the school, you can search online by typing the name of

your city, zip code, and adding the word "school district" after. Once you know the school district in your zip code area, you can contact the school district office. The number is available on their website in the "Contact Us" section. The school district office can then provide you with the contact information of your assigned school.

> **Texas:** If you live in Texas, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) has a webpage explaining how to enroll and locate your school at ***Enrolling Your Child in School***: https://tea.texas.gov/texas-schools/general-information/enroll-your-child, and to locate your school by using their ***School District Locator***: https://tea.texas.gov/texas-schools/general-information/school-district-locator.

Sometimes you may have a choice of schools to attend. There are some areas that call it "open campus" or "open enrollment" if there are multiple schools servicing the same area. Other areas have something called a voucher program, which might allow you to consider attending a private school or a charter school in your area. You can ask the school district if they have programs like this available to you. If you need to decide between schools, some questions to think about, and consider are:

Questions to ask yourself	*Your answer*
Is it easy to get to and from school?	
Is anyone you know already attending that school?	
Does the school offer language assistance programs?	
What sports, clubs, or extracurricular programs does the school have?	
What type of classes and college preparation programs does the school offer?	
Does the school offer additional educational support to newly arrived immigrants?	

E. How to Enroll

School enrollment is usually completed by a parent, legal guardian, or sponsor.

However, if you do not have a sponsor with you, you can still enroll in school under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (*more about the McKinney-Vento Act below*). The McKinney-Vento Act also states that "youth not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian are eligible for immediate school enrollment."[2] This federal law ensures that youth without a stable place to live or without a sponsor can enroll in and attend school without barriers.

To enroll, go to the school district office or the school's front office. Some schools also offer online registration. Most schools will require proof of residency to enroll, which means showing that you live in the area assigned to the school. Yours or your family's citizenship or immigration status should not be relevant to establishing residency.[3]

i. Proof of Residency

This can be a utility bill, rental agreement, payments, pay stubs, or documents from a government agency like the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR). If you are residing with your sponsor the document should have their name or your name as well as their/your current address. If you do not have any documents like this, your sponsor might be able to submit a signed declaration telling the school where you live. Please note that while documents like proof of residency to confirm that you live in the area assigned to the school or guardianship are typically required, the McKinney-Vento Act allows schools to waive these requirements for students experiencing or at risk for homelessness. If you need help, the school counselor should be able to assist you with the process. The exact requirements to enroll can vary depending on where you live.

ii. Proof of Immunizations

Another common type of document that you may need to enroll in school is proof of immunizations, which are medical shots to protect against certain types of diseases. Unaccompanied children often receive vaccinations while in ORR care

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[2] McKinney-Vento 2001- Law Into Practice: *When Legal Guardians Are Note Present: Enrolling Students on Their Own*, last visited December 10, 2024, available at https://nche.ed.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/guardianship.pdf.

[3] The U.S. Department of Justice & U.S. Department of Education have more information about how your right to enrollment regardless of immigration status in their resource, *Information on the Rights of Unaccompanied children to Enroll in School and Participate Meaningfully and Equally in Educational Programs*, available online at https://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/focus/rights-unaccompanied-children-enroll-school.pdf.

and can request a copy of those immunization records. If you received immunizations before coming to the U.S. and do not have records of your vaccinations, you may be able to provide a declaration confirming that you received the shots if medical records are not available. Some areas have resources to help you receive immunizations if you are missing any as well. State laws also offer exemptions to school vaccination requirements for medical, religious, or personal (referred as philosophical) reasons. [4] More information regarding the laws of each state as to school vaccinations is available online at https://www.ncsl.org/health/state-non-medical-exemptions-from-school-immunization-requirements.

iii. What is the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act?

As previously mentioned, there are also special protections for young people experiencing homelessness. A law called the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act says that schools must immediately enroll any youth experiencing homelessness, even if the youth does not have documents required to enroll like proof of residency or immunization records. The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act provides critical protections for unaccompanied immigrant youth, who are at a higher risk for homelessness.[5]

Youth experiencing homelessness may lack stable housing for a number of reasons. For example, they may be recent arrivals to the U.S., may be separated from their families, and/or may face numerous barriers, including limited financial resources and lack of support networks. Schools can offer an education as well as a sense of stability, routine, and safety. Schools can provide access to essential services such as meals, counseling, and social support, which are crucial for overall well-being and development.

The McKinney-Vento Act can help ensure that unaccompanied immigrant youth can continue their education without interruption by providing a sense of stability.[6] It ensures the rights and protections for youth, including unaccompanied youth, summarized in the table below:

[4] Centers for Disease Control, Public Health Law- State School Immunization Requirements and Vaccine Exemption Laws, last visited December 19, 2024, available at https://www.cdc.gov/phlp/docs/school-vaccinations.pdf.
[5] National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE)-Supporting Newcomer Students Experiencing Homelessness, last visited December 13, 2024, available here: https://nche.ed.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Newcomer-Students-Experiencing-Homelessness.pdf.
[6] National Center for Homeless Education, Supporting the Education of Unaccompanied Students Experiencing Homelessness, last visited September 30, 2024, available at https://nche.ed.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/youth.pdf.

Enrolling in School	You can enroll in school immediately, even without typical documents like proof of residency, immunization records, or previous school records. This prevents any delays in accessing education.
Stay in School of Origin	You can stay in your school of origin if you were to become unhoused (the school you attended before becoming unhoused) if it's your best interest. This helps provide continuity and stability to your education, which is vital during times of upheaval.
School Needs to Provide Transportation	Schools are required to provide transportation to and from the school of origin if it benefits you. This ensures that unstable housing does not hinder your ability to attend school regularly.
School Needs to Remove Barriers	Schools must identify and remove barriers to enrollment, attendance, and the success of unhoused students or to those who are at risk of becoming unhoused. This includes providing access to free school meals, counseling, and other essential support services.

F. Challenges and Guidance for Navigating Enrollment

Navigating enrollment can feel overwhelming for some, but it's important for you to know that there is support available to help you. The table below lists common challenges you can experience during the enrollment process and guidance in helping you find solutions.

Challenge	Guidance
School is refusing to enroll you based on documentation: The school is refusing to accept documents showing that you live in the school district or meet other requirements to enroll.	• You and your sponsor can schedule a meeting with the school principal or vice-principal, for them to explain to you the reason for the denial and discuss potential solutions.

	• Remember, under the McKinney-Vento Act even when you are unable to provide documentation the school staff has requested such as immunization records, residency, or previous school records, the school must work with you so you can enroll in school as soon as possible.
School is refusing to enroll you based on age: The school is refusing to enroll you, because you are 18 years of age or older or approaching your 18th birthday.	• You can go to the district office and request to speak with a district administrator or superintendent. • You can say, "Hello, my name is,_____ and I am seeking assistance with my enrollment, as I'm still interested in completing my education. I would like to discuss my options for enrolling and continuing my education within the district. Can we explore possible solutions together?
School is refusing to enroll you based on lack of formal education: The school is refusing to enroll you based on your lack of education before coming to the United States or limited ability to read and write in English.	• You can seek legal assistance if needed. You can reach out to local nonprofit organizations or law offices that offer free services in the area of education access. Remember you can contact MALDEF. • You can say, "Hello, My name is ____, I am calling because a school is refusing to enroll me due to (share reason of refusal with them and any other details you feel comfortable sharing).

If you encounter these or other problems in the enrollment process, remember that public elementary, middle, and high schools must give unaccompanied youth equal access to the public education system in the United States. Public schools generally should not be using practices or policies that unfairly target unaccompanied youth or make it impossible for newly arrived youth to gather the information necessary to enroll.[7] In addition, being denied school enrollment due to your age should not stop you from continuing your education. Some schools might say that enrolling at

[7] U.S. Department of Education, *Guidance for School Districts to Ensure Equal Access for All Children to Public Schools Regardless of Immigration Status*, at 2-May 8, 2014, available at https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/letters/colleague-201405.pdf. Copies of this policy guidance from the U.S. Department of Education are available in other languages online at https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/frontpage/faq/rr/policyguidance/index.html?queries%5Bsearch%5D=enroll.

18 makes it difficult to finish/graduate high school before turning 20 or 21, but that doesn't mean you don't have the right to an education. Your rights matter, and you deserve the chance to learn and grow. Education isn't just about earning a diploma, it's about gaining opportunities, developing skills, and building a better future for yourself.

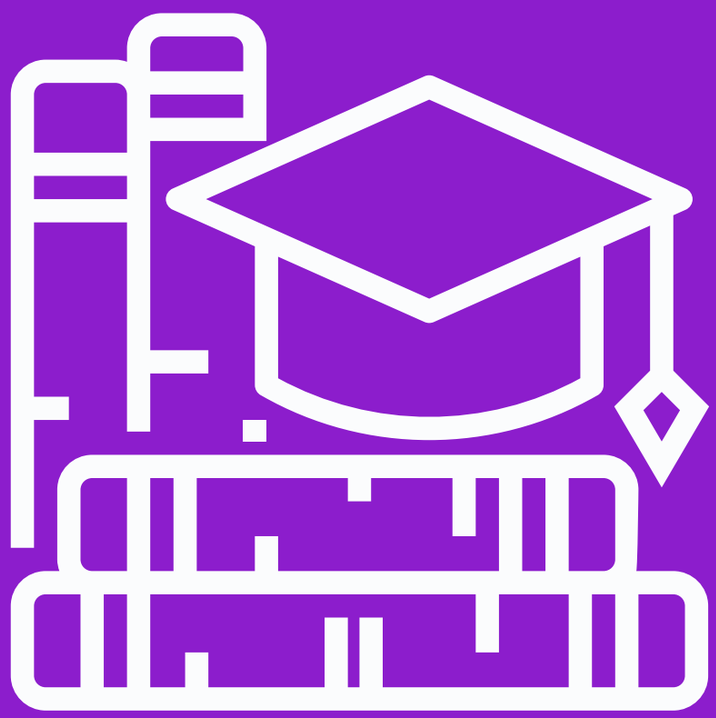
Even if graduation isn't the immediate goal, you have the right to be enrolled. Consider pursuing a GED if it suits you, but don't hesitate to advocate for yourself. Legal organizations like MALDEF can support you, and the McKinney-Vento Act protects your educational rights. Seeking assistance from legal advocates or educational advisors can also help ensure your access to education is not unjustly denied.

State laws and policies may also be helpful. You can look up your state's education laws about who has a right to attend public schools. To conduct this research, you can use your internet browser/search engine of preference (*like Google or Safari)*, and type in the name of the state you live in followed by the phrase, "education code for who has the right to attend public school." You will see information about the rules, referred to as educational codes or laws, that protect your right for a public K-12 education in the United States.

For example, and as a starting point, you can see your state's laws regarding compulsory education here: https://www.justia.com/education/compulsory-education-laws-50-state-survey/

Section IV

Understanding the Public School System



IV. Understanding the Public School System

The public school system in the United States is referred to as the K-12 (kindergarten to 12 grade) public education system. It consists of three main levels: elementary, middle, and high school. Each educational level offers the foundation for learning targets in the main subject areas of reading, math, science, and history. The system is designed to equip you with the knowledge and skills needed for your personal and academic growth and to prepare you for college, trade school, or to enter the workforce.

A. Educational Leadership

Schools are supported by a variety of adult professionals who have different roles and responsibilities. These individuals are responsible for ensuring that schools run smoothly and that students have a safe and productive learning environment. In the following graphic, we have provided a list of the various roles in education leadership along with detailed explanations of their primary duties. Remember, the following individuals in your school are there to assist you in your educational journey by providing guidance and connecting you to resources for you to succeed personally, socially-emotionally, and academically.

i. School Administrative Roles

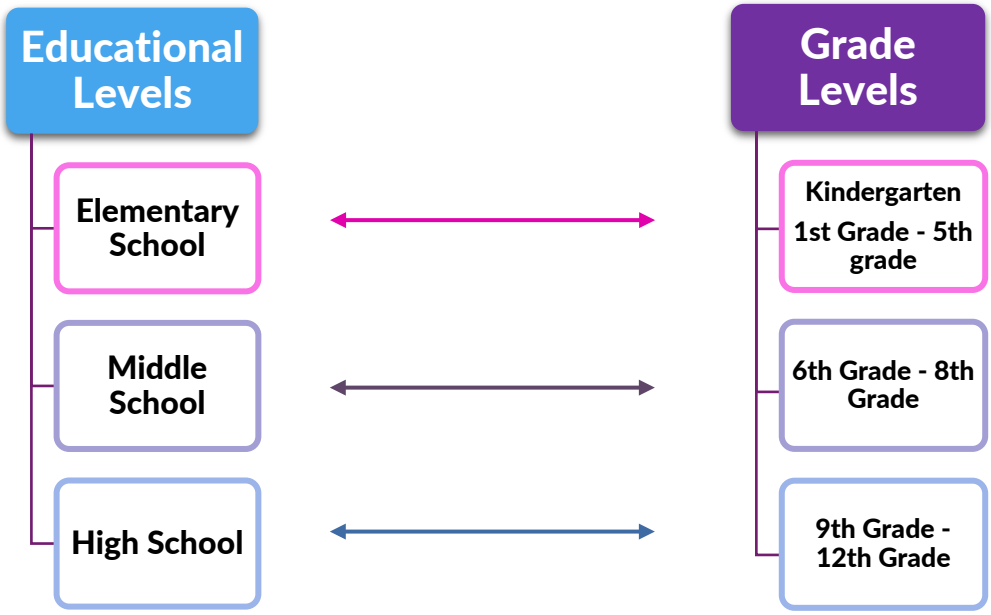
	Principal • Oversees school operations, engages with stakeholders, teachers, students, and families. • Fosters a positive, educational environment. • Monitors and enforces school-wide behavioral expectations and rules. • Sponsors and students can request a meeting with the principal if desired or necessary.
	Vice-Principal/Assistant Principal • Monitors and enforces school-wide behavioral expectations and rules. • Works collaboratively with principal, teachers, and staff to ensure students' safety and educational environment. • Students typically have a designated Assistant Principal, assigned by grade level or by alphabetized last name order.

	School Counselor • Guides students in their educational career, personal lives, and social-emotional development. • Develops student's schedules, and can provide counseling for mental health, classes, college career paths, financial aid, graduation, and more areas. • A school counselor is like a bridge between you as a student and school and community resources.
	School Social Worker • Provides support to students in the areas of mental health, self-care, behavior support, individual and group counseling. • You can reach out to your school social worker to connect you to school and community resources and support.
	Teacher • Plans and delivers subject-matter instruction to guide you in your academic journey. • Enforces school and class rules and behavioral expectations and encourages good behavior. • Grades or evaluates your schoolwork regularly so that you are aware of how you are progressing in your learning. • Communicates with other staff, sponsors, and community support to assist you in your learning and development. • You can talk to your teachers when you don't understand an assignment or topic covered in class and need support.

B. School Classifications

Typically, children start formal public education enrolling in kindergarten at age 4 or 5. Some students may attend pre-kinder before kindergarten. Elementary school levels include kindergarten up to 5th grade or 6th grade. Some elementary schools offer pre-kinder programs. Some schools might have elementary up till 6th grade while in other schools, 6th grade marks the start of middle school. Typically, 6th-8th grade students are in middle school. Then students move up to high school at the start of 9th grade when they are about 14-15 years old, all the way to 12th grade, when they are about 17-18 years old.

The diagram below offers a visual representation of the various education levels typical in the U.S. public school system.



In schools and colleges, different names are used to describe your grade level. For example, in U.S. high schools, students who are in 9th grade can be referred as "freshmen," 10th graders as "sophomores," 11th graders as "juniors," and 12th graders as "seniors."

In college, the same terms are often used: "freshman" for the first year, "sophomore" for the second year," junior" for the third year, and "senior" for the fourth year. However, some schools might use simpler terms like "1st year," "2nd year," etc., especially in different states or certain programs. These names are just a way to track where you are on your educational journey.

Classification	High School Grade Level	College/ University Year
Freshman	9th Grade	First Year
Sophomore	10th Grade	Second Year
Junior	11th Grade	Third Year
Senior	12th Grade	Fourth Year

C. Curriculum

What is a curriculum? Each school provides a curriculum or learning plan as per state guidelines that are then implemented by local school districts. A curriculum is like a roadmap for the educational year for both teachers and students. A curriculum lists the classes, learning goals, and objectives that students are expected to take and achieve during each academic school year.

There are certain parts typically included in a curriculum:

What does a middle school/ high school curriculum include?	**Required classes:** These are classes that all students must take to fulfill graduation requirements. These include "core" classes like Math, Science, History, and English for each grade level.
	Elective classes: These classes offer you the opportunity to explore your interests and talents. These can include subjects like music, art, theater, student leadership and sports. There are required elective credits that you must take; however, electives give you the agency to choose from a list of classes available.
	Foreign language classes: The classes available to you will depend on what your school offers. Some schools offer Spanish, French, or German to count for your foreign language credit. Other schools offer more languages. There are language levels depending on grade level. For example, Spanish I, Spanish II, Spanish III, and Spanish IV.
	Physical Education (P.E.) classes: You can choose to take Physical Education class or participate in alternatives like the school

	marching band or a sport to obtain the credit needed for your curriculum.
	Health and Speech classes: You might be required to take a health or speech class as part of the curriculum during a given year.

D. Understanding the Grading System

How do classes get graded? To graduate high school, you need to earn a certain number of credits. This is accomplished by completing a certain number of specific classes with a passing grade. Typically, a passing grade is usually 60 and above, with 100 being the highest score possible. Some schools may also use letters for your grades, with A being the highest and F being the lowest, and a passing grade may be a D or a C or higher, depending on the scale your school uses.[8] If you are confused about what grade you need to pass a class, ask your teacher or your school counselor. It is also important to note that high schools in the United States require on average 20 to 26 credits for you to be able to graduate and obtain a high school diploma.[9] Credits are earned by passing each class and are reported in your high school transcript.

Passing:	Not Passing:
60 and above or an A, B, C, & D.	*59 and below or an F.*

i. Keeping Track of Your Grades and Credits

How do you keep track of credits and grades? A school transcript is like a report or a snapshot of your time in school.

Your GPA is typically calculated by assigning a number value of 1.0 to 4.0 to each grade. For advanced classes, some curricula offer up to 5.0 points for an A. With a higher GPA, you can apply to more competitive scholarships, colleges, and degree programs. Some schools' transcripts will also include your class rank compared to other students in your grade based on everyone's GPA but note that not all schools

[8] U.S News, *What Students Should Know About the GPA Scale*, last visited January 09, 2025, available at https://www.usnews.com/education/best-colleges/articles/what-students-should-know-about-the-gpa-scale.
[9] National Center for Education Statistics, *State Education Practices (SEP)*, last visited March 14, 2024, available at https://nces.ed.gov/programs/statereform/tab3_3-2020.asp.

include this in the transcript. The transcript may also include scores from state standardized test if you took them. Some school transcripts may include notations about behavioral issues, including detentions, suspensions, or expulsions.

A transcript will include important details about your studies like:

List of classes completed. Such as core classes like:	Grades received in each class:	Number of credits earned for each class:	Grade Point Average (GPA):
• Math: Algebra(I&II), Geometry, Pré-Calculus, Statistics) • English I, II, III, & IV • Science: Biology, Chemistry, Physics, & Environmental Science • History: State and U.S. Government • Elective classes: Band, Art, Sports and others • Physical Education • Speech • Health	• Math (Grade of a 92, is an A) • English (Grade of an 83, is a B) • Science (Grade of 77, is a C) • History (Grade of 69 is a D)	• Math (4 credits) • English (4 credits) • Science (4 credits) • History (4 credits) • Foreign Language (3-4 credits) • Speech (1 credit) • Physical Education (2-3 credits) • Electives (4-5 credits)	• A GPA is the sum of all the grades you earned throughout high school, divided by the total number of credits. • You usually need a 2.0 GPA to graduate high school. • Your GPA is a main criteria when you are applying to colleges and universities for admission into the university and to your major.

A school transcript is useful when applying to colleges because it shows community colleges and universities how you performed academically in high school and can offer information about your character and conduct as well. In a school context, detention means students receive a consequence such as being kept after school for not following school or classroom rules. Suspension is a temporary removal of a student from school for violating the school's rules of conduct, students are typically suspended for a few days. Lastly, expulsion is a more severe disciplinary

action that removes a student from school, usually permanently in response to a student's unacceptable behavior or violation of school rules.

E. School Norms

What are school norms? School norms are the social rules set for students or expectations on how to behave in school. For example, schools expect you as a student to be at school on time and ready to learn. Schools expect respectful behavior such as speaking to peers and teachers kindly and appropriately without using bad words or yelling. Part of complying with school norms entails following all classroom and school rules about attendance, dress code, behavior, and academic integrity. Academic integrity requires that students honestly, fairly, and responsibly complete their academic work and avoid plagiarism and cheating.

There are consequences for not following school rules. For example, if you don't attend class, you will be given warnings and attendance records will reflect your absences, whether excused or unexcused. As discussed in the compulsory attendance section, there can be more serious consequences for your failure to regularly attend school, such as having to attend truancy court for having too many unexcused absences.

If you are disrespectful and don't follow class or school rules, your teacher or a school administrator may have a sponsor-teacher conference to discuss your behavior and classroom expectations. You can also receive detention, suspension, or even expulsion. School norms (school rules) help make the school environment an effective, positive, and safe one for students, including you, to learn and develop. Do your best to learn and follow school rules and put your best effort into learning.

F. School Schedule

What does a middle or high school schedule look like? Though there is some variation across schools, a day at a middle school typically lasts from approximately 8:30 am to 4:00 pm. A day at a high school typically starts earlier and lasts from approximately 7:30 am to 3:00 pm. Students attend school from Monday through Friday. Please note that your exact school schedule can vary depending on the extracurricular activities or school events you are involved in.

In both middle school and high school, the school day is divided into class periods where you attend each class assigned as listed in your class schedule for a set amount of time. This is usually about 45 minutes to an hour.

Some schools may have a different type of schedule that divides the classes in an "A Day" and "B Day." If your school does this, then you will attend your "A Day" classes on certain assigned days and your "B Day classes on other days." The classes for schools with this type of schedule will usually be longer, about 90 minutes for each class, and you would have less classes on each day. For example, during "A Day" you may attend math, English, and your elective classes, then on "B Day" you attend social studies, science and physical education. For each class period you usually have a different teacher (sometimes one teacher can teach more than one subject).

High School Schedule-Example:

Class	Start	End
Homeroom/ Advisory	7:30 A.M.	8:15 A.M.
Physical Education (P.E.)	8:20 A.M.	9:05 A.M.
Math	9:10 A.M.	9:55 A.M.
History	10:00 A.M.	10:45 A.M.
Lunch	10:50 A.M.	11:30 P.M.
English	11:35 A.M.	12:20 P.M.
Speech	12:25 P.M.	1:10 P.M.
Spanish	1:15 P.M.	2:00 P.M.
Science	2:05 P.M.	3:00 P.M.

i. Being Late to Class

What can happen if I don't arrive to class on time? In middle and high school, the teachers stay in their assigned classrooms and the students move from class to class. You are usually given a short break of about 4-7 minutes to get to each class. A bell usually rings to let teachers know when the class is over, and it is time to release you out of class. A second bell will then ring as a warning before the next class period begins. It is important that you do your best to arrive to class on time. Usually, schools have a rule about being late to class that affects your attendance record. Some can refer to this rule as a "tardy policy" that counts towards your attendance record at school. If you are late to class, meaning you arrive after the final bell rings, the teacher may mark you up as tardy. For some schools, multiple tardy marks can count as an absence. If you accumulate multiple tardies and are counted as unexcused absences, this can have serious consequences as the school may classify you as truant, see compulsory attendance section. As mentioned before, attendance is important, so you don't want to be tardy in between your class periods. We encourage you to do your best to get to class on time. Speak with a teacher, counselor, or school administrator if you are struggling to get to class on time.

G. School Policies

Dress Code Policy: Some high schools might require students to wear a school uniform or specific clothes. If your school requires students to wear a uniform, you may need to buy the uniform or ask the school how to get assistance with getting the clothes. If a uniform is not required, you can wear your everyday clothes; however, most high schools have a dress code policy which students must follow. For example, some schools might not allow shorts or hats to be worn. It is important that you familiarize yourself with your school's dress code. This information is usually found on your school's website, or you can always ask your school counselor or school staff to provide you with a copy of the dress code and explain this to you. It is important to review the student dress code of your school and be knowledgeable of what your school considers appropriate and not appropriate, and to follow your school guidelines.

Student Code of Conduct: In addition, schools have their own codes of conduct. A student code of conduct is a formal set of rules that describes expectations for student behavior when in school and outlines disciplinary actions for violations of misconduct that covers behavior across the entire school campus and activities. When you enroll at the school, you make a commitment to follow school rules. For example, a school code of conduct can include rules students must follow like:

- Be respectful towards peers, teachers, and others
- Follow dress code policy by wearing clothing that is not revealing or disruptive
- Have academic integrity, meaning not allowing others to copy your work and you not copying someone else's work
- Arrive to class on time, before the tardy bell
- Attend school regularly and if absent, provide proper documentation for your absence
- Be prepared with the necessary school materials for each class such as textbook, notes, pen, pencil, school provided Chromebook/laptop
- Do not disrupt class by talking in class or fighting with other students
- Use appropriate language, no swearing

- No bullying other students in the form of verbal, physical, social, or written aggression, intimidation, sexual harassment, or racial/ethnic harassment
- Don't use cellphone in class without your teacher's permission and/or keep the phone in your backpack or locker
- Follow safety school rules by not bringing dangerous items on school grounds

Not following the student code of conduct has consequences. Your teacher or school principal might have a conversation with you about why you are not following school rules. You might have to serve lunch or after-school detention or even be assigned to do community service. A more serious consequence would be suspension or expulsion. It is very important to be aware of your school policies and be informed to ensure you are following the student code of conduct. [10]

Student ID Policy: Schools will generally require you to have a student ID card. This

identification card may include your photo, name, your student ID number, your grade level and/or the name of the school you attend. You should obtain a student ID during the registration process or during your first few days of school. The first student ID card is usually free. If you lose your student ID card, you may have to pay a small fee to receive a new one. As part of the dress code some schools might require you to have your student ID on you and visible.

Anti-Bullying Policy: Bullying involves behavior where someone intentionally and

repeatedly causes harm, injury, or discomfort to another person. It can include physical actions, verbal remarks, or more subtle, manipulative behaviors. Bullying is when someone repeatedly and intentionally causes harm, distress, or discomfort to another person. It can take many forms, including physical actions, hurtful words, or subtle, manipulative behaviors. The person being bullied is often unable to defend themselves and is never to blame for the mistreatment.

Physical bullying doesn't always involve serious injury or pain, it can include actions like poking, pushing, tripping, or even invading personal space in a way that makes you feel uncomfortable or threatened. Even if these actions don't cause physical pain, they are still a form of bullying if they are meant to intimidate or bother you.

[10] Austin Independent School District, Student Code of Conduct- Dress Code, last visited March 27, 2024, available at https://www.austinisd.org/students/dress-code

For example, if another student repeatedly pokes you, pushes you, or makes fun of your appearance or abilities, that is bullying. If their actions make you feel unworthy or make it difficult for you to attend school because you fear encountering them, you are experiencing bullying. Please speak to an adult you trust such as a sponsor, teacher, social worker, principal, counselor, mentor, or any other adult you feel comfortable with if you are going through a situation like this, you are not alone.

Cyberbullying is threatening or harassing behavior conducted through electronic technology such as cell phones, email, social media, or text messages.[11] For example, you may be experiencing cyberbullying if someone sends harmful messages to you through social media apps such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok or Snapchat. Cyberbullying also includes threats such as wide spreading revealing photos or information you shared privately that wasn't supposed to be shared with more people across social media. One of the school's priorities is your physical and emotional safety. While cyberbullying may not occur directly at school since it occurs in an online platform, steps can be taken to protect you from cyberbullying too. Please reach out to a trusted adult such as a sponsor, teacher, coach, counselor if you are experiencing bullying or cyberbullying.

You don't have to put up with bullying and there is support available for you. States often require or at least encourage schools to implement a policy that protects students from bullying and ensures complaints of bullying will be investigated.

National Hotlines	
Safe Place	Text the word "safe" and your current location (address, city, state) to 4HELP (44357). https://www.nationalsafeplace.org/txt-4-help
Stop Bullying	Text HELP to 988 or AYUDA to 988 and then press 2 for Spanish https://www.stopbullying.gov/resources/get-help-now
Teen Line	Text "Teen" to 839863 https://www.teenline.org/

[11] American Psychological Association, Bullying, last visited October 30, 2024, available at https://www.apa.org/topics/bullying.

H. School Services

Schools are communities designed to help you grow. Schools not only serve your academic needs, but also your physical, social and emotional wellbeing. School staff recognize that there may be life circumstances that impact students differently, which is why they offer resources and opportunities to meet your needs. Within the school there are different services to make sure you succeed as a student. Below are descriptions of two services related to eating at and getting to school that are offered in the United States.

Free and Reduced Lunch – Eating Lunch at School: It is essential to feel nourished during school hours, so you can participate in class, work on class assignments, and be ready to learn. Schools recognize this need, which is why they offer food programs to ensure everyone has access to necessary nourishment. Through programs like the Free and Reduced Lunch Program, schools can provide low cost or free breakfast and lunch to students who qualify. To be eligible, students or their families need to be considered low-income, or they need to be part of other categories such as being a migrant, experiencing homelessness, being in foster care, or participants in certain federal programs like Head Start.[12] When you enroll in school, you can fill out an application for the reduced-price lunch program as part of your paperwork. Once submitted, the school will inform you whether you qualify for the program. If you are unsure about the form or if you qualify, you can ask your school counselor.

School Bus Transportation: Schools provide free public school bus transportation to qualifying students. School bus transportation makes it easier for students to safely get to and from school. It helps many students whose sponsors may not be able to provide transportation and be able to attend school every day and return to their home, or a nearby bus stop, at a regular time.

Eligibility for school bus transportation depends on how far you live from the school or if you are subject to hazardous conditions on your way to school. A hazardous condition can include an unsafe walking pathway or uncontrolled major traffic like having to cross a major road intersection. You can also be eligible for school bus transportation if you are qualified to attend a magnet program at a different school. A school magnet program is a program that focuses on a specific subject like science, math, or art. Additionally, you may qualify for school

[12] National Center for Education Statistics, *Understanding School Lunch Eligibility in the Common Core Data*, last visited March 27, 2024, available at https://nces.ed.gov/blogs/nces/post/understanding-school-lunch-eligibility-in-the-common-core-of-data.

transportation if you're eligible for the special education program. Ask during the enrollment process about school bus transportation eligibility to ensure you can safely get to and from school. [13]

I. Challenges and Guidance for School Services

Listed are some challenges you may experience in the process of accessing free or reduced meals and free school bus transportation, as well as some guidance to address these challenges.

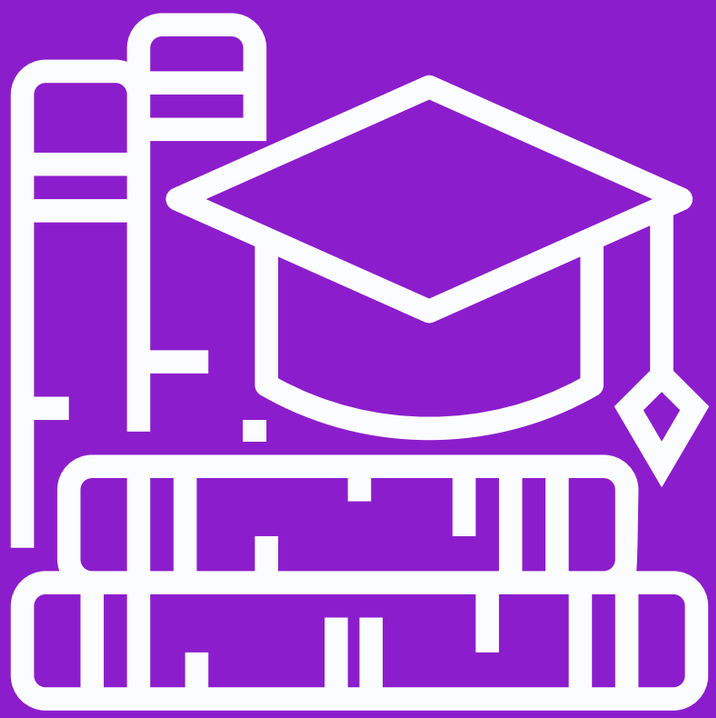
Challenge	Guidance
Language Barrier: School application documents are typically in English language.	• Some schools might have applications available in Spanish, or in other languages. Ask the school office staff if they have applications in your language. School staff may be able to provide interpreters to assist you in filling out the forms.
Lack of Required Documentation: You might not have all the necessary documentation such as social security numbers or tax returns.	• If you don't have access to or can't provide the required income documentation, talk to a school administrator such as a counselor or assistant principal about your situation and see if they can adjust documentation requirements for proof of income or address. As mentioned before, schools, should help you enroll even if you are missing documents. The school may provide you with alternatives such as waivers for required documents you don't have at the moment to apply to these school programs.
Legal Concerns: You might worry that applying for a federal program such as free and reduced cost meals might have legal consequences for your immigration case.	• Requesting access to this program should not affect your immigration case according to current law. For more information, check out this resource (ILRC), https://www.ilrc.org/sites/default/files/2024-03/What%20You%20Need%20to%20Know%20About%20Public%20Charge.pdf

[13] Houston Independent School District, *Transportation Student Eligibility*, last visited April 01, 2024, available at https://www.houstonisd.org/Page/31935.

	Qualifying for public school programs offered by schools who receive federal assistance does not impact your immigration process/case.
Confidentiality: You might be afraid to provide personal information such as your guardian's/sponsor income and address information.	• Schools are required to keep student information confidential under FERPA law. Schools need written sponsor's consent to release student information.

Section V

School Programs



V. School Programs

Schools offer different programs to support your growth and help you in various areas of need as a student. This next section reviews several of the programs that can help you as a student depending on your needs. It offers an introduction to these programs along with an overview of the educational support available through them.

- Special Education program
- English Language Proficiency program
- High School Career & Technical Education program
- Advanced Placement classes
- Dual Credit & International Baccalaureate program
- Communities in Schools program
- Extra-Curricular programs or activities

A. Special Education

Students with Disabilities Rights, Services, and Supports

Students who have disabilities are entitled to public education like everyone else.

When a student needs extra help at school because of a disability, they have the right to receive the educational support they need. Schools evaluate students at no cost to the students and sponsors to determine whether they qualify for special education services. If a student qualifies for special education services, then the student will receive the necessary support, accommodations, and interventions based on their Individualized Educational Plan (IEP). An IEP is a written plan made for students with disabilities that lists specific goals, support, and services that the school will provide to help the student learn and succeed.

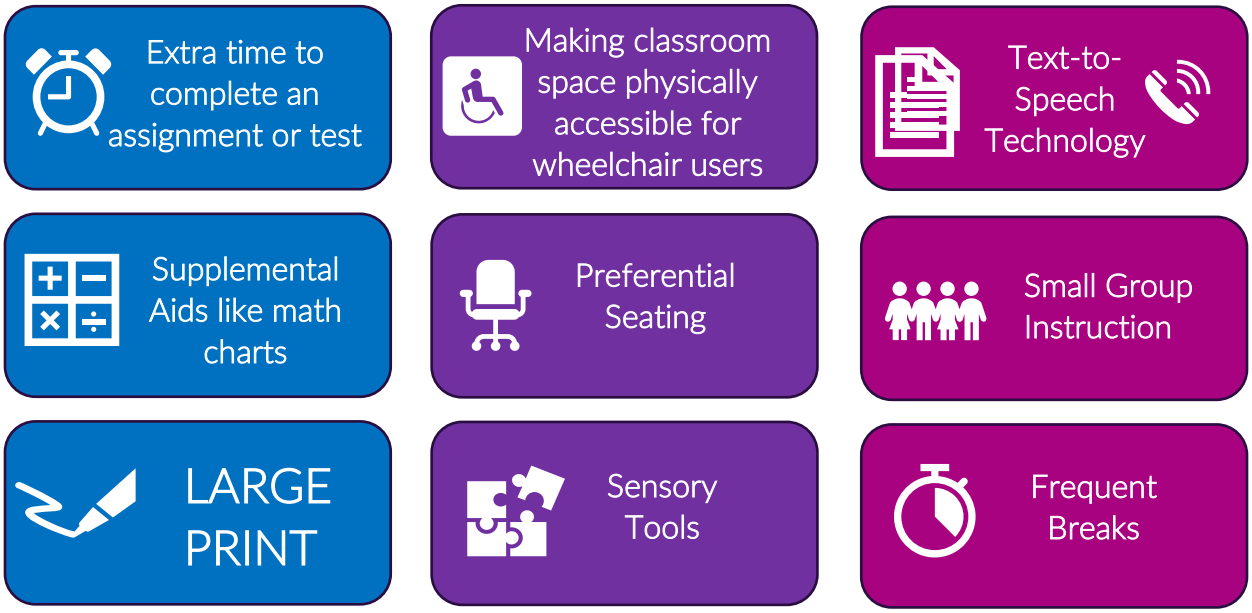
If a student doesn't qualify for the Special Education program, but needs support due to a disability, the student may qualify for what is commonly referred to as a Section 504 plan. Section 504 refers to a section of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which is a civil rights law. Both plans work towards making learning accessible for students, to help students reach their educational goals.

What are accommodations? Accommodations are changes or adjustments made in the classroom and learning environment that help students succeed in school.

These accommodations help students with disabilities reach their goals and progress in their education.

What are interventions? Interventions are actions taken to help a student with a disability improve an academic, social, or personal skill. For example, there is reading and math intervention where the special education teacher works in small-group instruction with students who have more difficulty with reading comprehension or solving math problems.

Examples of Accommodations for students with disabilities:



If you need extra help at school because of a disability, here's how you can get it:

- Speak Up: Talk to your teacher or school counselor about what you find challenging and what might help you.
- Sponsor Involvement: Make sure your sponsor is in the loop. Your sponsor can be your biggest supporter in getting the help you need.
- Evaluation Process: Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), your sponsor can request that the school conduct a special education program evaluation free of charge. The school will check in with you to see what your needs are. This could mean some tests/evaluation or meetings to understand your situation better. There can be times when the school disagrees with the sponsor, it is important to learn about IDEA and your rights as a student as well as your sponsor's rights as your guardian. If there

school during the evaluation process you can reach out to local disability rights organizations or disability education lawyers.

- Planning Help: If you qualify, your school will create a personalized IEP, as mentioned above. This plan will include your goals, accommodations, and services like therapies and interventions. Your guardian and the IEP committee meet yearly to review your progress and discuss any educational concerns during the school year.
- Feedback: Keep giving feedback to your teachers and support team about what's working or is not working for you. You are the expert on your needs.
- Stay Informed: Ask questions! Knowing what support, you can get will help you make the most of it.

Overall, teachers and school staff are good sources to reach out to get started and learn more about the process. Below are some challenges you might experience with the special education process. Followed by guidance to provide you with encouragement to seek solutions to your concerns.

B. Challenges and Guidance of the Special Education Program

Challenge	Guidance
Documentation Requirements: Special education services might require assessments of previous educational records. Accessing these documents may be difficult for students or their guardian/sponsor.	• To address documentation requirements, speak to the school administrators about the documents you do have available or are able to gain access to. • School administrators, or the Special Education teacher will know best how to assist you with this matter. If they are unable to assist, they should be able to connect you with the appropriate professional who can help.
Confidentiality Concerns: You might be concerned about who will have access to your education plan information.	• Your plan information is confidential, meaning your information is private and only shared with professionals on your case, and can't be shared with others unless you give consent/permission (usually written consent).

Communication Barrier: It might be difficult for the student applying to special education services to communicate needs and understand assessment process.	• Evaluation materials or meetings should be conducted in a language that you best understand and available in the format to meet your disability needs. • The school should provide you with a language interpreter (including sign-language) if you need one.
Fear of Discrimination: You might fear being discriminated against due to the need for services.	• It is against the law to discriminate against students due to disability and/or immigration status. You have rights and deserve good treatment and guidance of the special education process.
Fear of Stigmatization: Students who are assessed for special education services might be afraid to be singled out or bullied because of their disability or as it relates to student's immigration status.	• It's understandable to experience emotions such as embarrassment, anxiety, and fear. Remember to breathe in and out and take it one step at a time. • Bullying because of a disability is wrong and if you are experiencing bullying, please reach out to a trusted adult at school or at your house. Remember, you can reach out to the national hotlines listed in the Anti-Bullying section as well. • Ask questions and know you can reach out to your school counselor or social worker if you need support.

C. Language Proficiency Program

Adjusting to a new school environment can pose significant challenges for new students who are not proficient in English. However, many school districts in the United States provide bilingual programs specifically

designed to support you if you are learning English as a second language.

i. English as a Second Language (ESL)

English language programs, commonly known as **English as a Second Language (ESL)** or **English Language Learner (ELL)** programs, are designed to support newly arrived non-English speaking students. To be enrolled in such a program, you will have to take the English Language Proficiency (ELP) assessment, which determines how well you know English. If it's determined that your English comprehension is low, you will be placed in ESL classes. In these classes you will receive intensive lessons in English language skills, including reading, writing, speaking, and listening. You may need short- term or long-term support depending on the progress you make in learning English.

What services do emergent bilingual programs offer?

Emergent bilingual programs help students learn English while also using their primary language. Important to note, most emergent bilingual programs is instruction provided most commonly in Spanish and English language. Followed by Vietnamese, Mandarin and Arabic language, bilingual programs in the U.S.

English Language Development Classes	These classes focus on building your ability in English language skills, such as vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and comprehension.
Bilingual Support	Some programs may provide you instruction in your native language to facilitate understanding and academic success while they are learning English.
Small Group Instruction	You may receive targeted support in small groups to address specific language learning needs and challenges.
Cultural Integration Activities	The school will facilitate activities that help you feel connected to your school and community to foster a sense of belonging and inclusiveness.
Support Services	Some schools provide support services such as bilingual support, language resources, and cultural

integration activities to help students feel more comfortable and successful in their academic journey.

D. High School Career and Technical Education

Some school districts across the U.S. offer career-track program specialization to high school students to enable career exploration.

What is a career-track program? A career-track program is an educational path composed of a series of classes to help students prepare for college and careers by helping you learn skills and to develop knowledge and experience for specific job roles in different job fields.

Through Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs in the areas of healthcare, education, business, law, sciences, automobile- mechanics, or aesthetician, for example, you can have early exposure to professional career tracks. These programs will give you the opportunity to explore careers that align with your interests and ambitions. [14]

If you participate in a CTE program, you can get hands-on experience in a career track of your interest. In addition, you will receive mentoring and gain skills and knowledge of the profession you are interested in. These programs can give you more opportunities for employment in the future, or help you feel better prepared to choose a career track in college. [15]

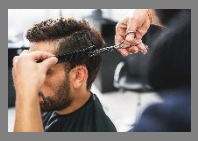
During the enrollment process you can ask your school's guidance counselor to see if the school offers a career and technical education program. If they do, ask them to give you more information about the subject areas of focus and think about what interests you. If you are unsure about what area you want to study, you can do some research online about the career track or ask your teachers, friends, or adults you trust about their knowledge or expertise in the field.

What are the benefits of participating in a Career and Technical Education program?

Participating in a Career and Technical Education specialization program can help you stand out when applying to college/university or jobs. These programs typically provide a certificate proving that you have completed coursework in a specific

[14] U.S Department of Education, Career and Educational Pathways Exploration System Program, last visited May 06, 2024, available at https://www2.ed.gov/programs/careerpathways/index.html.
[15] Texas Education Agency, Career and Technical Education, last visited May 08, 2024, available at https://tea.texas.gov/academics/college-career-and-military-prep/career-and-technical-education.

career field. Also, earning this certification can demonstrate to future employers that you are dedicated, goal-oriented, and capable of following through on your commitments. If your school offers a program specialization track it is recommended to learn more about the content area that most interest, you and let your counselor know you would like to pursue that specific career education program. Below are a few examples of the program specializations offered in different states, school districts, and schools.

				
Medical Transcriptionist Uses electronic devices to convert voice recordings from physicians into formal written reports. Transcribes, proofreads, and edits patients' medical records.	**Dental Hygienist** Examines patients for signs of oral diseases and provides preventative care as well as education about oral health.	**Paralegal** A legal assistant who performs tasks that require knowledge of legal concepts, but not the full expertise to practice law.	**Automotive Mechanic** A person who inspects, maintains and repairs cars. Explains car problems and repairs to clients, and ensures all cars are in proper working condition.	**Cosmetologist** A trained person whose job is to improve the appearance of a customer's face, hair, or skin using beauty treatments.

E. Advanced Academic Classes

You can be placed in different academic classes that vary in levels of difficulty. Some examples are classes known as Advanced Placement (AP), Dual Credit, or the International Baccalaureate (IB) track.

What are AP or IB programs?

Advanced Placement (AP) and the International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma program are advanced level academic programs that consist of college-level academic content offered to high school students. These are great options for students who aim to attend college or university after graduating high school. You

can earn college credit by earning a score of 3-5 on AP exams or 4-7 on IB exams. If you are enrolled in a school where AP courses are not available to take, you may still be able to take the AP Exam and earn college credit if you meet the criteria score.[16] If you are interested in taking this level of advanced classes speak with your school counselor so she/he can provide you with more guidance.

What are Dual Enrollment or Dual Credit programs?

Many high schools nationwide offer dual enrollment programs otherwise known as concurrent enrollment or dual credit programs. These programs allow eligible high school students to enroll in college courses and earn credit for both high school and college courses students are enrolled in. Dual enrollment classes are often taught in 2–4-year college campuses or in high school campuses, where class is conducted by an approved instructor. [17]

Enrolling in these advanced studies while in high school can allow you to gain experience taking college level courses. These rigorous classes will ease the transition to college after you graduate high school. Gaining college credit will allow you to transfer credits earned in high school to public universities and colleges, helping you complete a college education at a faster pace, and potentially reduce the cost of tuition. Speak to your school counselor about eligibility for the dual enrollment program and to request more information to see if your school offers a program like this.

F. Communities in Schools

Communities in Schools (CIS) is a nationwide organization that provides in-school services to help you succeed in school and life by connecting you to academic and non-academic resources and caring adults. CIS works with schools, educators, community organizations, and school leaders to provide students (you) with the support needed to overcome different obstacles and graduate high school. For example, connecting with a CIS coordinator at your school can help you access resources like tutoring if you are struggling to understand a class subject. Other ways that a CIS coordinator may be able to help include:

- Providing you with more information about higher education

[16] Texas Education Agency, *Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate Programs*, last visited May 21, 2024, available at Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate General Information, 2020-21 (texas.gov).
[17] Education Commission of the States, *50-State Comparison: Dual/Concurrent Enrollment Policies*, last visited May 20, 2024, available at 50-State Comparison: Dual/Concurrent Enrollment Policies - Education Commission of the States (ecs.org).

- Helping you explore careers and majors, colleges and universities, and financial aid
- Connecting you to healthcare services if you need
- Helping you if you are experiencing homelessness and need assistance finding safe housing
- Helping you remain in school, be able to meet your basic needs of shelter and food, so you can focus on learning and accomplish your educational goals.

You can ask your school counselor, principal or teacher if there is a CIS coordinator at your school. If there is, you can request an appointment with a CIS coordinator for them to assess your situation and see how they may be able to assist you. You can also check online to inform yourself if there is a Community in Schools program at your school here: https://www.communitiesinschools.org/.

G. Extra-Curricular Programs and Activities

As a high school student, you can join clubs or groups outside of your required subject classes. These groups or clubs are called extracurricular activities. Examples of extracurricular activities include sports such as basketball and swimming, clubs for hobbies like chess or photography, student government, debate, theatre, band, dance, cheer, yearbook, and robotics. Every school is different, but most should offer a more extensive list of activities to join.

How does joining an extracurricular program or activity help me? Joining these activities can help you make new friends, become involved in your community, learn new skills to display your talents and interests when applying to colleges and universities. Typically, these activities occur before or after school and many are at no cost.[18] However, depending on the extracurricular activity, there may be a class period you are required to take and a fee to join that covers things such as uniforms, equipment, and transportation. Extracurriculars that occur during school can substitute a physical education or fine arts credits, required for graduation.

How does participating in sports help me academically? Extracurricular activities like competitive sports are a great way for you to enhance your skills and connect with your peers. To ensure all students can thrive in these activities' schools encourage you to maintain a minimum of a 2.0 GPA. This approach helps you

[18] USA Hello, Public School in the USA: A guide for immigrant parents, last visited May 21, 2024, available at https://usahello.org/education/children/public-school/.

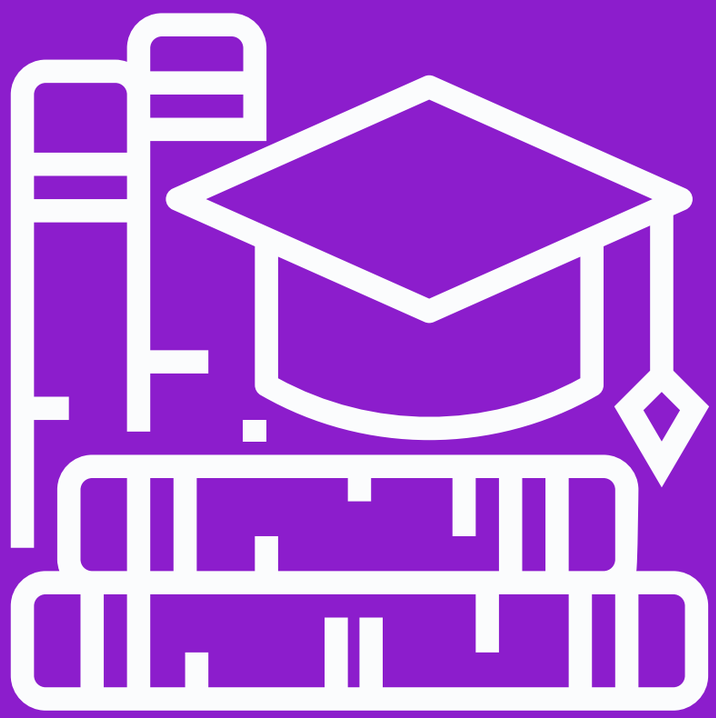
develop good academic habits and fosters a balanced approach to your studies and passions. If you are involved in sports and are having difficulty maintaining a passing grade in your classes, you are given a break to focus on your studies and receive a passing grade before being permitted to participate in the sport. During your break, you can attend practice and rehearsals but will not be able to participate in school games. [19]

During your enrollment process you can ask the school counselor, teacher, social worker, or school staff what extracurricular activities the school has to offer. Being involved in different extracurricular activities can be an avenue for you to create new friendships with your peers as this will give you the space to have fun, develop skills, and build community. This can help you build development skills such as leadership, time-management, teamwork, and problem-solving. All useful skills to continue to develop into the young adult you wish to become.

[19] University Interscholastic League, Academic Requirements No Pass No Play, last visited May 21, 2024, available at https://www.uiltexas.org/policy/tea-uil-side-by-side/academic-requirements.

Section VI

Examinations and Testing



VI. Examinations and Testing

In this section of the education guide, we will explore tests and assessments that you may encounter as you navigate your education journey. Whether you're embarking on the path of traditional high school education or considering alternative options like pursuing a GED (General Educational Development), understanding the process involved can make this process less daunting.

A. Statewide Assessments

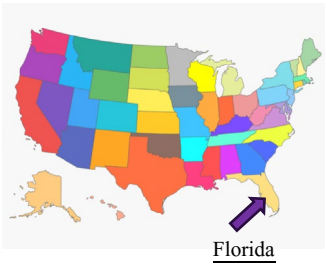
In the United States, under the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), public school students must take standardized tests.[20] Standardized tests are commonly used to assess students' academic progress and ability in various subjects like Math and English Language Arts. This type of test can consist of multiple choice, open-ended or fill in the blank questions depending on the subject. Statewide tests may be mandatory for students and the specific testing practices or requirements may vary across states. Try your best, on all the assessments you may need to take.

Below are some examples of standardized testing in various states:

The State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) is a series of standardized tests administered in Texas schools. These tests assess students' skills in subjects such as reading, writing, mathematics, science, and social studies. Students typically take STAAR tests annually, starting in third grade and continuing through high school. In high school, you must pass subject specific tests in the areas of Math, English Language Arts, Science, and U.S History, end-of-course exams to meet graduation requirements.[21]

For non-English speaking students, accommodations are available, including alternative language options for certain tests. For instance, the STAAR reading, and mathematics tests are available in Spanish for eligible students who receive instruction in Spanish.

[20] U.S. Department of Education, Every Student Succeeds Act, last visited April 5, 2024, available at https://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/essa/essaassessmentfactsheet1207.pdf.
[21] Texas Education Agency (TEA). *All about the STAAR test*, last visited April 5, 2024, available at https://www.texasassessment.gov/staar-about.

	The California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) are tests given to students in California public schools. The program includes assessments in English language arts/literacy and mathematics for students in grades 3-8 and 11, as well as science assessments in grades 5, 8, and high school. CAASPP assessments are typically taken annually to measure your academic achievement and growth.[22]For non-English speaking students, accommodations such as extended time, breaks, or translation glossaries may be provided during CAASPP testing. Additionally, some CAASPP tests may offer you linguistic accommodations such as translation or interpretation services in languages other than English if you are considered an eligible student.
	The Florida Assessment of Student Thinking (FAST) is a series of tests administered to students in Florida public schools. These tests assess students' proficiency in English language arts/literacy and mathematics. Students typically take FAST assessments several times throughout the school year to monitor their academic progress and growth.[23] If you are a non-English speaking student, accommodations such as extended time, small-group testing, or bilingual dictionaries may be provided to support your performance on the FAST assessments. Additionally, linguistic accommodations such as translation or interpretation services may be available if you require them.
	The New York Regents are standardized exams administered by the New York State Education Department. High school students typically take these tests to assess their knowledge and skills in various subjects, including English language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, and foreign languages. Regents' exams are typically taken at the end of specific courses and are a graduation requirement in New York State.[24]

[22] California Department of Education. *CAASPP Description*, last visited April 5, 2024, Available at https://www.cde.ca.gov/Ta/tg/ai/cefcaaspp.asp.
[23] Florida Department of Education. K-12 Student Assessment, last visited April 5, 2024, available at https://www.fldoe.org/accountability/assessments/k-12-student-assessment/best/.
[24] New York State Education Department. *New York State Testing Programs- High School Regents Examinations*, last visited April 5, 2024, available at https://www.nysed.gov/state-assessment/nystp-high-school-regents-examinations.

	If you are a non-English speaking student, some Regents exams may offer translation or interpretation services in languages other than English. Additionally, if you are an English language learner, you may receive linguistic accommodations such as extended time or bilingual dictionaries to support your performance on the exams.

B. General Education Development (GED)

Some people may need to pursue a GED certificate if they were unable to get a high school diploma. This certificate is generally available for adults who may have struggled to finish traditional high school, those who left high school in their earlier years or recently arrived immigrant youth who find it challenging or impractical to complete four years of high school because of their age. A GED can offer an alternative path for these students.

What is the difference between a GED certificate and a High School Diploma? One key difference between a GED certificate and a high school diploma is the process and the time it takes to complete. While a high school diploma is earned through completing traditional high school coursework, a GED certificate is obtained by passing a series of standardized tests. However, both are widely recognized by employers, colleges, and universities as proof of academic achievement

Understanding the GED process

The GED process assesses proficiency in four subject areas: mathematics, language arts, social studies, and science. By passing the GED exam, you demonstrate that you possess the same knowledge and skills as a high school graduate, opening doors to further your education and career opportunities. To help you explore this option, there are numerous resources available. Many schools, nonprofit organizations, community centers, and libraries offer free GED orientation and tutoring to assist you in your studies. These classes provide structured instruction, practice exams, and individualized support to help you prepare effectively for the exam. Signing up for a GED program typically involves several steps.

How do I start the GED process?

1	2	3	4	5	6
First, you need to find a GED preparation program in your area. You can do this by researching online, contacting local schools, libraries, community centers, or nonprofit organizations.	Once you've identified a program, you may need to attend an orientation session to learn more about the program and its requirements.	There is usually a fee associated with taking the exam, though financial assistance may be available for those who qualify.	Next, you'll need to register for the GED exam. This can be done online through the official GED Testing Service website at https://www.ged.com/ or by contacting your local GED testing center.	Important to note that while some organizations offer GED preparation services free of charge, other organizations may charge a fee for their services.	Be sure to research your options and consider factors such as cost, location, and quality of instruction before enrolling in a program.

C. Preparing for Success

Tests are part of pretty much all classes in the United States. Whether you are taking a classroom quiz, standardized test, or pursuing a GED certificate, you might face challenges in your education journey. Keep in mind that seeking help from teachers, mentors, or community groups can assist you in areas where you're having difficulty. Developing good study habits can also help you overcome some of these academic challenges.

Study Tips

Create a study space:

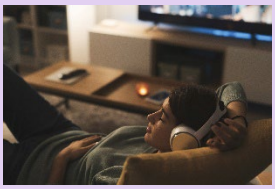
- Find a quiet area in your home where you can focus without distractions.
- This could be a corner of your room or a library with a desk or a table. Make sure your study space has good lighting and that you have all the materials you need like your books, computer, a notebook and something to write with.

Break your study time into manageable sessions:

- Rather than trying to study for hours at a time, break your study sessions into smaller ones. For example, you could study for 30 minutes at a time with short breaks in between.
- Set realistic goals for each study session, such as completing a certain number of practice problems or reviewing a specific chapter.

Use study aids:

- Utilizing study aids such as flashcards, practice tests, and study guides can enhance your learning. For example, if you're studying for a math exam, create flashcards with key formulas and concepts to review regularly.
- Take practice tests to gauge your understanding and identify areas where you need to focus your studying.



Take regular breaks:

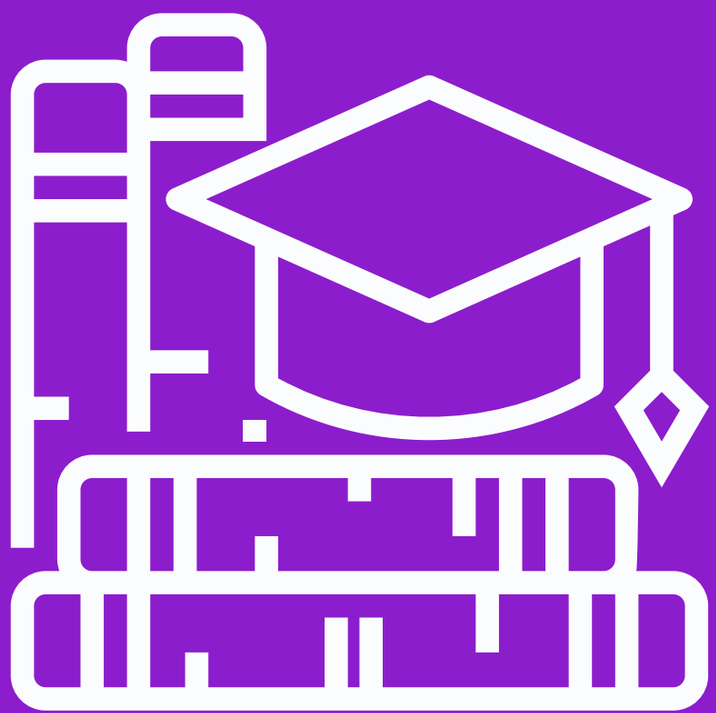
- It's important to take regular breaks to rest and recharge your mind. For example, after studying for an hour, take a 10–15-minute break to stretch, walk around, or grab a healthy snack.
- This will help prevent burnout and keep you focused and productive during your study sessions.

Work together with your peers:

- Forming study groups or teaming up with peers can create a supportive learning environment where you can exchange insights, share strategies, and motivate each other.
- Regularly meet with a group of classmates to review material, work on practice problems together, and quiz each other on key concepts. This can help reinforce your learning and keep you accountable in your study goals.

Section VII

High School Graduation



VII. High School Graduation

Graduation is an exciting time and marks the culmination of all your efforts and dedication in your high school journey. It is important to prepare for this special milestone from the time you start high school as a freshman, sophomore or junior to the time you graduate. You prepare by attending school, taking classes that will help you develop academically, taking the required test and assessments, participating in school extracurricular activities, passing your classes, and seeking help from teachers, social workers, counselors, school staff, or school administrators when you need assistance.

It is beneficial to start thinking and planning from early on during high school, what you want to do after you graduate high school as there are different educational pathways and opportunities in the United States you can pursue. Receiving a high school diploma is an important educational accomplishment for your future either in higher education, vocational/trade school, or in the workforce. Given that most employers, institutions of higher education and vocational careers require a high school diploma, or GED equivalency to enroll in their programs or obtain employment.

Common Requirements for Graduation:[25]

Texas	California	Florida	New York
• 4 credits of English • 3 credits of Math • 4 credits of Science • 4 credits of Social Studies • 1 credit of Physical Education • 2 credits of Language other than English • 1 credit of Fine Arts • 5 credits of Electives	• 3 credits of English • 2 credits of Math • 2 credits of Science • 3 credits of Social Studies • 2 credits of Physical Education • 1 credit of Visual and Performing Arts or Technical Education • One semester of Ethnic Studies	• 4 credits of English • 4 credits of Math • 3 credits of Science • 3 credits of Social Studies • 1 credit of Physical Education • 1 credit of Fine Arts, speech/debate or Career & Technical Education • 7 & 1/2 credits of Electives	• 4 credits of English • 3 credits of Math • 3 credits of Science • 4 credits of Social Studies • 2 credits of Physical Education • 1 credit of Fine Arts • 1 credit of a Language other than English • 3 & 1/2 credits of Electives

[25] Education Commission of the States, 50 State Comparison- High School Graduation Requirements 2023, last visited March 18, 2025, available at https://reports.ecs.org/comparisons/high-school-graduation-requirements-2023-01.

ROADMAP TO HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION

Passing - English, Science, Math, History classes, and meeting total class credit requirements.

In core subject areas. This includes exams like STAAR, CAASPP, FAST, & New York Regents.

Be present most days at school, 91-95% of the time. If absent show documentation to be excused.

Register to take the SAT or ACT starting Sophomore or Junior year.

Complete financial aid application to the colleges you plan to apply, along with scholarship applications.

Make sure to meet with your counselor regularly to ensure you are taking the classes necessary to be on track to graduate.

A. Standardized Exams for College Admissions

As you prepare for your future after high school graduation, it is important for you to do well in tests that are considered admission criteria for the universities you want to apply to. High test scores make you a more competitive applicant for admission into colleges/universities.

What standardized exams do colleges/universities consider for admissions? Each college and university have specific requirements for admission into the school and program of study. Most require or highly recommend submission of the SAT or ACT test. These tests are available in paper and digital format. The higher you score on these aptitude tests, the better it reflects on your application as academic merit. College Board is the organization that administers standardized tests such as the PSAT, SAT, AP exams, and additional tests that colleges and universities can use as part of their admission criteria.[26]

PSAT	SAT	ACT
Time: 2 hours and 45 minutes. **Content:** It consists of three sections- Reading, Writing, and Math. **Format:** Most questions are multiple choice questions, except for some Math questions that ask you to write-in the answer.	**Time:** You have 64 minutes to complete the Reading and Writing section and 70 minutes to complete the Math section for a total of 2 hours, 14 minutes. **Content:** It consists of three sections- Reading, Writing, and Math. **Format:** Most questions are multiple choice questions, except for some Math questions that ask you to fill-in the answer.	**Time:** You have 60 minutes to complete 60 questions for Math. 35 minutes to complete 40 questions for Reading and Science, 45 minutes to complete 75 questions for English, and an optional 40 minutes writing section with 1 writing prompt. **Content:** It consists of four mandatory sections— Reading, Science, English and Math— and an optional writing section. **Format:** Multiple-choice questions in the four subject areas of English, Reading, Math, and Science.

Some states may require you to take additional exams to ensure you are ready to succeed in college-level courses. For example, Texas requires you to take the **Texas Success Initiative Assessment**, known as the **TSI**, to determine if you are ready for entry-level college coursework in the areas of English Language Arts (ELAR) and Mathematics. There are exemptions to this assessment, such as meeting college

[26] College Board, *About Us*, last visited May 09, 2024, available at https://about.collegeboard.org/.

readiness benchmarks on the SAT, ACT, STAAR English III or Algebra II EOCs (End of Course), or successfully completing college level courses through Dual Credit or Advance Placement classes. [27] College readiness benchmarks mean you've received the academic scores on state-level exams needed or taken advanced level classes to demonstrate you can handle college-level material.

Please Note: During COVID-19 many colleges and universities did not require the SAT or ACT as part of their admission criteria. The PSAT exam is usually taken in the 10th grade as a practice test for the SAT taken Junior year/11th grade of high school or latest Fall semester of 12th grade.[28] The ACT test can be taken from 9th grade to 12th grade. [29]

B. Vocational and Trade Careers

Vocational and Trade schools are another career path you can take if you are interested in performing specialized skill work. If you participated in your high schools career and technical education programs, this can be a career pathway for you. These schools are designed to attain vocational education or technical skills to complete the tasks of a particular or specific job. Vocational and trade schools can give you a certification to work in jobs like electrician, HVAC technician, phlebotomist, air traffic controller, car mechanic, truck driver, paralegal, construction inspector, and other specialized fields. [30]

[27] Texas Education Agency, The TSIA (Texas Success Initiative Assessment), last visited May 14, 2024, available at https://tea.texas.gov/academics/college-career-and-military-prep/the-tsia-texas-success-initiative-assessment.
[28] College Board, *How the SAT is Structured*, last visited May 14,2024, available at https://satsuite.collegeboard.org/sat/whats-on-the-test/structure.
[29] ACT, The ACT Test Overview, last visited May 14, 2024, available at https://www.act.org/content/act/en/products-and-services/the-act.html#overview.
[30] Indeed Career Guide, *47 Types of Jobs You Can Pursue After Trade School*, last visited May 15 ,2024, available at https://www.indeed.com/career-advice/finding-a-job/types-of-trade-school-jobs.

Trade school requirements include:

Minimum age of enrollment is 16 years old (sponsor signature may be required).

High School Diploma or GED (General Education Diploma) or state authorized equivalency exam.

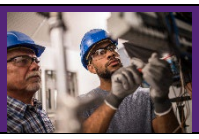
Application Fee

Trade schools that participate in the Free Application for Federal Student Aid or best known as FAFSA (financial aid will be explained in the upcoming section) can provide financial assistance to students in the form of grants, loans, and work-study, therefore when looking at a trade/vocational school make sure to ask or double check with the enrollment department if the school participates in the federal student aid program.

Please Note: The Free Application for Federal Student Aid is a separate application, and eligibility is determined based on information students (you) provide on the FAFSA application. [31]

Possible Career Paths:

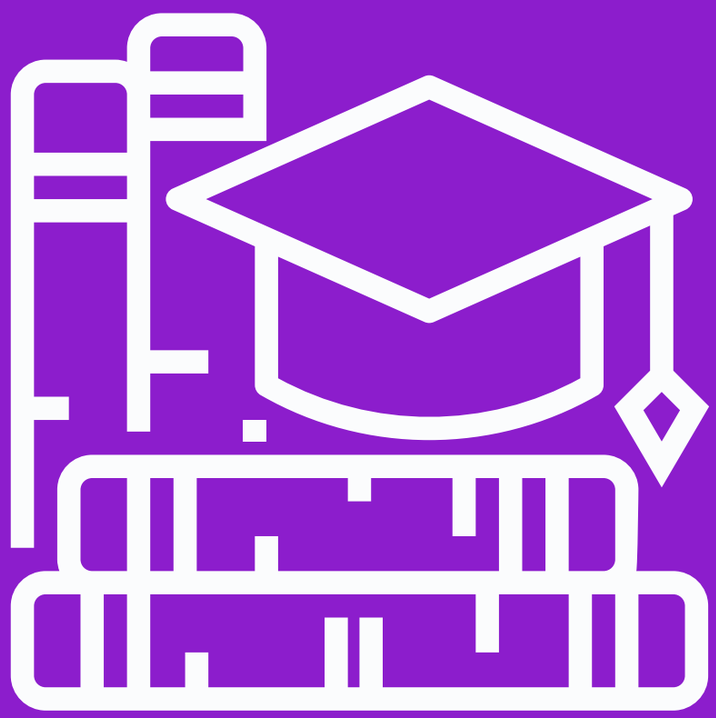
You want to choose something you enjoy and is sustainable as a career. Vocational trades are a great career path to pursue if you're looking for 1-2 years of professional experience after high school training or specializations. Careers in this field are essential to maintain communities and cities.

		
Electrician: A professional who installs, maintains, operates or repairs electrical equipment.	**Phlebotomist:** A health worker trained in drawing blood from patients and preparing samples for testing.	**Truck Driver:** A professional who drives commercial vehicles, mainly trucks and trailers to transport goods and services.

[31] Universal Technical Institute, *Trade School Requirements: Ultimate Application Guide*, last visited May 15, 2024, available at https://www.uti.edu/blog/education/trade-school-requirements.

Section VIII

Higher Education: Financial Aid and Tuition Support



VIII. Higher Education: Financial Aid and Tuition Support

Deciding to pursue higher education by attending community college or university can be expensive. However, financial aid or tuition support may be available to help students afford the cost of higher education. The federal and state governments offer different types of financial assistance, each with different eligibility requirements to help students attain a college degree/certification.

A. What is a Public College/University?

A public college/university is a higher education institution that receives funding from the state government. Public colleges are often larger than private colleges.

What is the Cost of Attendance?

One major factor when making the decision on whether to attend college and which college to attend is the cost of attendance. Tuition cost for public colleges/universities is divided into two categories: In-state tuition and Out-of-state tuition. In-state tuition is reduced tuition paid by students who are considered residents of the state where the college/university is located. In- state tuition can be significantly more affordable than out-of-state tuition.[32] Out- of state tuition is higher tuition charged to students who are not considered residents of that state to attend that college/university. Depending on where you live, a student's immigration status may impact whether or not they qualify for in-state tuition. It is important to research your state's requirements.

When considering cost, make sure you research online on the school's admission website or ask a counselor or admissions representative for an estimate of the cost of attendance of that school. When calculating the cost of attendance, you will want to consider costs, such as tuition and fees, room and board, books and supplies, transportation, as well as miscellaneous expenses (like doing laundry, grocery shopping, and entertainment). The total annual cost is usually divided into two semesters (Fall/Spring semester), and you may also need to pay for a summer semester if you are interested in attending summer school.

What does residency requirement mean for financial aid?

Residency requirement for college admissions refers to whether a student is considered a resident of the state where the student is applying to school. This

[32] Best Colleges, *The Student's Guide to In-State vs. Out-of-State Tuition*, last visited May 24, 2024, available at https://www.bestcolleges.com/resources/in-state-vs-out-of-state-tuition/.

residency requirement varies from state to state, as each state has its own criteria for determining in-state residency. Some common requirements include:

- Physical Presence: To be considered an in-state tuition student, you must live in the state for a certain amount of time, usually at least 12 months (*Some states may require more or less months*).
- Financial Independence: Some states require you to show you are financially independent from your sponsor.
- Academic Requirements: Some states may have additional academic requirements for in-state tuition qualification.

Most students need to receive financial aid to help pay for the costs of attending university. There are different types of scholarships, institutional and state grants you can apply to, as well as state funded loans. Your immigration status may impact what you can apply for. The next sections discuss the different types of aid and who is eligible.

B. Private Colleges and Universities

Private colleges/universities are another option you can consider. Private colleges don't receive their primary funding from the state government therefore their admission criteria and procedures are different. Private colleges can be for-profit or nonprofit institutions. Generally, private schools have a higher cost of attendance; however, they can offer more scholarships at times. Some private colleges may have religious affiliation.

What schools are private colleges/universities? The following table has some examples of private colleges in some of the largest states in the United States. There are many more private colleges and universities that are not listed.

Texas	California	Florida	New York
• Rice University • St. Edwards University • Baylor University • Dallas Christian College • Huston-Tillotson University • Austin College • Trinity University	• University of Southern California • Standford University • Pomana College • California Institute of Technology • Art Center College of Design	• University of Miami • Florida College • The University of Tampa • Rollins College • Florida Institute of Technology • Florida Southern College • Trinity Baptist University	• Columbia University • New York University • Barnard College • The American Musical and Dramatic Academy • St. Francis College

	• California Baptist University		• Manhattan University

C. Federal Financial Aid

Federal financial aid is financial assistance in the form of educational grants, work-study, or loans provided by the federal government to cover educational expenses in college/university. To receive federal aid, students must apply online using the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) (more detailed explanation below), meet eligibility criteria, and submit any necessary documents requested. The financial aid office at your college/university can assist you if you have questions or need assistance completing the online application.

What is the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)?

FAFSA is a free application that students use to determine their eligibility for federal financial aid to attend a college/university/trade school program that participates in this national program to assist with college expenses. If students are eligible, they may qualify to receive federal aid in the form of grants, federal work-study, or loans. You must complete the FAFSA or state equivalent financial aid application each year before attending college/university. Students have the option to fill out and submit the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) here, https://studentaid.gov/.

Please Note: Some states may have state equivalent applications that students without lawful immigrant status can apply to. We will explain more about state equivalent financial assistance programs, following FAFSA eligibility.

Types of Federal Aid

- Grants are typically awarded based on financial need, allocated by federal and state governments, and DO NOT need to be repaid. The most common grant awarded is the Federal Pell Grant.
- Federal Work-Study provides part-time employment to eligible students, by allowing students to earn money either in an on-campus job, or off-campus job while enrolled in school to support their educational expenses. Students must apply for federal work-study through FAFSA.[33]
- Federal loans such as Direct Subsidized Loans, Direct Unsubsidized Loans, and Direct PLUS Loans are provided by the U.S. government and must be repaid

[33] Federal Student Aid, 8 Things You Should Know About Federal Work- Study, last visited October 30, 2024, available at https://studentaid.gov/articles/8-things-federal-work-study/.

after you graduate or finish attending college even if you drop out of the program. These loans can have fixed or variable interest rates, and there are different repayment options. Federal loans, unlike private loans, can offer loan forgiveness and income-based repayment plans, post-graduation. Private loans (such as bank loans) sometimes require a credit check, tend to have higher interest rates than federal loans, and don't have educational loan repayment flexibility.

i. FAFSA Eligibility

FAFSA has the following basic eligibility requirements that applicants must meet to apply for federal aid:[34]

- Show you are qualified to obtain a college education by having your high school diploma or GED
- Demonstrate financial need
- Be a U.S citizen or eligible non-citizen
- Have a valid social security number
- Sign and certify the FAFSA form, agreeing to only use financial aid for educational purposes
- Be enrolled or accepted to enroll as a student in an eligible degree or certificate program
- Maintain satisfactory academic progress in school

ii. Eligibility for Non-U.S. Citizens

If you fall under the categories below you are considered an eligible non-citizen, which means you can apply for FAFSA:[35]

- You are a U.S. national or permanent resident
- You have an Arrival-Departure Record (I-94) from U.S. Citizen and Immigration Services (USCIS) showing one of the following status categories:
    - Refugee
    - Asylum Granted
    - Conditional Resident Alien
    - Cuban Haitian Entrant
    - Parolee (you must be paroled for at least one year, and you must be able to provide evidence from USCIS that you are in the United States

[34] Federal Student Aid An Office of the U.S. Department of Education, *Eligibility Requirements*, last visited May 24, 2024, available at https://studentaid.gov/understand-aid/eligibility/requirements.
[35] Federal Student Aid An Office of the U.S. Department of Education, Eligibility for Non-U.S. Citizens, last visited May 24, 2024, available at https://studentaid.gov/understand-aid/eligibility/requirements/non-us-citizens.

for other than a temporary purpose with the intention of becoming a U.S. citizen or permanent resident.)

- Modified parole requirements for
  - Ukrainian citizens and nationals paroled into the United States between Feb. 24, 2022, and Sept. 30, 2024
  - Afghan citizens and nationals paroled into the United States between July 31, 2021, and Sept. 30, 2023
- You hold a T-visa (for victims of human trafficking), or your parent holds a T-1 nonimmigrant status.
- You are a "battered immigrant-qualified alien" who is a victim of spousal abuse by a U.S. citizen or lawful permanent resident, or your parent is designated as such under the Violence Against Women Act *(VAWA)*.[36]

You should always check the *Federal Student Aid* website to see if there have been any updates to who is eligible to apply for federal aid. Students who do not meet the eligibility requirements would not be able to receive federal financial aid through FAFSA. You can check here: https://studentaid.gov/understand-aid/eligibility/requirements

D. State Financial Aid

Some states-including California, Colorado, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Oklahoma, Oregon, Texas, Virginia, Washington, and the District of Columbia— have offered state financial aid to students who meet criteria requirements regardless of their immigration status. These state financial aid programs may make it easier for students without a legal immigration status to attend college too. You will usually need to live in the state in order to be eligible to participate in their state financial aid program. Be sure to check online on the college/university' website, ask your school counselor, college advisor, or a financial aid counselor/representative from the college/university for information about eligibility requirements for your state.

If you are applying for state financial aid, make sure to send your application to each of the college/university financial aid offices that you are applying to. Some states may have an online portal to submit this application, others might require you to mail your application to each college/university. After submitting the state financial aid application, contact the school's financial aid office to confirm your

[36] United States Department of Education Office of Postsecondary Education, Eligibility for Title IV Aid for "Battered Immigrants-Qualified Aliens" as provided for in the Violence Against Women Act, last visited May 24, 2024, available at https://fsapartners.ed.gov/sites/default/files/attachments/dpcletters/GEN1007.pdf.

application has been received and is being processed. You may ask for an application confirmation number. Once your application has been processed, the school's financial aid office may contact you by email or mail to inform you of their decision to offer state aid to you.

The following table lists the states that offer state financial aid that may be available for students that are not U.S. citizens or legal permanent residents and the state website with more information to their application portal, and/or paper application.

State Financial Aid Applications	
State	Financial Aid Website/Application
California: California Dream Act Application (CADDA)	https://dream.csac.ca.gov/landing
Colorado: College Application for State Financial Aid (CASFA)	https://cdhestudentxprod.regenteducation.net/signin
Illinois: Alternative Application for Illinois Financial Aid- Monetary Award Program (MAP)	https://studentportal.isac.org/en/alternativeapp
Maryland: Maryland State Financial Aid Application (MSFAA), Apply through the Maryland College Aid Processing System (MDCAPS)	https://mdcaps.mhec.state.md.us/MDCAPS/StudentRegisterForLogin.aspx
Massachusetts: Massachusetts Application for State Financial Aid (MASFA), (Tuition Equity form required too)	https://madhestudentxprod.regenteducation.net/signin
Minnesota: Minnesota Dream Act (MN Dream Act)	https://mnaid.guarantorsolutions.com/StudentPortal/Login
New Jersey: New Jersey Alternative Financial Aid Application	https://www.hesaa.org/Pages/NJAlternativeApplication.aspx

New Mexico: Print a copy of the FAFSA application and submit to each college financial aid office	https://studentaid.gov/
New York: NYS Dream Act	https://hesc.ny.gov/applying-aid/nys-dream-act/
Oklahoma: OK College Start-Application for Undocumented Immigrants	https://www.okcollegestart.org/Financial_Aid_Planning/Oklahoma_Grants/Oklahoma_Tuition_Aid_Grant.aspx
Oregon: Oregon Student Aid Application (ORSAA)	https://oregonstudentaid.gov/fafsa-orsaa/fafsaorsaa-filter-tool/
Texas: Texas Application for State Financial Aid (TASFA)	https://www.highered.texas.gov/students-families/tasfa/#paper-tasfa
Virginia: Virginia Alternative State Aid (VASA)	https://schevstudentxprod.regenteducation.net/signup
Washington: Washington Application for State Financial Aid (WASFA)	https://wsac.wa.gov/wasfa
Washington District of Columbia (DC): Eligible students can receive in-state tuition, contact the school's financial aid office.	https://www.higheredimmigrationportal.org/state/district-of-columbia/

Other states may offer financial aid as well, but there may be limited to no access to college for students classified as without legal immigration status. If you attend college/university at a state with more restrictive access to financial aid, you might need to pay out-of-state tuition fees (which is a higher tuition rate) due to being classified as a foreigner/international student, or because the state does not allow students without a legal immigration status to enroll in public colleges/universities. States where access to public college has been limited or historically have not had policies specifically for students without lawful immigration status include Alaska, Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Idaho, Indiana, Iowa, Louisiana, Maine, Mississippi,

Missouri, Montana, New Hampshire, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, South Carolina, South Dakota, Vermont, West Virginia, Wisconsin, and Wyoming.[37]

You can find more information about which states offer comprehensive access to state financial aid vs more restrictive access in these websites:

Online Resources	
National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (NASFAA): Finder of financial aid programs available to students through state educational agencies, searchable by state.	https://www.nasfaa.org/state_financial_aid_programs
Higher ED Immigration Portal: Portal to learn more about what each state offers in terms of financial aid resources for college/university.	https://www.higheredimmigrationportal.org/states/

Please Note, the next section has information about scholarships that may be available to help pay for college, even in states with more restrictive access.

E. Scholarships

There are other options to receive help paying for college such as scholarships. A scholarship is a monetary payment made to support a student's education that is usually awarded based on academic merit or some other achievement. There are institutional scholarships awarded by a school and outside scholarships that can be awarded by nonprofit organizations, businesses, philanthropic organizations, or private and community foundations.

To learn more about scholarships that you may be able to apply for, the Federal Student Aid Office of the U.S. Department of Education suggests checking with your country of origin's embassy or a consulate in the United States to see what

[37] Higher ED Immigration Portal, Portal to the States- Tuition & Financial Aid Equity for Undocumented Students, last visited October 30, 2024, available at U.S. State Policies on DACA & Undocumented Students | Higher Ed Immigration Portal.

they offer. The U.S. Department of Labor also has a free online scholarship search, https://www.careeronestop.org/toolkit/training/find-scholarships.aspx. Additionally, you can ask the college advisor, teacher, counselor, social worker, mentor, or the financial aid office of the college/university you plan to attend what type of aid the school offers to students without legal immigration status. The office of financial aid will be able to let you know if and what scholarships they have available for you to apply to or be considered.

What scholarships are recommended?

Scholarships
The Dream US National Scholarship: This national scholarship is for undocumented students who are eligible to receive in-state tuition where they reside. To receive this scholarship students must attend a school in their state from the national partner colleges list. https://www.thedream.us/scholarships/national-scholarship/
The Dream US Opportunity Scholarship: This Opportunity Scholarship is for undocumented students who reside in a state that requires them to pay out of state tuition or does not allow enrollment into its public universities. To receive the Opportunity Scholarships, students must attend a partner college from a shortened list in another state. https://aim.applyists.net/Account/LogOn?ReturnUrl=%2fDreamOpportunity
Davis-Putter Scholarship Fund: The Davis-Putter Scholarship Fund provides financial support for students who are active and emerging organizers in progressive movements for liberation, self-determination, and social and economic justice in their communities. https://www.davisputter.org/apply
Hispanic Scholarship Fund (HSF): The Hispanic Scholarship Fund offers a merit-based scholarship for Hispanic students that are U.S. citizens, permanent legal residents, or DACA recipients. https://www.hsf.net/scholarship
Esperanza Fund Scholarship: The Esperanza Education Fund scholarship is for students born outside the U.S. or those who's both parents were born outside the U.S. Applicants must be a graduating senior or recent GED graduate residing in the District of Columbia, Maryland, or Virginia.

https://www.esperanzafund.org/scholarship-program
Dr. Juan Andrade Jr. Scholarship: Young Hispanic leaders who share Dr. Andrade's lifelong commitment to servant leadership. https://accessscholarships.com/scholarship/dr-juan-andrade-jr-scholarship/
Golden Door Scholars: Provides DACAmented and undocumented students with the financial aid and support needed to invest in their education and define their futures. It's a community that offers comprehensive support in career readiness. https://www.goldendoorscholars.org/
Youth Education Foundation: Helps create tomorrow's leaders through academic achievement. Scholarship criteria include demonstrated character, leadership, service, financial need, and scholastic ability. https://www.rotarysa.org/scholarships/youth-education-foundation/

F. Challenges and Guidance for Navigating Higher Education

Participating in academically challenging programs and extracurricular activities helps applicants (you as a student) learn new skills, stand out, and increase your chances of gaining acceptance into the college/university of your choice and being awarded merit-based scholarships. We would like to explore challenges you might encounter as you navigate the higher education space and offer guidance for you to feel equipped navigating these challenges.

Challenge- How can the higher education process be challenging?	Guidance- What resources are available to help me as I transition to higher education?
Graduation can be a long-term goal: Graduation may seem like a far goal ahead due to struggling in classes, exams, or because of all the requirements to achieve this milestone.	• Speak with your school social worker or school counselor as they can guide you to more direct resources in your school and community to support your personal and academic goals. • Seek tutoring support if needed by speaking with your teachers, counselor, or school administrator. • Local public libraries, community centers such as the YMCA, or after school programs may be able to help you for

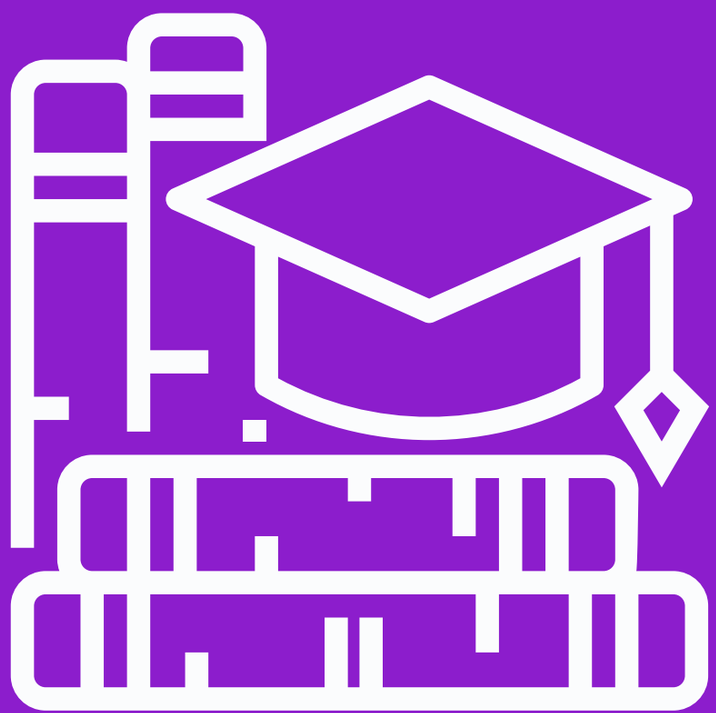
Challenge- How can the higher education process be challenging?	Guidance- What resources are available to help me as I transition to higher education?
	free if you go and seek information about their programs and types of assistance to students in high school. • Remember to be patient with yourself as this is a new environment and try to be open to learning from your peers, teachers, and mentors.
Feel Misunderstood: You might feel like your sponsors/ family members don't understand everything you have to do to graduate, and that is a valid feeling.	• High school and the college application process in the United States may be unfamiliar to your sponsors/family members too. It is understandable to feel overwhelmed with the unfamiliar, reach out to your school social worker or counselor to have a conversation and talk through these feelings. • Develop reasonable and achievable short-term goals to accomplish your long-term goal of graduating high school. For example, a goal can, be something like: "I will do my best to attend school and complete my assignments on time to pass my classes for the grading period."
Work on the present and think about your future goals: You are doing your best to complete your high school graduation requirements while trying to figure out what you want to do next, either attend community college/university/trade school, or enter the workforce.	• Seek help from your College Adviser (If your campus has one), counselor, social worker, or teacher to guide you through the career exploration and higher education process. • Attend college representative visits if your school offers them, to start exploring what each college/university has to offer and to learn about their admission requirements. • If you are in a Career & Technical Education program and envision yourself pursuing a trade specialization, talk with your high school teacher about your interest, and see if they can offer you

Challenge- How can the higher education process be challenging?	Guidance- What resources are available to help me as I transition to higher education?
	more guidance on the process of receiving your trade license.
Financial Aid: Navigating the financial aid process and figuring out how to pay college expenses can be difficult and stressful.	• Contact the college/university/trade school via phone number or email and tell them you are interested in learning about any financial aid/scholarships they offer for students without lawful immigrant status. • Attend FAFSA/State Aid financial aid nights or other events at your school or school district. • Research online the college's/university's admissions office, state financial aid programs, and scholarships.
College admission process is a multi-step process: The college admission process takes time, and asks for essays, letters of recommendation and resumes.	• While there are different components of the college admission process focus on one task/goal at a time. • Make sure you write down important application submission deadlines, application fees needed, and financial aid submission deadlines. • For letters of recommendation, you want to ask an adult you trust, such as a teacher or community leader, to write a letter of recommendation for you. You want to provide the recommender with two to three weeks or more time to write the letter of recommendation. • Take time to write your college application essays and ask a teacher if they can review/revise your essay. • A key part of the college application process is your Grade Point Average (your grades). Try your best every day at

Challenge- How can the higher education process be challenging?	Guidance- What resources are available to help me as I transition to higher education?
	school so that your hard work is reflected in your grades.
You're the first one in your family to attend college: No one in your family has attended college before, and you have so many questions.	• It is understandable and good to have many questions about attending college. It is a big decision you will take as a young adult. • Reach out to your school social worker, college adviser, teacher, or school administrator if you need one-on-one guidance. • There are many resources online. Go to the college/university website and send an email or contact the admissions and financial aid office and ask your questions, the representatives are there to help you. • Attend college nights if your school offers them. If you can, attend a college tour. You may even be able to attend a virtual college tour if that is more accessible for you.

Section IX

Additional Resources



IX. Additional Resources

We want to provide you with more online resources in certain areas to increase your understanding:

Resources	
American Federation of Teachers Teacher organization that provides information about students' rights and guidance for immigrant students in K-12 public education.	English version available at https://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/2025/rights_for_immigrant_students_schools_0.pdf Spanish version available at https://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/2025/rights_for_immigrant_students_schools_spanish_0.pdf More languages available here- https://www.aft.org/our-community/immigration
Children's Immigration Law Academy (CILA) Youth Toolkit: Offers practical tips, guidance, and information on local and national resources.	English version available at https://cilacademy.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/2023.06.15-PDF-FINAL-Youth-Toolkit-English-1.pdf Spanish version available at https://cilacademy.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/2023.06.16-PDF-FINAL-Youth-Toolkit-Spanish.pdf
Colorín Colorado- Bilingual site for educators and families of English language learners.	https://www.colorincolorado.org/article/ten-strategies-supporting-immigrant-students-and-families https://www.colorincolorado.org/immigration/guide/rights

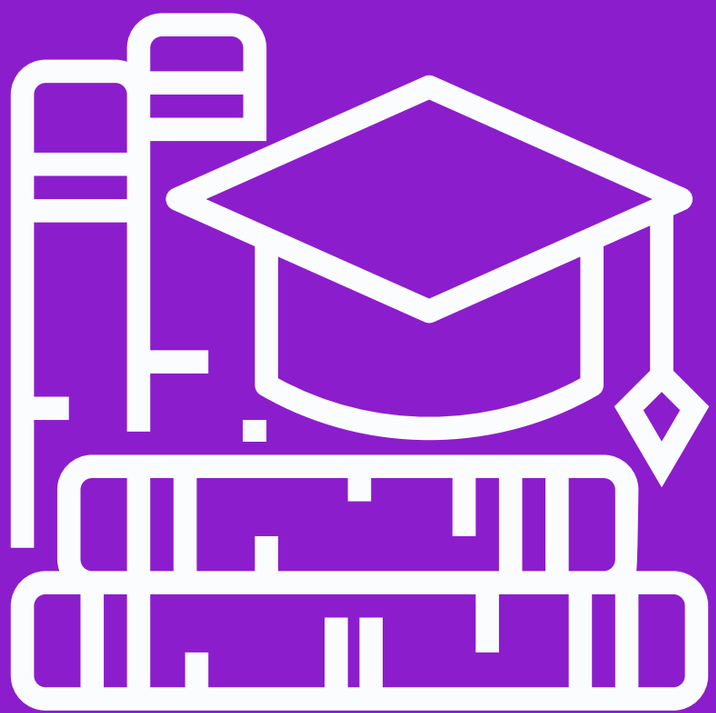
	https://www.colorincolorado.org/guide/mental-health-support-immigrant-students https://www.colorincolorado.org/sites/default/files/How-Schools-Can-Partner-Immigrant-Families_2.pdf
Community In Schools (CIS): National organization that assists youth needing additional support to graduate high school.	https://www.communitiesinschools.org/
Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA): Law that prohibits schools without parental/sponsor consent from providing any outside agency like ICE or CBP with any information about a student's educational record.	https://studentprivacy.ed.gov/resources/parent-guide-family-educational-rights-and-privacy-act-ferpa
Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA): Free application used to determine eligibility for federal financial aid to attend college, university, or trade school program.	https://studentaid.gov/
Higher Ed Immigration Portal: Portal to learn more about what each state offers in terms of financial aid resources for college/university.	https://www.higheredimmigrationportal.org/states/
Higher Ed Legal Services Project: California statewide effort to offer zero- cost immigration legal services to CSU & CCC students by trusted nonprofit legal organizations.	https://www.ilrc.org/about-higher-education-technical-assistance-project
Immigrant Connections: Collection of policies, guidance, and protocols used by various	https://www.immigrantsrefugeesandschools.org/post/what-to-do-if-ice-visits-your-school-

school districts and states for what to do if ICE visits your school. *(This is a "living" document that will update regularly as more district and state guides are identified)*	sample-policies-and-guidance-from-school-districts-and-states?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=sample_policies_guidance&utm_term=2025-01-28
Informed Immigrant: Find resources for undocumented students.	https://www.informedimmigrant.com/resources/
JUSTIA, Education Law Center: Compulsory Education Laws: 50-State Survey	https://www.justia.com/education/compulsory-education-laws-50-state-survey/
Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF): Encourages sponsor to contact them with any information about immigration enforcement activity in school.	https://www.maldef.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/IMMIGRATION-ENFORCEMENT-IN-SCHOOLS-1.22.25.pdf
My Undocumented Life: Up- to-date information and resources for undocumented students, families, and allies.	https://mydocumentedlife.org/category/college-scholarships/
National Association of Student Financial Aid and Administrators (NASFAA): Finder of financial aid programs available to students through state educational agencies, searchable by state.	https://www.nasfaa.org/state_financial_aid_programs
National Center for Education Statistics: Compulsory school attendance laws by state (2020).	https://nces.ed.gov/programs/statereform/tab1_2-2023.asp
National Immigration Law Center: Know Your Rights factsheet.	https://www.nilc.org/resources/factsheet-trumps-rescission-of-protected-areas-policies-undermines-safety-for-all/

Safe Place: National anti-bullying hotline.	Text the word "safe" and your current location (address, city, state) to 4HELP (44357). https://www.nationalsafeplace.org/txt-4-help
Stop Bullying: National anti-bullying hotline.	Text HELP to 988 or AYUDA to 988 and then press 2 for Spanish https://www.stopbullying.gov/resources/get-help-now
Teen Line: National anti-bullying hotline.	Text "Teen" to 839863 https://www.teenline.org/
The National Center for Youth Law: Tools to advocate for unaccompanied immigrant youth in federal immigration custody and youth recently released from custody.	https://youthlaw.org/sites/default/files/attachments/2024-05/Toolkit-%20Educational%20Advocacy%20for%20Unaccompanied%20Immigrant%20Youth%20in%20California_0.pdf
U.S Department of Labor-Scholarship Finder: Scholarships and other financial aid opportunities for different levels of study.	https://www.careeronestop.org/toolkit/training/find-scholarships.aspx

Section X

Conclusion



X. Conclusion

We understand that navigating the U.S. education system is complicated. You can experience a lot of emotions and feelings throughout the process of starting high school in the United States, during high school, and in planning for your future beyond high school.

We hope this educational guide helps you feel better prepared to navigate this stage in your life, and that you feel confident advocating for yourself in school settings. Here at CILA, we believe in your potential to succeed and wish you the best in your educational endeavors!