



U.S. Department of Education

# English Learner Family Toolkit



## Introduction

The U.S. Department of Education (the Department) promotes student achievement, fosters educational excellence, and ensures that every child has the opportunity to obtain a high-quality education. The Department also supports families in choosing education services that meet their child's needs. The Office of English Language Acquisition (OELA) is a principal office in the Department. OELA

- provides national leadership to help English learners (ELs) attain English proficiency and achieve academic success.
- identifies major issues affecting the education of ELs and supports all reforms and initiatives considering the education needs of ELs.
- promotes opportunities for all students to gain biliteracy or multiliteracy skills.

OELA is pleased to provide this *English Learner Family Tool Kit*, with information on questions families may have about public schools in the United States. The following topics are covered in the tool kit:

1. Enrolling Your Child in School
2. Attending School in the United States
3. Obtaining Services for English Learners
4. Finding Additional Services for Your Child
5. Keeping Your Child Safe and Healthy in School
6. Helping Your Child With Schoolwork at Home

Each topic covered in the *English Learner Family Tool Kit* is divided into 5 parts: (1) *General Information*, (2) *Family and Student Rights*, (3) *Questions to Ask School Staff*, (4) *Tips*, and (5) *Resources*. All resources in the tool kit are available online, free of charge.

OELA developed this tool kit<sup>1</sup> and would like to thank all EL family members, students, and school staff who contributed information.

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<sup>1</sup> The National Clearinghouse for English Language Learners (NCELA) supported the development of the tool kit. NCELA can be accessed at <https://ncela.ed.gov/>.

## Enrolling Your Child in School

“Enrolling Your Child in School” is the first topic in the English Learner Family Tool Kit. This tool kit is meant to support families of English learners (ELs) in the U.S. education system. Each topic has five parts: (1) Overview, (2) Family and Student Rights, (3) Questions to Ask School Staff, (4) Tips, and (5) Resources. Information varies for each topic, though some information may be repeated.

### Overview

Enrolling your child in school can be a very exciting time. Some things may be familiar, and other things may be unfamiliar to you and your child. All children who live in the United States have the right to equal access to a free public education. States may also have public preschool or pre-kindergarten programs. School staff can provide important information about enrolling your child in school. Please ask them questions. Teachers, principals, guidance counselors, and other staff will work together to help you and to help your child learn and succeed in school.

### Family and Student Rights

**As a family member with school-aged children, you have certain rights.** *This is very important. A parents’ national origin, citizenship, or immigration status does not change this right.* For example:

- Under federal law, all children, regardless of their citizenship or residency status, are entitled to equal access to a free public education.<sup>1</sup>
- Schools and school districts can ask for immunization records and proof of age from a clinic or doctor, as well as proof of residency (for example, a utility bill that reflects your current address). Check the school and district websites to learn about the documents required to enroll your child in school. All students must provide this information.
- Schools cannot ask for documentation that would prohibit or unlawfully discourage a student from enrolling in or attending school.
- Schools are not allowed to share information that may reveal a student’s personal information, unless permitted by law or if you give them written permission.<sup>2</sup>
- Schools must ensure meaningful communication with limited English proficient parents in a language they can understand. They must notify limited English proficient parents of information about any program, service, or activity of a school district that is called to the attention of parents who are proficient in English.
- Schools must identify EL students who need services to learn English. To get started, most schools will ask you to fill out a Home Language Survey. This will help determine if your child needs to be tested to find out if your child is eligible for English language services.
- If the English proficiency assessment determines that your child is eligible for specialized language services, the school must provide these services. You must give permission for your child to receive these services. You also have a choice to not have your child receive such services.

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<sup>1</sup> Students with F-1 or M-1 non-immigrant visas attending private schools are responsible for paying tuition, while F-1 visa holders attending a public secondary school are responsible for paying the full, unsubsidized per capita cost of attending school (see <https://studyinthestates.dhs.gov/kindergarten-to-grade-12-schools>).

<sup>2</sup> Information about the *Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)* can be found at [https://studentprivacy.ed.gov/sites/default/files/resource\\_document/file/for-parents.pdf](https://studentprivacy.ed.gov/sites/default/files/resource_document/file/for-parents.pdf).

## **Suggested Questions to Ask School Staff**

The following are sample, optional questions you may ask school staff to help you to enroll your child in school:

1. Who can help me enroll my child in school?
2. Will my child's siblings enroll in this school?
3. What documents must I bring to school or the district office to enroll my child?
4. A minor relative is living with me, and I am not the legal guardian of that child. The child's parents are not living with the child. Can I enroll the child in my local district?
5. Can I get materials translated and an interpreter to help me talk with school staff?
6. What is the deadline for providing the required documents and/or for getting any required vaccinations?
7. What time does school start and end?
8. How does my child get to school? Do I have to pay for transportation services? Where can I find information on bus routes and bus stops, and how can I find out if the bus is delayed?
9. My child needs help learning English. How can I be sure that my child receives services to help him or her learn English?
10. What supplies does my child need for school?
11. Does the school have before- and after-school day care for my child?
12. How can I enroll my child in after-school activities or in an after-care program (for elementary school children)?
13. Is there a public preschool program for my 4-year-old child? If so, how can I obtain information about that program?
14. What information about my child will the school share with people outside of the school?
15. My child will be in high school. How can I get information about graduation requirements?

## **Tips for Families**

- Do not sign any paperwork until you understand the information and agree to what is being asked of you.
- If possible, take a parent or guardian whose child already attends your school with you to enroll your child.
- If possible, visit your school and district websites to see what information is available to help you prepare for enrolling your child.
- Ask for a school calendar and information about when the school opens late and closes early.
- Sometimes families must pay for the child's breakfast or lunch, school supplies, and before- and after-school activities. Ask the school if you must pay for these things or if the school can provide you with financial assistance, if needed.
- Sometimes schools close due to holidays, teacher workdays, bad weather, or other unexpected events. Schools let families know about these events in several ways, such as sending text or email alerts or broadcasting it on the local news or radio stations. Ask how you can expect to receive this critical information.

## RESOURCES

Adult Learning Resource Center. (2012). Enrolling in school. In *A Guide to Your Children's Schools: A Parent Handbook*, pp. 4-6. Des Moines, IL: Illinois State Board of Education.

Retrieved from <https://www.isbe.net/Documents/PGuide-english.pdf>

This is a guide developed by the state of Illinois to help parents learn how to enroll their child in school. There are some items that are specific to the state, like specific documents needed for proof of residence, but some of the information is more general.

iColorín Colorado! (no date). School Registration: ELLs and Immigrant Students. Retrieved from <http://www.colorincolorado.org/school-support/school-registration-ells-and-immigrant-students>.

This web page is a compilation of resources, including video and fact sheets, to help parents of English learner and/or immigrant students register or enroll their children in school.

Education Law Center. (2012). *How to Enroll a Child in Public School*. Philadelphia, PA: Author. Retrieved from [https://www.elc-pa.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/ELC\\_SchoolEnrollmentGuide\\_Aug2012.pdf](https://www.elc-pa.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/ELC_SchoolEnrollmentGuide_Aug2012.pdf)

This is a guide developed by a nonprofit in Pennsylvania to help parents navigate enrollment in school. Some of the information is specific to Pennsylvania, but some of the information is more general.

Refugee Center Online. (2018). "Public School in the USA." Retrieved from

<https://therefugeecenter.org/resources/public-school/>

This web page is meant to help new arrivals navigate the public school system, and includes questions and answers about enrollment.

U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, and U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights. (2014). "Fact Sheet: Information on the Rights of all Children to Enroll in School." Washington, DC: Authors. <https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/crt/legacy/2014/05/08/plylerfact.pdf>

This fact sheet outlines the rights of all children residing in the United States to enroll in school, regardless of citizenship or immigration status.

This document contains examples and resource materials that are provided for the user's convenience. The inclusion of any material is not intended to reflect its importance, nor is it intended to endorse any views expressed, or products or services offered. These materials may contain the views and recommendations of various subject matter experts as well as hypertext links, contact addresses and websites to information created and maintained by other public and private organizations. The opinions expressed in any of these materials do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of the U.S. Department of Education. The U.S. Department of Education does not control or guarantee the accuracy, relevance, timeliness, or completeness of any outside information included in these materials. Mentions of specific programs or products in these examples are designed to provide clearer understanding and are not meant as endorsements.

## Attending Schools in the United States

*“Attending Schools in the United States” is the second topic in the English Learner Family Tool Kit. This tool kit is meant to support families of English learners (ELs) in the U.S. education system. Each topic has five parts: (1) Overview, (2) Family and Student Rights (3) Questions to Ask School Staff, (4) Tips, and (5) Resources.*

### Overview

Public schools in the United States may be different from schools in other countries. For example, U.S. public schools generally have three levels: elementary, middle or junior high, and high school. Some states may offer public education until age 18. States may also have preschool or pre-kindergarten programs at the public school. Early learning programs may be free or may require a fee; and may be either partial-day or full-day programs.

Students may have more than one teacher and may have classes in different rooms. Schools may ask students to wear uniforms and eat lunch at school. Each school has rules that provide a safe environment for students and teachers. The rules may be different for each school. For example, in some schools, students must raise their hand to ask questions and line up in a row when leaving the classroom. Girls and boys are often in the same classroom. Students may work together in small groups at times. In middle, junior high, or high school, students may be allowed to use cell phones.

Teachers, principals, guidance counselors, and other people in the school will help you and your child learn more about school. Your child’s teacher may ask you to attend a meeting to learn about how your child is doing in school. In addition, several times a year, you may receive a report card about how well your child is learning English, mathematics, science, social studies, and other subjects.

### Family and Student Rights

***As a family member with school-aged children you have certain rights. This is very important. A parents’ national origin, citizenship, or immigration status does not change this right. For example:***

- Under Federal law, all children, regardless of their citizenship or residency status, are entitled to equal access to a free public education.<sup>1</sup>
- Schools and school districts can ask for immunization records and proof of age from a clinic or doctor, as well as proof of residency (for example, a utility bill that reflects your current address). Check the school and district websites to learn about the documents required to enroll your child in school. All students must provide this information.
- Schools cannot ask for documentation that would prohibit or unlawfully discourage a student from enrolling in or attending school.
- Schools may not share information that may reveal a student’s personal information, unless permitted by law or if you give them written permission.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Students with F-1 or M-1 non-immigrant visas attending private schools are responsible for paying tuition, while F-1 visa holders attending a public secondary school are responsible for paying the full, unsubsidized per capita cost of attending school (see <https://studyinthestates.dhs.gov/kindergarten-to-grade-12-schools>).

<sup>2</sup> Information about the *Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)* can be found at [https://studentprivacy.ed.gov/sites/default/files/resource\\_document/file/for-parents.pdf](https://studentprivacy.ed.gov/sites/default/files/resource_document/file/for-parents.pdf).

- Parents or guardians may choose for their child to receive services to learn English if their child is identified as needing these services. School districts and schools are required by federal law to provide these services.
- Schools must ensure meaningful communication with limited English proficient parents in a language they can understand. They must notify limited English proficient parents of information about any program, service, or activity of a school district that is called to the attention of parents who are proficient in English.
- Schools should provide a safe and helpful environment, free from bullying.

## **Suggested Questions to Ask School Staff**

The following are sample, optional questions you may ask school staff to help regarding attending school:

1. How do I find out what school my child will attend?
2. Who do I ask to provide me with an interpreter when I go to the school?
3. How old does my child have to be to start preschool or kindergarten in my state?
4. What is the maximum age under which I can still enroll my child in high school in my state?
5. Does the school require a uniform? What if I cannot afford to buy the uniform?
6. Who is my child's guidance counselor, and what is this person's contact information?
7. What does my child eat for lunch? When does my child eat lunch? Where does my child eat lunch? What are the rules for lunch? Do I pay for the lunch?
8. Can you explain the attendance policy? How should I tell the school my child will be absent?
9. What will happen if my child must miss school?
10. My child was in \_\_\_\_ grade in their previous school. Will my child be in that same grade at this school?
11. What is expected of my child and me when it comes to homework?
12. If there is homework in my child's grade, what help can we receive if my child can't complete the homework?
13. Is there someone in the school who works with families?
14. Does this school have a family-teacher organization? If so, how do I join?

## **Tips for Families**

- Some schools may want families to help out in the school, playground, or cafeteria. Families may also volunteer to support sports teams or join a parent-teacher association (PTA). Helping out at your child's school will give you a chance to learn more about schools in the United States. Do not be shy about asking how you can help or volunteer in your child's school.
- Before you visit the school, check the school's website. You may find answers to your questions there.
- Most schools charge for meals, supplies, or uniforms. Ask the school about financial assistance if you cannot afford to pay for these things.
- Schools often send families important information by text messages or email. If you have limited proficiency in English, ask how the school will notify you of the same information that is given to parents who are proficient in English. Be sure that the school has the information that it needs in order to contact you.
- Make sure you understand all of the information you receive. Do not agree to or sign anything until you understand fully what is being asked of you.

- In addition to a report card for your child, each year, all families must receive another type of report card: a school report card. The school report card provides important information about your child’s school. This is a good way to learn how well the school is performing, and enables you to compare your child’s school with other schools in the district. School report cards must be posted on the district’s website.

<b>Information That May Be on a School Report Card</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student demographic data</li> <li>• School safety and climate information</li> <li>• Academic performance in mathematics, reading, language arts, and science</li> <li>• Number of English learners achieving English language proficiency</li> <li>• School graduation rates</li> <li>• Teacher and staff information</li> <li>• Postsecondary preparation information</li> <li>• Financial data</li> </ul>

## Resources

Adult Learning Resource Center. (2012). Enrolling in school. In *A Guide to Your Children’s Schools: A Parent Handbook*, pp. 4-6. Des Moines, IL: Illinois State Board of Education.

Retrieved from <https://www.isbe.net/Documents/PGuide-english.pdf>

This is a guide developed by the state of Illinois to help parents learn how to enroll their child in school. There are some items that are specific to the state, like specific documents needed for proof of residence, but some of the information is more general.

Bridging Refugee Youth and Children’s Services (BRYCS). (2018). Children's Books about the Refugee/Immigrant Experience. Retrieved from <http://dev.brycs.org/clearinghouse/Highlighted-Resources-Children-Books-about-the-Refugee-Immigrant-Experience.cfm>

This website provides titles of books, some in different languages, about coming to the United States and attending school. These books are suitable for students in preschool, as well as elementary, middle, and high school.

International Rescue Committee (2007). *Educational Handbook for Refugee Parents*. Retrieved from <https://brycs.org/clearinghouse/2554/>

This handbook helps families understand schools in the United States. The handbook is available in Burmese, English, French, Somali, and Spanish.

Refugee Center Online. (2018). “Public School in the USA.” Retrieved from <https://therefugeecenter.org/resources/public-school/>

This web page is meant to help new arrivals navigate the public school system, and includes questions and answers about enrollment.

This document contains examples and resource materials that are provided for the user's convenience. The inclusion of any material is not intended to reflect its importance, nor is it intended to endorse any views expressed, or products or services offered. These materials may contain the views and recommendations of various subject matter experts as well as hypertext links, contact addresses and websites to information created and maintained by other public and private organizations. The opinions expressed in any of these materials do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of the U.S. Department of Education. The U.S. Department of Education does not control or guarantee the accuracy, relevance, timeliness, or completeness of any outside information included in these materials. Mentions of specific programs or products in these examples are designed to provide clearer understanding and are not meant as endorsements.