K12 ACADEMICS — SCHOOL TRANSITIONS SERIES

Coming to a U.S. School from Abroad

A guide for newcomer families — how the U.S. school system works, how to enroll, English-language support, and how to help your child adjust, learn, and thrive in a new country.

K12 ACADEMICS

Find Your Community

2026 EDITION

ABOUT K12 ACADEMICS

The world's largest education resource.

Online since 2004, K12 Academics has helped millions of families, students and educators **find the right school, college, camp, business and program in their community** — for every kind of learner.

WELCOME — HERE'S HOW IT WORKS

Starting school in a new country is a big transition. The U.S. system works differently from many others, and newcomer families have real **rights and supports** — including free public school for every child and English-language help. This guide explains how it works and how to help your child adjust, in **ten steps**.

General guidance. Enrollment, records evaluation, and services vary by district and state. This guide describes typical patterns; confirm specifics with your local school district. It is educational and not legal advice.

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STEP 01 OF 10

Understand the U.S. School System

WHAT TO KNOW

U.S. schooling runs **K–12** (kindergarten at age ~5 through 12th grade at ~18), is **free at public schools**, and is followed by optional college. It's typically divided into **elementary, middle, and high school**, and organized by local districts.

BY THE NUMBERS

K–12	3 levels	Local districts
free public school	elementary, middle, high	run the schools

HOW TO HELP

Learn the **basic structure** — grade levels, school types, and how your local district works — so the system feels less unfamiliar from day one.

GOOD TO KNOW

U.S. public school is **free and open to all children** — a different model from many countries, and a real support for newcomer families.

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STEP 02 OF 10

Know Your Enrollment Rights

WHAT TO KNOW

In the U.S., **every child has the right to enroll in free public school** — regardless of immigration status (established by the Supreme Court). Schools cannot deny enrollment on that basis, and generally cannot require certain documents to enroll.

BY THE NUMBERS

Every child	Regardless of status	Can't be denied
has the right	protected by law	on that basis

HOW TO HELP

Enroll your child confidently at your **local public school** — it is their right — and ask the district about the enrollment process and any support for new arrivals.

GOOD TO KNOW

Public schools **cannot deny enrollment** based on immigration status — this is a settled legal right for every child in the U.S.

3

STEP 03 OF 10

Handle Records & Grade Placement

WHAT TO KNOW

Bring any **school records and transcripts** from your home country (translated if possible). Schools evaluate them to determine **grade placement and, in high school, credits**. Placement often reflects age plus academic level.

BY THE NUMBERS

Foreign records	Grade placement	HS credits
bring & translate	age + academics	evaluated for graduation

HOW TO HELP

Provide your child's **foreign school records** (with translations if you can), and work with the school on **grade placement** and, for teens, how credits count toward graduation.

WATCH OUT

In high school, ask early how **foreign credits** are evaluated — it affects graduation timing and the path to college.

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STEP 04 OF 10

Access English-Language Support

WHAT TO KNOW

Children still learning English are **English Learners (ELs)**, entitled to **language-support services** by law — the school assesses English proficiency and provides help (like ESL or bilingual support) to access learning.

BY THE NUMBERS

EL services	Assessment	Support
a legal right	of English level	ESL / bilingual help

HOW TO HELP

Make sure your child is **assessed for English-learner services** and receiving the language support they're entitled to — it's key to accessing every subject.

GOOD TO KNOW

English-language support is a **right, not a favor** — ask about EL services and how your child's progress will be tracked.

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STEP 05 OF 10

Bridge Academic & Curriculum Differences

WHAT TO KNOW

U.S. curriculum, teaching style, and expectations may differ from your home country — more **class participation, projects, and independent work**, and different content sequencing. Your child may be ahead in some areas, behind in others.

BY THE NUMBERS

Different style	Different content	Uneven
participation & projects	sequencing varies	ahead & behind

HOW TO HELP

Talk with teachers about **differences in content and expectations**, and support your child through them — a strong student from abroad simply needs to adapt, not start over.

GOOD TO KNOW

U.S. classrooms often expect more **speaking up and independent work** — which can be new; reassure your child it's a skill they—ll build.

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STEP 06 OF 10

Navigate Cultural Adjustment

WHAT TO KNOW

School culture differs: **norms, communication styles, the student-teacher relationship, and how parents interact with schools**. Understanding these — and that adjustment takes time — smooths the path for the whole family.

BY THE NUMBERS

New norms	Parent role	Takes time
school culture differs	involvement expected	for the family

HOW TO HELP

Learn how U.S. schools **communicate and expect parents to engage** (conferences, emails, involvement), and give your family grace as you adjust to new norms.

GOOD TO KNOW

Adjusting to a new school *culture* takes time for parents too — ask the school how it prefers to communicate and involve families.

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STEP 07 OF 10

Support Your Child Emotionally

WHAT TO KNOW

Newcomer children often face **culture shock, homesickness, language stress, and finding where they belong**, on top of a new school. Patience, connection, and honoring their home culture help enormously.

BY THE NUMBERS

Culture shock	Belonging	Home culture
+ homesickness	finding their place	honor it

HOW TO HELP

Be a steady, patient support: **acknowledge the hard feelings, keep your home language and culture strong, and help your child build connections** at school and in the community.

GOOD TO KNOW

Keeping your **home language and culture** strong isn't a barrier — it supports identity, wellbeing, *and* learning English.

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STEP 08 OF 10

Navigate as a Family

WHAT TO KNOW

Parents may face their own **language barriers and unfamiliar expectations**. Schools must provide **interpretation and translated information** for families — and connecting with other newcomer families and community groups is a huge help.

BY THE NUMBERS

Interpretation	Translated info	Community
schools must provide	your right	other families help

HOW TO HELP

Ask the school for **interpreters and translated materials** (they're required to communicate with you in a language you understand), and seek out newcomer and community groups.

WATCH OUT

You have the right to **communicate with the school in your language** — request interpretation for meetings and translated documents.

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STEP 09 OF 10

Handle Special Situations

WHAT TO KNOW

Some situations need extra planning: **older newcomers with limited English, students who missed schooling, teens navigating credits and the college path, and students with disabilities** (who have the same rights as any child).

BY THE NUMBERS

Older newcomers	HS & college	Disabilities
+ interrupted schooling	credits & the path	same rights apply

HOW TO HELP

For teens, plan the **credit and graduation path** early; for interrupted schooling or disabilities, ask about **newcomer programs and evaluations** — extra support exists.

GOOD TO KNOW

Newcomer students with disabilities have the **same special-education rights** as any child — ask for an evaluation if you have concerns.

10 STEP 10 OF 10

Help Them Thrive

WHAT TO KNOW

With time, support, and connection, newcomer children **thrive** — and their bilingual, bicultural experience becomes a genuine strength. Stay connected, build community, and celebrate how far your child comes.

BY THE NUMBERS

They thrive	Bilingual = strength	Community
with time & support	a real asset	build it

HOW TO HELP

Stay involved, connect with community and school supports, and **celebrate your child's growing bilingual, bicultural strengths** — they are a lasting advantage.

GOOD TO KNOW

Bilingual, bicultural young people bring **real strengths** — your child's journey is an asset, not just a challenge.

QUICK REFERENCE

U.S. Schools: A Newcomer's Overview

Key things newcomer families should know — confirm specifics with your local district, since some details vary.

Structure

Free public school, K–12 (ages ~5–18), in elementary, middle, and high school, run by local districts; college is optional after.

Enrollment rights

Every child has the right to enroll in free public school regardless of immigration status — schools cannot deny it on that basis.

Records & placement

Bring translated foreign transcripts; schools evaluate them for grade placement and (in high school) credits toward graduation.

Language support

Children still learning English are entitled to English-learner (EL) services by law — assessment plus ESL or bilingual support.

Family rights & support

Schools must provide interpretation and translated information; disabilities carry the same rights; newcomer programs and community groups help.

EVERY CHILD CAN THRIVE HERE

Find Your Community.

Explore our country guides, English-Learner resources, and School Transitions guides — among **1,297 free resources** to help every family thrive.

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