



GUIDE
TO THE EDUCATION SYSTEM
IN THE UNITED STATES

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PRIMARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION

Primary School

The first years of compulsory schooling are called elementary or primary school (just to confuse the issue, elementary schools are also called grade or grammar schools). Secondary education is for children aged 12 to 18. Secondary school generally takes place in a high school, which is often divided into junior and senior high. Junior high (also called Middle School) is for those aged 11 to 14 and senior high is for students aged 15 to 18.

Primary education starts at the age of five, in Kindergarten. To qualify for kindergarten a child must be five years old on or before a 'cut-off' date (in the State of Minnesota the cutoff date is 1st September) to attend that year. For example, if your child turns 5 years old on July 31, 2007, then he will start school in September, 2007. If your child turns 5 years old on December 12, 2007, then she will begin school in September, 2008. Usually a child must be enrolled in kindergarten or first grade in the calendar year in which he turns six. Elementary school, which is almost always co-educational (mixed boys and girls), is usually attended from the age of 5 or 6 until 11 (grades K to 6), when students go on to a middle or junior high school. In some school districts, students attend elementary school until 14 (up to grade 8) before attending a senior high school.

The elementary school curriculum varies with the organization and educational aims of individual schools and local communities. Promotion from one grade to the next is based on a student's achievement of specified skills, although a child is required to repeat a year in exceptional circumstances only. (Some school districts are returning to testing as a means of determining when a child is ready to move to the next grade, in an effort to reduce reliance on 'social promotion,' and this is becoming yet another contentious issue.)

Elementary schools provide instruction in the fundamental skills of reading, writing and mathematics, as well as history and geography (taught together as social studies), crafts, music, science, art and physical education (phys education) or gym. Foreign languages, which used to be taught at high schools only, are now being introduced during the last few years of elementary school in some areas (although in some cities, state schools don't offer any foreign language teaching). Elementary students are usually given homework; however, the workload is lighter than in many countries. The workload increases with higher grades.

Many elementary schools offer Gifted Education Programs. Those are programs that address the needs of students for whom the regular curriculum in one or more subjects is not challenging enough. To learn more, you can visit the **Gifted Education Programs** section.

Secondary School

In some districts, students attend a combined junior/senior high school or attend a middle school until 14 (grade 8) before transferring to a four-year senior high school. Like primary education, secondary education is co-educational (boys and girls are together in the same classroom). American high schools are often much larger than secondary schools in other countries, and regional high schools with over 2,000 students are common in some rural areas and city suburbs.

Secondary school students must take certain 'core' curriculum courses for a prescribed number of years or terms, as determined by each state. These generally include English, mathematics, general science, health, physical education and social studies or social sciences (which may include American history and government, geography, world history and social problems). Students are streamed (tracked) in some high schools for academic subjects, where the brightest students are put on a 'fast track'. This means students are given the opportunity to take enriched classes in one or more academic subject. The brightest students can also take college level classes during the last two years of high schools. To learn more about academic opportunities offered in secondary school, you can visit the **Gifted Education Programs** section of this guide.

In addition to mandatory subjects, students choose 'electives' (optional subjects), which supplement their future education and career plans. Electives usually comprise around half of a student's work in grades 9 to 12. Students concentrate on four subjects each quarter and are seldom 'pushed' beyond their capability or capacity for learning.

High School Educational Standards in the US

High schools offer a wide range of subjects from which students can choose a program leading to college/university entrance or a career in business or industry. The courses offered vary from school to school and are listed in school curriculum guides. Around the ninth grade, students receive counseling as they begin to plan their careers and select subjects that are useful in their chosen fields. Counseling continues throughout the senior high school years and into college, particularly in junior college or the first two years of a four-year college program.

Larger schools may offer a selection of elective courses. Students planning to go on to college or university elect courses with an emphasis on academic sciences (biology, chemistry, physics), higher mathematics (algebra, geometry, trigonometry and calculus), advanced English literature, composition, social sciences and foreign languages.

Upon satisfactory completion of 12th grade, a student graduates and receives a high school diploma. (In the US, students graduate from high school, junior high school, elementary school and even pre-school.) At high schools (as at colleges and universities) there are

ceremonies to celebrate graduation complete with caps, gowns, diplomas, and speeches by staff and students.

Graduation ceremonies are often called 'commencement' (=beginning), because they mark the start of a new stage in a student's life. Americans are enthusiastic about 'life cycle events' (milestones) and graduations are a time of great celebration and feting of students. It's a particular honor for a student (usually the top student) to be chosen as the 'valedictorian', who gives the valedictorian oration or farewell speech at the graduation ceremony.

Importance of Hobbies and Sports in High School

With the exception of physical education (phys education) classes, school sport is usually extra-curricular, i.e. takes place outside school hours. Team sports have a high profile at many high schools. High school sport is central to school activities and the ceremony that goes with college sport is also found at high school level.

In addition to sports, many other school-sponsored activities take place outside school hours, including math, science and nature clubs, musical organizations (e.g. band and choir), art and drama groups, and language clubs. Nearly every school has a student-run newspaper and a photographic darkroom is also usually available.

Colleges and universities place considerable value in the achievements of students in high school extra-curricular activities, as do employers. High schools are also important social centers, and participation in school-organized social events such as homecoming parades (welcoming back of former residents and alumni,) and school dances is a tradition in many schools.

For additional Information about Sports in American schools, you care read this [article](#)

Generally, each school district hosts a website where you can find a wealth of information about the district's educational philosophy and strategy, as well as available resources, programs, curriculums, schools' academic reports, etc.

Additional Resources for Parents

The [University of Minnesota Extension](#)'s website provides practical information and educational opportunities for families and family professionals. Whether parenting young or not-so-young children, recovering from a divorce or separation, or coping with the day-to-day struggles family life can bring, their programs and resources are there to help.