



The Educational System in the USA

In the United States, the majority of students attend public school, which is run by the state governments and paid for with tax money. About ten percent of students attend private schools, typically religious schools that are expensive. A very small number (3%) of students are homeschooled, and are taught at home by their parents. In these cases, students must pass assessment tests given by the state to ensure they are receiving an education comparable to that of public schools.

Children start school at age 3 or 4, and the first year is called “preschool.” At age five students begin Kindergarten, the first year of compulsory education. After that comes twelve more years of compulsory education, grades 1-12. Primary school is the first six years. At age twelve students move to Middle School for two years, which sometimes is in the same building as Primary school and in other cases it is part of the High School. At age fourteen students begin High School, which is four years of school, each with a special name: ***Freshman, Sophomore, Junior, and Senior***. When you complete these four years of high school successfully, you graduate and receive a high school diploma.

The school year starts in mid-August and ends in mid-May, with 180 days of school each year required in all states. The weather in some states (like Nebraska) sometimes affects these dates. In August when temperatures are high, schools sometimes have a “*heat schedule*,” in which the days end early to avoid the hottest hours. Once in awhile in the winter it snows so much that cars are unable to drive, and the schools get a “*snow day*,” where school is called off and kids can spend the day building snowmen and sledding. If schools use more than their given snow days in a winter, the days must be made up at the end of the semester, in which case school may sometimes be extended into late May.

Another big difference between Spanish and American schools is the classroom environment. American schools in general are more formal and strict. In the U.S., students always address their teachers as “Mrs. Smith,” using “mister, missus or miss” and the teacher’s last name. Any physical contact between teachers and students apart from a handshake is prohibited.

The grading system (or marks system) is also quite different. Students are graded on a scale of 0-100, and anything less than a 60% is considered failing. Grades are given as percentages and letter grades, in the following way:

90-100% - A

80-89% - B

70-79% - C

60-69% - D

59% and below — F (fail)

Throughout high school these grades are also averaged into a number called your GPA, or Grade Point Average, which is important when applying to colleges. The GPA is given on a 4-point scale, and includes decimals (for example, if you’re a B-average student, your GPA would be around 3.00, or if you get mostly B’s and a few A’s it would be around 3.33).

Another big difference in American high school is that the students, instead of the teachers, change classrooms each hour. Each student has the same schedule every day, and each class during the day is with a different group of students in the same age group. Students are required to take four years of English and math, three years of science and social studies, and one year of physical education (P.E.). Foreign language obligations depend on the laws of the state you live in. Most high schools require 1-3 years of a foreign language in order to graduate, and if you want to go to college after high school, most universities require two or three years of high school language classes.