

## **PART II – GENERAL INFORMATION ABOUT SCHOOLS**

The following information pertains to all students from Kindergarten to 12th grade. Due to space limitation we have included the websites under most of the sections where further information is provided. This part contains the following sections:

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## **PART II - SECTION A APPLICATION & ENROLLMENT PROCESS**

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### **REGISTERING A CHILD FOR SCHOOL**

Once you have chosen a school, whether public or private/parochial, you will need to **register** your child(ren) at the school.

#### **1) Enrollment period**

Enrollment dates vary by school but typically the main enrollment months, for most schools, is between January – March of each year. Many magnet, charter and private schools have an early enrollment period that is typically between November-December and the deadline for many magnet schools is Dec 15. These schools may have tests that your child may need to undergo, so contact them early enough and check when early enrollment begins.

Many schools have “rolling” or “year round” enrollment, wherein they fill up vacant seats and it is advisable to contact schools, even if you think you may have missed a deadline.

#### **2) Registration and admission procedures**

**You will begin the process by making an appointment with a guidance counselor at the school and visiting the school.**

First look at the school's website for information on registration dates and paperwork required. You will generally be required to fill in an application form and submit the same along with the required documentation and certificates.

In addition to these, most **private/parochial schools** have entrance requirements that can include:

- an examination.
- an interview with the prospective student.

#### **3) Documentation / Certificates required**

For the most part, public schools require the following documents:

**a) Immunizations:** In order to register a child in the school of choice, the parent will need to provide a proof of immunization from a doctor regarding the following required immunizations (shots, vaccines). If your child is missing any, talk to your physician or the school nurse. You might want to check about spacing out when the vaccinations are given, rather than have your child receive a large number at one time.

<b><u>From 3 to 5 years old</u></b>	<b><u>Kindergarten to</u></b>	<b><u>Grades 3 to</u></b>	<b><u>Grades 6 to 12</u></b>
3 Hep B ( <i>Hepatitis B</i> )	<b><u>2nd</u></b>	<b><u>5</u></b>	3 Hep B
4 DTaP ( <i>Diphtheria, Tetanus &amp; Pertussis</i> )	3 Hep B	3 Hep B	5 DTaP
3 Polio ( <i>Inactivated Polio</i> )	5 DTaP	5 DTaP	4 Polio
1MMR ( <i>Measles, Mumps &amp; Rubella</i> )	4 Polio	4 Polio	2 MMR
1 Varicella	2 MMR	2 MMR	2 Varicella
	2 Varicella	2 Varicella	1 Tdap ( <i>Tetanus &amp; Pertussis</i> )
			1 MCV ( <i>Meningococcal</i> )

Immunization information is available through the school nurse or the district office. For more info visit <http://www.doe.in.gov/sites/default/files/health/2012-2013-school-requirements-reference-chart-and-faqs.pdf>

- b) **School Records** from your home country or previous school in the US, and translations as necessary. Make sure you include any testing results that your child may have on record that would prove proficiency in certain subjects. More on testing later in the booklet.
- c) **Birth Certificate or Passport** to show date of birth. Currently visa status does not affect child's right to attend public schools.
- d) **Proof of Residence** - to prove that you reside in that school district. This can be a utility bill or the copy of document showing you rent or own your home in that district.
- e) **Medical Certificates** – Evidence of a medical exam conducted no less than 12 months prior to the children's school entry date. Ask your physician at home for such a certificate before moving.
- f) **Sports Participation Medical Requirement:** Before a student can participate in sport at school the school will require a sports physical signed by the child's doctor. The appropriate form can be obtained from the school or website. It will need to be signed by a doctor and should be completed by the deadline specified by the school, not earlier.

Further, when you make the formal application, in some private schools, you may be asked for:

- an application fee which is not refundable.
- medical records - some schools ask you to complete a health form.
- letters of recommendation from teachers or people who know your child and any testing results.

**Note: For admission to all schools it is important to have all non-English records officially translated. You MAY need to have this done and attested by a public notary in your home country/consulate.**

#### 4) Academic placement

**Remember you are your child's advocate... make sure that he/she is placed right in the right grade and ability level at school!**

A major issue for international families is finding the appropriate academic course work/grade for their children. High schools have academic advisors or counselors to help you. Parents and children meet the counselor who looks at your academic records, talks to the student, and decides which courses are best for your child to enroll in. The system here is usually flexible and, if necessary children can be moved from one course to another. You can call your child's counselor or teacher for an appointment and get help.

If your child has special needs or is gifted in intellectual areas, sports, music, or art, always inquire about special programs at the district and school level. When students are placed in an advanced class (often called 'Honors' or 'Advanced' class) in middle or high school always ensure the student is placed in advanced classes in the following year. Teachers have been known to make mistakes in this regard.

International families need to be vigilant about the academic placement of their child. Sometimes wrong assumptions are made about a student's ability or their stage of learning in a particular subject and students can be placed incorrectly (usually in a lower class/grade than appropriate). Teachers are often unaware of the language challenges facing students from other countries (including English speaking countries), cultural differences, or limited grasp of US culture and practices. For example, a student may be mathematically talented but when faced with different US math processes and imperial measurement for the first time, they may appear to be weaker.

Also if international students have lower than expected test scores – such as in ISTEP or initial placement tests – always discuss this with the teacher. The student’s lower score may be due to a cultural bias in the test (such as expecting a detailed knowledge of American daily life), or lack of experience in the particular form of the test.

## **PART II - SECTION B**

### **FINANCIAL AID FOR PRIVATE SCHOOL EDUCATION**

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If a family would rather send their child(ren) to a private/parochial school outside their district, but are unable to do so for financial reasons, there are resources to help, the main categories being Vouchers, Tax Credit Scholarships and the private school's own financial assistance programs.

#### **Choice Scholarship Program:**

*(Choice Scholarship Website: <http://www.myschoolvoucher.com/> or Indiana Department of Education website -<http://www.doe.in.gov/choice>)*

The Indiana General Assembly recently passed a law creating the Indiana voucher program to provide children access to quality educational opportunities, no matter where they live. The Indiana voucher program provides vouchers, or scholarships, to eligible students to attend a private school of choice. These programs offer the opportunity for families to choose the school that best suits their children's needs. The programs are intended for families that qualify for this according to their income.

*(For details, visit <http://www.myschoolvoucher.com/parents/eligibility.htm>)*

#### **a) School Vouchers**

A voucher, or "Choice Scholarship," is a state payment that qualifying families can use to offset tuition costs at participating schools. Students qualify based on total household income and the amount of the scholarship corresponds with the public school corporation in which the student lives. This program begins in 2nd grade, unless a child received a tax credit scholarship in kindergarten. For more information visit the website.

#### **b) Tax Credit Scholarship System:**

A Tax Credit Scholarship is where State approved not-for-profit organization or a Scholarship Granting Organization (SGOs) could help pay for your child's private education. It is ideal for students entering kindergarten *OR* children who went to kindergarten at a public school and will be going to first grade at a private school. <http://www.schoolchoiceindiana.com/index.php/info-for-schools/tax-credit-scholarships>

#### **Private School Financial Assistance Programs**

Most private schools offer some degree of financial assistance – you could find out about these by contacting the schools of your choice. Inquire if the school has scholarships or financial aid available or whether they provide fee reductions for additional children from the same family.

## **PART II - SECTION C**

### **ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE IN SCHOOL**

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This section covers various topics related to Academic Performance in schools such as:

1. Grading, Report Cards & Progression to next grades
2. Testing in School
3. Homework & Projects
4. Helping to Improve Performance – Counselors & Tutoring
5. Special Needs
6. Gifted Programs

#### 1. **GRADING & REPORT CARDS**

##### **a) How is Performance assessed in schools?**

In the US, the student is assessed on a continuous basis, on his/her performance over the year and not only on end-of-semester tests. There are various types of quizzes, tests, homework assignments and projects that run continuously and the student is graded on each of these. Teachers might also provide opportunities for students to earn extra credits by completing some activity or behavior in class or for completing homework etc..

##### **b) Grades**

The word 'grade' can mean the year of attendance in the school (e.g.: 1st grade, 5th grade, 12th grade) but is also used to denote a mark received as result of a student's work. Each task is given a letter from A,B,C,D or F. Some schools also use + (plus) and - (minus) signs with the letter grades. A+ is the highest grade and D- the lowest pass grade. F denotes the student has failed to reach the lowest acceptable standard.

In the US, students' work is often graded from a negative perspective, which means that points are deducted for errors in the work. For example, three errors in a piece of creative writing could result in -3 which could translate to a B+ grade (or similar). In some other countries, work is graded from a more positive perspective in which the best aspects of the piece of are recognized and rewarded and the errors are not treated as being so significant. For example, an excellent piece of creative writing showing originality in story and construction could result in a grade of 19/20. The spelling and grammatical errors may be noted but not penalized. Neither of these approaches is necessarily better than the other. They simply reflect different practices in teaching.

An important grading terminology for High School students is the GPA or Grade Point Average, which is the average of all the student's letter grades for all 4 years of High School. GP. While schools may differ in calculating GPA (some schools choose to weight the score for more rigorous classes such as AP or IB or Honors courses), a typical correlation of GPA to letter grades would be:

GPA	Grade
4.0	A
3.0	B
2.0	C
1.0	D

Some strategies for increasing GPA will be discussed in detail in the section on High Schools ([Part III Section D](#)).

### **c) Report Cards**

Report cards are a record of your student's classes and grades. There is a mid-term report and a semester report which provides information about your child's progress and if they are achieving the standard to move into the next grade level. Most schools have websites which provide up to date information on each student to parents. In some schools parents are required to sign report cards and return them to the teacher. Most schools send parents at least one report card each semester. Student reports are also normally available on school websites. Individual records are password protected, so check with your counselor for access details.

### **d) Student progression to the next grade**

At the end of each academic year teachers decide if students are ready to move into a higher grade level. Unless the student is having problems with the work, he/she will progress to the next grade level. The education system here makes every effort to help each child progress annually rather than holding them back to repeat a grade level. Some school districts have a 'no social progression' policy which requires students to meet a minimum academic standard before progression to the next grade level.

## **2. TESTING IN SCHOOLS**

### **a) Test Formats**

#### **i. Multiple Choice Tests:**

Most tests in American schools are multiple choice, which can be difficult and strange for the students arriving from other countries, unless other forms of testing and assessment are used. Multiple choice tests are given frequently in American classrooms and students may have several multiple choice tests in one week in a range of subjects. Some possible reasons for their popularity include:

- They can be generated on a computer and graded by a computer.
- They are seen as a form of objective grading and do not require any subjective decision making
- They can be quick to set-up and grade, and they can test small or large amounts of knowledge or skills.

There are mixed views on whether multiple choice tests are an effective tool in assisting learning or in providing an effective and reliable tool for evaluating knowledge and skills. For new international families, unfamiliar with multiple choice testing, it is important to recognize the skills and strategies which need to be used for effective performance in multiple choice tests. Some additional tutoring in test taking skills can be very helpful.

#### **ii. Essay Type tests**

At the high school level, there are few tests like the Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate tests, which may have essay type questions. These require the students to answer questions, not just by reproducing what they have learnt from memory, but calls for their interpretation, analysis, comparisons and justification of their opinion. These writing skills have specific requirements and it is important for students to be taught how to answer these questions.

### **b) Tests in Indiana:**

#### **i. Initial Placement Test:**

Some schools may administer **Initial Placement Tests** to test a child's English and Math ability and place them at an appropriate level. This may also be done for a second language, if necessary.

#### **ii. School tests:**

Most school testing is done by way of quizzes and tests that are administered by individual teachers throughout the year and at the end of each semester.

### **iii. Standardized State Level Tests – ISTEP+ and ECA tests**

#### ***(Indiana Statewide Testing for Educational Progress+ and End of Course Assessments)***

In Indiana, all students in grades 3 through 10 take the Indiana Statewide Testing for Educational Progress-Plus (ISTEP+) / ECA tests, in the spring. The purpose of the Indiana Statewide Testing for Educational Progress-Plus (ISTEP+) program is to measure student achievement in the subject areas of English/Language Arts, Science, and Mathematics. In particular, ISTEP+ reports student achievement levels according to the Indiana Academic Standards that were adopted in November 2000 by the Indiana State Board of Education.

To graduate from high school all students must take End of Course Assessments (ECAs) for 3 subjects – Algebra1, Biology1 and English10. These are criterion-referenced assessments (testing against curriculum that is taught). There are no grades given for these tests and performance is measured very simply as Pass Plus, Pass or Fail. All students must earn at least a “Pass” in these subjects, without which they will not be able to graduate High School.

If you have arrived recently from another country and your child does not do as well as expected, discuss the situation with the teacher. There may have been a cultural bias in the test, or unfamiliarity with this style of test (such as a lack of experience in multiple choice questions). Sometimes newly arrived students are so overwhelmed by the new country and new school they may not perform well initially and will improve as they become more settled and more familiar with expectations.

For more information about ISTEP+ see: <http://www.doe.in.gov/assessment/istep-grades-3-8>

### **iv. Standardized National Level Tests**

In the junior year in High School (Grade 11), students normally take the SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test) or ACT (American College Test) or the Preliminary tests for each of these i.e PSATs or PLAN (which is the preliminary ACT). These tests scores are very important for College admissions and since they are primarily related to high school students, they have been discussed in detail in [Part III- Section D \(Requirements for College Admissions\)](#)

### **3) HOMEWORK AND PROJECTS**

Unlike many other countries, where grades primarily reflect test results, in the US, homework and projects also contribute to the final grade of the student and it is important that your child completes these on time.

Homework and projects in the US are often application based and often involve research and hands-on activities. This may take more time than standard homework that focuses on only memorizing or practicing concepts. Your child may need to plan his/her time and work to ensure that he/she is able to complete and submit his/her assignments as scheduled. Most schools have the homework and assignments along with the due dates, put up on the school website. They are also likely to have a Homework Hotline, which you can call to check what homework needs to be submitted each day.

### **4) PERFORMANCE IMPROVEMENT**

If your child is not performing well in school, it is important that you arrange to meet his/her teacher or school counselors, to find out how you can help your child improve his/her performance.

#### **School counselors**

- Public elementary schools vary on the provision of counselors – some have them, some do not. Where they are not available, the principal and class teachers do the work. Non-public elementary schools – particularly the bigger ones- are more likely to have one or more school counselors.



- Public middle schools and junior high schools have counselors whose primary role is to facilitate course selection and progression, and on transition from elementary school and to high school. These counselors can also assist with personal problems. Private/Parochial middle schools may also have counselors.
- High schools have counselors whose primary role is to assist students with their choice of subject and to help with the college selection and application process. These counselors can also assist with personal problems. They are also an excellent point of contact for international families trying to find answers to a wide range of questions about school practices and policies. High school counselors also appreciate knowing of any major family circumstance which could affect student performance and behavior and will liaise with the student's teachers to advise them of these matters. It is also possible to approach a counselor to request a change of teacher (although a good case needs to be made). In some high schools, especially private/parochial ones, one or more counselors are dedicated full time to working with students and their families on the college selection and application process.

### **Tutoring**

Most teachers make themselves available before or after school if your child needs additional help in particular topics. If you child needs special tutoring, check with the school /teachers / counselors on available options to get him the additional help he/she requires.

Some of the free resources that are available for students to use are:

- AskRose Homework Hotline for Grades 6-12 from the Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology Visit <http://www.askrose.org/> or call 1-877-275-7673
- Khan Academy that provides free online resources - <https://www.khanacademy.org/>

### **5) CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS –(Individualized Education Plan - IEP)**

All US Public schools are required to provide resources to evaluate and support children with special needs, whether they attend a public school or a private school. Each special needs child is provided with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) which will describe how the student learns and what teacher and service providers will do to help the student. For more information in this area visit <http://idea.ed.gov/> or <http://idea.ed.gov/explore/home>

### **6) GIFTED & TALENTED PROGRAM**

Most public schools have options for students who are identified, through some testing, as gifted or talented learners. You will need to talk to the school or the school district to check options available to help your child learn at the level of his potential. There are also other organizations that support gifted learners. More information can be found at the following websites:

- The National Association for Gifted Children <http://www.nagc.org/>
- The Association for the Gifted /TAG <http://www.cectag.org/>

Further, IUPUI offers a SPAN program for academically qualified high school students. Students take courses at college level which are not offered in their high school. [www.iupui.edu/home/span](http://www.iupui.edu/home/span)

There are also various online high school courses that students can complete online. The most recognized ones are university affiliated ones. An excellent example is Stanford University Education Program for Gifted Youth (EPGY). Visit: <http://epgy.stanford.edu/>.

### **Summer camps for gifted children**

Each summer some colleges offer courses or live-in camps for gifted students. Courses are available at IUPUI, Butler University, Ball State University (north of Indianapolis) and Northwestern University (Chicago) and many

others. Many premier colleges across the country also offer such courses. Ask your class teacher, counselor or check college web sites. Courses are offered from elementary through to high school and college credit.

## **PART II -SECTION D EXTRA-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES**

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These are activities and subjects that are not part of the usual school course work and usually involve a considerable amount of time for the students and their families. There are usually some costs involved, which are different for each type of activity. Extra-curricular activities include:

### **Sports Participation**

While most schools will have some form of competitive sports where children try-out and are selected for/cut from the teams, some schools may have options for all interested children to participate i.e. “non-cut” sports. Some schools may have policies regarding international students participating in sports. Check with the sports director of the school you are applying to, in case this is a major issue in your decision.

If your student joins a team, there will be a cost associated with the student's participation, usually to cover food, uniforms and incidental expenses. Also your child will be required to undergo a specific Sports Physical Exam and submit a form to the school. Also, schools usually require a student to maintain a certain GPA in order to remain on the sports team. If a student's academic performance is unacceptable, he/she may be withdrawn from the team temporarily or permanently.

Sports are offered at the Middle School and High School levels. Sports are divided into Fall and Spring Sports. For high school sports, each school is a member of a particular Conference Division according to the Indiana High School Athletic Association (IHSAA) and will play the members of its group in the regular season. The highest ranked teams in each conference, then play against each other in the “play-offs”.

### **Music:**

Marching Bands are very popular in Indiana. Bands play at sporting events, march in parades and enter competitions. Many schools have orchestras, choirs, jazz bands and other types of musical activities.

### **Theatre, Speech, Debate**

Many schools offer children an opportunity to participate in activities and competition related to Theatre and Drama, Speech, Debate, Model United Nations Assembly etc.

### **Academic competitions:**

Students can participate in a wide variety of academic competitions (history, geography, spelling, mathematics, science, essay-writing and art).

### **Scouts**

A very popular extra-curricular activity in the US, especially at Elementary School level, is Boy Scouts or Girl Scouts. The Boy Scouts of America is one of the largest youth development organizations in the US, with the stated aim of providing a program for young people that builds character, trains them in the responsibilities of participating citizenship, and develops personal fitness. The Girl Scouts is an organization, along the same lines, with the stated mission of building girls of courage, confidence, and character, who make the world a better place. For further information, visit <http://www.scouting.org/> and <http://www.girlscouts.org/>

### **Field trips**

These are visits to museums or places of interest where students learn more about the subjects they are studying. There is usually a fee for each child who goes on a field trip. One parent must sign a form giving permission for the child to go on the field trip. Most of these outings have nothing to do with “fields” or sports. In elementary schools in particular, parents may be invited to attend the field trips to help with the supervision of the students. Most schools require a police background check on parents attending field trips.

### **Social service and community work**

There is a strong culture of community service and volunteerism in the US. Many schools, especially parochial schools, are likely to require that students complete a minimum number of service hours to be able to graduate. Most schools have various opportunities for children to volunteer to serve various community needs. While these may not be compulsory in some schools, being involved in some sort of service project is likely to help your child when applying to colleges, and it also serves as a good forum to develop many leadership and social skills.

### **Summer camps**

Every summer, schools provide a variety of organized enrichment classes for an extended period of time, known as summer camps. The summer camps will range in topics from academics, to arts, to music and mostly sports. Some academic camps will be offered to improve a grade (remediation); some are classes otherwise offered in the semester which are offered also in the summer; and some are just simply of extra interest. Most camps are open to students from other areas and not necessarily for students from the school or school district. Sports camps are geared for sport teams and also for aspiring athletes. Check the school website for summer class offerings. As mentioned in the previous section, many colleges also offer summer camps for gifted children. (Refer previous section – [Part II Section C](#))

## **PART II –SECTION E TYPICAL PROCEDURES & POLICIES IN SCHOOLS**

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This section attempts to answer questions you might have on common practices and policies in schools. It is meant to provide an overview of what is generally followed but you will need to check with your school for the specific policies in these areas. It includes information on the following topics:

1. School Calendar – School Year / Holidays / School Hours / Recess Breaks / Snow Days & Delays / Attendance
2. Facilities including Lunch, Transport, Before & After Care
3. School Policies – Religion, Uniforms, Medication, Safety & Discipline, Fire Drills
4. Common Practices in Schools – Pledge of Allegiance, School Celebrations, Gifts to Teachers, Fundraising, Birthday Celebrations.

### **1) SCHOOL CALENDAR / HOLIDAYS / ATTENDANCE**

#### **a) The school year**

Under Indiana law public schools must offer 180 days of school per year. In Indiana, the school year normally begins in middle to late August and ends in late May to early June and is divided into two semesters, fall and spring, with an optional Summer School during the long vacation. In December there is a winter vacation (two or three weeks) for the ‘holiday season’. In the fall semester there are typically two short breaks - one towards the end of October and another at the end of November for the Thanksgiving holiday. ‘Spring break’ is a one or two week period during the spring semester and is a traditional vacation time when many families travel to warmer climates for a change after the long winter. Dates for these different breaks are decided by each school district.

A typical school calendar will look something like this:

School begins (Fall Semester)	Middle – Late August -
Fall break	End – October (approximately 1 week)
Thanksgiving break	Fourth Thursday in November (usually the holiday starts on Wed through the weekend)
Winter Vacation	Around Dec 25- early Jan. Most schools close for 1 or 2 weeks until after New Year's Day.
School Re-opens (Spring Semester)	2 <sup>nd</sup> week of Jan
Spring break	March-April (1-2 weeks)
School closes	End May – early June
Summer Vacation	June – mid / late August

#### **Year round schooling (Balanced calendar)**

The tradition of the long summer vacation began in the early years of public education when children were required to help with farming chores during the growing season. Some Indiana schools have adopted a ‘year round school year’ which means they do not have a long summer vacation. Instead the vacation period is spread through out the year enabling teachers and students to have longer breaks during spring, holiday season, and fall.

### **b) Holidays**

In addition to the above breaks, most schools will follow this schedule of holidays/ days off:

**Labor Day:** Usually first Monday in September.

**Martin Luther King Day:** 3rd Monday in January

**President's Day:** Usually 3rd Monday in February

**Memorial Day:** Usually last Monday in May

### **c) School hours**

Students attend school from Monday to Friday. Public school hours are different for elementary, middle and high schools - the day starts between 7:30 a.m. and 9:00 a.m. and ends between 2:00 p.m. and 4:00 p.m. The start times may differ from school to school. These staggered start times are necessary as school districts use the same fleet of buses for transport to all the schools in the district.

### **d) Recess**

In many US schools, opportunity for students to have a 'recess' or break from lessons is limited compared with many other countries. In a public elementary school, there may be a recess period immediately following lunch in the cafeteria. During 'recess', students will be taken outdoors for supervised play. It is common practice in public middle and high schools for students to have only one break from class during the day – for lunch in the cafeteria during which students are supervised and are expected to remain seated.

This all-day confinement within the school building appears to be driven by several factors:

- Climate – the school months are the coldest, and going outdoors is difficult.
- Security – keeping students indoors makes it easier to supervise them and ensure their safety.
- Lack of time – public schools require only **180 school** days per year (shorter than in many other countries) so restricting students' free time during each school day is important.

### **e) Snow Days & School Delays**

Schools will be closed whenever the winter weather causes dangerous driving conditions. School closings are announced on the radio and television and through internet. Some school districts and private schools also have a telephone/text/e-mail notification system which will notify all families early in the morning regarding a school closure (all day) or delayed start (usually two hours). Make up days (the number of days your school was closed) are added towards the end of the spring semester.

Some days the school day may be delayed by one or two hours if the road conditions have not improved by the time students are to be picked up at the bus stops, but they are likely to improve in an hour or two. School districts and private schools will shorten class times for these delayed days to provide all classes on those days. These delays will also be announced by radio and television or via phone or internet by the affected schools.

### **f) Student attendance**

**Compulsory Attendance:** Once a student is enrolled in a school, he/she cannot be taken out either temporarily or permanently without requesting permission from the school. **Any time the student will be absent or late to classes, the school needs to be notified as soon as possible before the school day begins.**

• **Excuses and Tardy Arrivals:** US schools have strict policies on student's daily attendance and their punctual arrival at the beginning of the day. It is important to read your school's or district's policy on these matters and become familiar with the terms such as excused and unexcused tardies (late arrival in the morning), and excused and unexcused absences. 'Unexcused' can lead to penalties for the students in terms of their grades and /or detentions or ultimately suspension.

• **Doctor's Appointments and Planned Absences:** Call the school to make arrangements for these ahead of the appointment day. A note from a doctor's or dentist's office after an appointment will be required for a child returning to school during the day or the absence may be unexcused.

## **2) SCHOOL FACILITIES**

### **a) Lunch**

**Lunches are not free.** In public and private/parochial schools children usually eat their lunch in a cafeteria. Lunch hour can be anytime between 10:30 a.m. and 1:00 p.m. depending on the school and the student's schedule. This is to allow for several 'sittings' of students as not all the school's students can fit into the cafeteria at one time. There are several methods of paying for school lunches including an online payment system. Check with your local school about their process. If your child has any special dietary needs, you should contact a school counselor for help. Students can bring lunch from home in an insulated lunch box or paper bag. Many schools offer breakfast in the morning too.

'Free lunch' Is provided for lower income families who qualify for a subsidized school lunch (and often breakfast as well).

### **b) Transportation**

Public schools provide free transportation for all their students and use distinctive yellow school buses to carry students between home and school. In elementary and middle schools students are allowed to ride the bus to their own homes. A note from parents is required if the student needs to travel to a different destination. Some schools provide "activity" buses which take students to play in sporting events, go on field trips or stay at school for after hours activities. School districts have buses that are modified to carry wheelchairs.

Private/Parochial schools rarely provide transportation, and if they do, they charge a fee. They usually have buses for field trips and sporting events but not for transporting students between home and school. Parents often make arrangements to share driving children to school ('carpool').

The term 'busing' refers to the movement, by bus, of a group of students within a school district to enable disadvantaged students to attend a school in a more advantaged socio-economic area of the school district. This is less common than it was in past decades.

Very few students in Indiana walk or ride their bike to school. High school students with a license often drive to school.

### **c) Before & After care**

Many schools typically provide parents the option of dropping children to school early or letting them stay behind after school in extended care. This is especially useful for parents who are both working. There is normally a per hour charge for utilizing this option and you will need to check with the school for details regarding the timings and charges.

## **3) SCHOOL POLICIES**

### **a) Religion in schools**

Federal law prohibits the practice or teaching of formal religion in public schools. This is part of the American Constitution which requires a legal separation of church and state. Some public schools have before or after

school clubs which have a religious affiliation. However, private/parochial schools are permitted to teach and practice religion.

#### **b) Uniforms, dress codes and fashion**

Most public schools in Indiana do not have a school uniform but may have a dress code (some rules about the types of clothes students may wear at school). Indianapolis Public Schools (IPS) have a school uniform. Private/Parochial schools most often require uniforms though some may prescribe only a dress code.

Even though most schools only have limited rules about clothing, there is an informal dress code among students. Your children, other parents, or teachers will help you with these informal codes which vary. For students from other countries, where current trends and dress styles can be very different, wearing clothing which is similar to that worn by American students, can be an important factor in helping them to settle in.

#### **c) Medication**

Schools in the US are generally very strict on children carrying and taking medication in school. Most schools will require parents to send in the required medication to the school office or class teacher, along with a note on the dosage and time the medicine has to be administered. It is important that you check with the school on their policy before sending in any medication with your child.

#### **d) School discipline and safety**

All schools have policies on discipline which will be available on the school web site or in printed information provided by the school. Some school districts have a system of color sheets to indicate the grade of misdemeanor by the student. It is important to be aware of these systems as they can have long term consequences for the student as misdemeanors are recorded on the student's record. International students from countries where school students experience more free time and physical activity during the school day may find this aspect of school life in the US difficult in terms of adjustment.

US classrooms and hallways are usually quiet and calm. The noise and activity increases between periods or when students are moving to or from lunch. Students are supervised carefully at these times.

Public middle and high schools have armed security officers or police on patrol within the school, and high schools will often have them outside the school too (such as at entrances to the school site). These officers are an essential part of the discipline process for the school. Often they develop a warm relationship with the students. High schools often have one or more 'Dean of Students' who have responsibility for school discipline and attendance.

Many US public schools are architecturally designed to increase security and to reduce heating and cooling costs. Many schools consist of a very large single building containing all classrooms, offices, gymnasiums, performance areas, cafeteria, resource centers and bathrooms. All doors into the building are locked for entry during the day except for the main front door. (In many schools this design also means many internal classrooms have no windows – and consequently, no natural day light.)

#### **e) Drills**

Schools often have three drills which students practice occasionally during the school year:

- **Fire drills** – for students to evacuate the building quickly and safely in case of fire.
- **Tornado drills** – students learn the location (such as a school hallway) and seating position (such as on floor, against wall, with knees drawn up and hands over the head) in case of a tornado warning.
- **Intruder alert** – students practice safety procedures should an armed intruder enter the school (such as turning off lights in classroom, retreating to corner out of sight of door, locking the classroom door).



- **Lock down** - at times the school will be on alert for incidents happening in the surrounding area by locking down the school entrances as well as classrooms so no one will leave their classrooms or school until the incident is cleared by the authorities.

#### **4) COMMON PRACTICES IN SCHOOLS**

##### **a) American Flag and Pledge of Allegiance**

- In many American classrooms, students, children are expected to say the Pledge of Allegiance every morning. Each classroom may have an American flag (also called the Stars and Stripes), and a flag will often be viewed on the classroom monitor showing the morning school wide news broadcast.
- It is not obligatory for international students to say the Pledge of Allegiance; however, it is advised that students stand and be quiet and respectful. Parents may wish to liaise with teachers about this matter. Younger international students will also need to have the meaning of the Pledge explained to them.

##### **b) School Celebrations (not holidays)**

- **Valentine's Day February 14:** In some elementary and middle schools, every person in the class gives everyone else a signed Valentine card (available for purchase in packets). Some schools offer flowers or chocolates for students to purchase for their friends (usually a fund raising activity for the PTO or Student Council).
- **Halloween October 31st:** Most schools have banned the use of costumes while attending school, but there may be a school that allows a costume and provides a competition for best costume. Most elementary schools have been adopting a "Dress as your favorite book character" day in lieu of costumes for Halloween.
- **Field Day** usually during the last week of school, is a day full of athletic and non athletic activities both indoors and outdoors.
- **Spirit Days / Weeks** – Most schools have some days when children can wear prescribed clothes in the school colors to show "school spirit".

##### **c) Gifts to teachers**

Giving gifts to teachers for the holidays and/or the end of the school year usually occurs with younger children in elementary school, but may carry into the high school years. Ask other parents what the practice is for your student's class. Schools often have a 'teacher appreciation' initiative which helps raise funds for the school. Parents can make a donation to the school and the teacher receives a special note of thanks in the student's name.

Bus drivers may also be given gifts. Again, ask other parents for advice, but you may choose to do as you feel in this respect.

##### **d) Birthday celebrations**

In elementary school, a class may celebrate a student's birthday. Ask the teacher for advice. Note that in most schools only wrapped store bought food is acceptable, not home made food.

It is discouraged for children to hand out birthday party invitations at school. Invitations should be mailed or handed out outside the school setting.

##### **e) Fundraising**

In both, public and private/parochial schools, fundraising is important and may take many different forms including purchasing items, attending functions, collecting box-tops, sponsoring students and donating money. Families should use their own discretion in these matters. Asking other families, particularly other international families, for advice is recommended.

##### **f) Food Drives**

Schools often organize “Food Drives” where families are asked to donate non-perishable food items like canned or packaged food that can be donated to local food pantries or homeless shelters.

## **PART II - SECTION F PARENTS AND THE SCHOOL**

This section covers channels of interaction between schools and parents and ways for parents to involve themselves in school activities. It also includes a special section on International families and the school

### **Ongoing Communication**

Schools in the US are very receptive to parents. You are always free to email teachers/staff of the school with your questions or doubts and if needed, ask for an appointment to meet them.

Some of the more formal channels of interaction between the school and parents include:

#### **School web sites**

Schools have websites with valuable information for parents such as student reports and grades. Daily homework may also be available on the web site, or by phone through a 'homework hotline'. Teacher email addresses and phone numbers are available through the web site. School websites often offer a system for payment of tuition, sports, and book fees. Sometimes, an account for student lunches in the cafeteria can also be paid online.

#### **Back to School Nights**

In the first semester (fall semester), schools have a Back to School Night when parents go to the school to visit the classrooms, meet the teachers, and learn about the work for the coming academic year. These are very important evenings especially for international families new to the school system. It is strongly recommended that at least one parent attends.

#### **Teacher conferences**

During the school year parents are sometimes invited to come and meet individual teachers for a teacher conference. You can call your child's teacher and ask for an appointment to meet them. During the year you can contact your child's teacher or counselor if you have questions or if your child is having any problems. Remember, parents are always encouraged to call or meet with their child/ren's teacher/s.

In some schools, parent/teacher conferences are held without the student present, and at others the student is present and may make a presentation of their school work.

#### **Parent Teacher Association (PTA) or Parent Teacher Organization (PTO)**

Most schools have a Parent Teacher Organization/Association (PTO or PTA), which is a formal association that works to help and support the school. They are managed by parents and are essential to the school in terms of fund-raising and organizing special events. They will often have sub-committees working on a range of initiatives throughout the school. (US schools, like churches, serve as the social hub of the community).

For international families, a PTO is a place where you can meet people and learn more about the way the school system operates.

- An active PTO is seen as an indication of a better school because it raises money for equipment and field trips. Students work to raise money by selling products to friends and neighbors. Sometimes the students go door-to-door in your neighborhood to sell products. **Note:** An adult should go with the children on these sales rounds
- provides volunteers to help in the school.
- holds meetings where parents and teacher can get to know each other.
- talks with the principal and teachers about any concerns or needs at the school.

### **Volunteering in schools**

In US schools, parents are encouraged to be involved in the school particularly by volunteering within the school or classroom. This also gives parents who are new to the US school system an excellent opportunity to learn more about the school and teachers. Teachers (mainly in elementary classrooms) may make a direct appeal for volunteers, or the Parent Teacher Association may make requests. Some elementary classrooms have 'room mothers' who assist with projects. There is normally a sign-up sheet or email sent out and if you are interested in volunteering, you could sign-up for events, activities or just to help.

### **International families and the school**

**Parents of non-English speaking children will give their children's school life a great boost by teaching them even the most basic of English phrases.**

It is suggested that international parents always ensure their children's teachers know they are from another country and to ask for the teachers' understanding and support.

In US schools teachers and counselors have a personal phone and email address, and parents are encouraged to make contact with the teachers by these methods with concerns or questions. Sometimes a personal visit may be more appropriate (particularly if the matter is serious). Always make an appointment with the teacher or counselor for these visits.

Parents of students from other countries can volunteer to make presentations about their home country – its customs, holidays, history and culture. Consider offering this to your children's teacher, but discuss it first with your children. Most will be very supportive of parents doing this but a few will not want their 'foreign home country' mentioned to either the teacher or the students in their class.