AISE

Resource Handbook

A Guide to the American School System 101



Welcome Message & Purpose of the Handbook

Dear Student,

Welcome to your new school community in the United States. Starting at a new school, especially in a new country, can feel both exciting and overwhelming. There are new classes, new traditions, and new ways of doing things to learn.

This handbook was created for you.

Its purpose is simple: to help make your transition into the American school system a little easier. We know that understanding things like classes, grades, clubs, and college preparation can be challenging when everything is new.

Think of this handbook as a friendly map to help you navigate your new academic journey. Our goal is to provide you with the knowledge and confidence to take full advantage of the opportunities your high school has to offer.

You are not alone in this journey. Your school is here to support you, and we hope this handbook serves as a useful tool as you build a successful and fulfilling life here.

We are so glad you are here.

Best,
Advocates for Immigrant Student Equity

This project was completed as part of AISE's mission to ensure equitable access to educational resources for all students, regardless of their background.

Founded by Joseph Shing, AISE [Advocates for Immigrant Student Equity] was created to address the systemic barriers that immigrant and refugee students often face when entering the U.S. school system.

Overview of the U.S. School System

This section provides a simple guide to how schooling is organized in the United States. Knowing the structure will help you understand where you are now and what comes next.

Education in the U.S. is typically divided into four main levels:

1. *Elementary School* [Grades K-5]
    - Ages: Usually from about 5 to 11 years old.

2. *Middle School* [Grades 6-8]
    - Ages: Usually from about 11 to 14 years old.
    - Focus: Transition and exploration. Students move between different classrooms and teachers for each subject. This is where they start to explore more specific subjects, like different sciences and arts, and may have some choice in their classes.

3. *High School* [Grades 9-12]
    - Ages: Usually from about 14 to 18 years old.
    - Focus: Preparation for the future. Students take a wider variety of required and elective courses to prepare for college, a career, or other paths after graduation. Each year has a distinct name:
        - 9th Grade: Freshman
        - 10th Grade: Sophomore
        - 11th Grade: Junior
        - 12th Grade: Senior

4. *Higher Education* [College/University]
    - This is the optional level of education after high school, including community colleges, technical schools, and universities where students can earn degrees.

School Year Calender

Academic School Year

The typical American academic school year runs from mid-to-late August or early September through May or early June.

Major Breaks and Holidays

Here are the typical breaks you can expect during the school year:

- *Summer Break*: This is the longest break of the year, lasting about 10-12 weeks from June to August.
- *Fall Break / Thanksgiving Break*: Schools often have a short fall break in October or November. This leads into Thanksgiving Break, which is usually a 3-5 day weekend at the end of November for the Thanksgiving holiday.
- *Winter Break*: This break lasts for about 2-3 weeks and covers the Christmas and New Year's holidays. It typically runs from late December through the beginning of January.
- *Spring Break*: A one-to-two-week break that occurs sometime between March and April. Families often use this time for vacations.
- *Other Holidays*: Schools are also closed for national holidays like:
  - Labor Day (Early September)
  - Martin Luther King Jr. Day (Mid-January)
  - Presidents' Day (Mid-February)
  - Memorial Day (Late May)

important note:

Your specific school district will provide a detailed calendar at the start of the year. Be sure to check it for exact dates, as they can vary in different parts of the country!

Different Types of Classes Offered

In American high schools, you can often choose different levels of classes. This section explains what these levels mean and how they can affect your Grade Point Average (GPA).

1. **ENL (English as a New Language)**
Purpose:
These classes are designed to help students who are learning English. They focus on building reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills.

Who it's for: Any student whose first language is not English. The goal is to support your success in all your other classes.

2. **Standard/College-Prep Classes**
Purpose:
These are the regular classes that cover the essential material all students need to learn. They prepare you for the expectations of college.

Who it's for: All students. This is the standard level for graduation.

3. **Honors Classes**
Purpose:
These classes cover the same subjects as standard classes but go deeper and move at a faster pace. They are more challenging and require more independent work.

Who it's for: Motivated students who want a greater academic challenge and are prepared for harder coursework.

4. **Advanced Placement (AP) Classes**
Purpose:
These are college-level courses taught in high school. At the end of the year, you can take an AP exam. A high score on this exam may allow you to earn college credit and skip introductory courses in college.

Who it's for: Students seeking the highest level of challenge. They require strong study habits and dedication.

5. **Dual Enrollment**
Purpose:
These classes allow you to take college courses (often at a local community college) while you are still in high school. You earn both high school credit and real college credit at the same time.

Who it's for: Students ready for college-level work who want to get a head start on their college degree.

Understanding GPA: Weighted vs. Unweighted

Your Grade Point Average (GPA) is a number that represents your average academic performance. It is very important for college applications.

Unweighted GPA

- This is the standard GPA on a 4.0 scale.
- An A is a 4.0, a B is a 3.0, a C is a 2.0, and so on.
- It does not matter if you take a standard, honors, or AP class; an A is always worth a 4.0. This GPA only measures your letter grades.

Weighted GPA

- This GPA recognizes that some classes are harder than others.
- It gives extra points for taking more challenging courses like Honors, AP, or Dual Enrollment.
- For example, an A in an honors class might be worth a 4.5 instead of a 4.0, and an A in an AP class might be worth a 5.0.
- This means your weighted GPA can be higher than a 4.0. It shows colleges that you have challenged yourself.

why this matters:

Colleges look at both your unweighted and weighted GPA. They want to see that you have earned good grades (unweighted) and that you have been willing to challenge yourself with difficult courses (weighted).
Something to keep in mind is that some scholarships for college also consider your GPA.

your next step:

When scheduling your classes, talk to your school counselor about which level is right for you. It is better to succeed in a standard class than to struggle in an AP class.
Find the balance that challenges you but allows you to do your best work.

School Administration & Departments

Principal

The principal is the head of the school. They are the head administrator who oversees the entire school, sets policies, and handles major decisions or issues.



Vice Principal or Assistant Principal

An assistant principal manages the school's daily operations, primarily focusing on student discipline, teacher support, and building safety.

School Counselor (Guidance Counselor)

Counselors are there to help you with many things. They can assist in choosing your classes each year, making sure you're on track to graduate, and advising you on college or career plans. They also are trained to help with personal issues like if you feel sad, stressed, or have a problem at school or home, you can talk to your counselor confidentially. Don't hesitate to visit them; their job is to support students.



Health Office



Most schools have a nurse or health office. If you feel sick or get hurt during the day, ask to go to the nurse. The nurse can give basic first aid, allow you to rest if you're not feeling well, and will call your parents if you need to go home or see a doctor. The nurse also keeps track of vaccinations and physical exam records.

Librarian



The librarian manages the library. They can help you find books and show you how to use computers or printers if the library has them. The library is a great quiet place to study, and the librarian is there to assist.

Coaches and Club Advisors



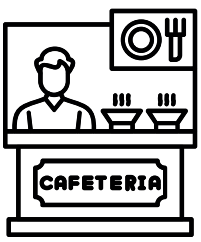
If you join a sports team, the coach is the teacher or adult in charge of the team.

If you join a club, there will be a club advisor [often a teacher volunteering with that club]. These adults can become great mentors as well, since they share an interest with you [soccer coach, science club advisor, etc.].

Custodians and Cafeteria Staff



Custodians are the people who keep the school clean and maintained. Cafeteria staff prepare and serve lunch. Always treat them with respect and a "thank you" – they are important members of the school community.



Main Office Staff

When you enter the school's main office, you'll meet secretaries or office staff. They handle paperwork, attendance records, and phone calls. If you arrive late in the morning or need to leave early, you'll check in with them. They can also help you find a classroom or deliver a message to a teacher. Be polite and give your name when you approach them – they manage a lot of students, so introducing yourself helps.



Teachers

These are the adults who teach your classes. You will have several teachers (one for each subject). They are your first point of contact if you have questions about classwork, homework, or if you need extra help understanding a lesson. It's completely okay to ask questions if you don't understand something – teachers actually appreciate it when students ask (it shows you care about learning).



Extracurricular Activities: Clubs and Sports

What are extracurricular activities?

Extracurricular activities are clubs, sports, and organizations that you can join outside of your regular class time. They are not part of your graded coursework, but they are a very important part of your education and life in an American high school.

Why are they important?

- Make Friends & Feel Connected: This is the best way to meet people who share your interests, helping you build a community and feel at home.
- Explore Your Passions: Love art, coding, debate, or volunteering? Clubs let you dive deeper into what you enjoy.
- Develop Leadership Skills: You can become a club president, team captain, or lead a project.
- Strengthen College Applications: Colleges look for students who are involved and contribute to their community. Your involvement shows your interests and commitment.

How to Start Getting Involved

At the beginning of the school year, schools often host a **Club Fair** where students can explore different clubs and activities. Each club sets up a table to share what they do, and students can sign up to join.



Steps to Join:

1.Ask Your School Counselor: They have a full list of all available clubs and sports.

2. Look for Posters and Announcements: Schools announce meeting times and tryout dates on posters, in the daily announcements, or on the school website.

3. Just Show Up: For most clubs, you can simply go to the next meeting. There is no pressure to commit immediately.

4. Talk to the Advisor: Every club has a teacher advisor. You can email them or talk to them after class to ask questions.

Types of Activities

Here are some common types of clubs and sports you might find:

Academic Clubs:
Focus on a specific academic subject or skill.

- Examples: Science Olympiad, Debate Team, Model United Nations (Model UN), Robotics Club, Book Club, Academic Superbowl.

Arts & Culture Clubs:
Allow you to express your creativity and learn about different cultures.

- Examples: Theatre Club, Choir, Band, Orchestra, Art Club, Diversity Club, Language Clubs (Spanish Club, French Club, etc.).

Interest & Hobby Clubs:
Based on shared interests and hobbies.

- Examples: Chess Club, Video Game Club, Anime Club, Environmental Club, Cooking Club, Gardening Club.

Leadership & Service Clubs:
Focus on helping the community and developing leadership.

- Examples: Student Government, National Honor Society, Key Club, Interact Club.

Sports & Athletics:
Schools offer team sports that compete against other schools. There are usually different teams for different seasons (Fall, Winter, Spring).

- Examples: Soccer, Football, Basketball, Volleyball, Track & Field, Cross Country, Swimming, Tennis, Wrestling.

Important Note on Sports: Most sports require you to "try out" (do a short audition or test) to make the team. You will also need a physical exam from a doctor before you can play. Ask the coach of the sport or the athletic director for more information.

Final Thoughts:

Don't be afraid to try something new! Go out of your comfort zone. Joining a club or sport is one of the fastest ways to improve your social skills, make friends, and feel like you truly belong at your new school. Your courage to try will be rewarded.

Key Words/Terms

- Tryouts: A selection process for a sports team or competitive group where coaches choose the best players.
- Club Advisor: The teacher who supervises and supports a club.
- Varsity: The main, most competitive team that represents the school.
- JV (Junior Varsity): A team for developing players, often younger students.
- Club Fair: An event at the start of the school year where all clubs recruit new members.
- Commitment: The promise to regularly attend meetings and participate.

Highschool Social Events

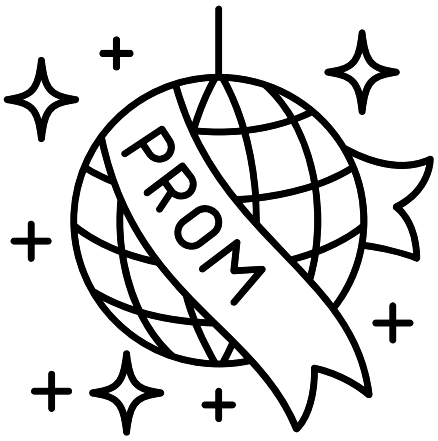
Homecoming (HOCO)

Homecoming is one of the biggest fall events. It celebrates school spirit and often includes a football game, pep rally, parade, and a formal dance. It's called "Homecoming" because alumni are invited to return and celebrate with current students.



Prom (Junior Senior Formal Dance)

Prom is a formal dance held near the end of the school year, usually for juniors and seniors. Students often dress in formal attire, arrive with friends or dates, and take photos before dancing the night away. It's considered a highlight of the high school experience.



Spirit Week



Spirit week is a school tradition where students celebrate school spirit through themed dress-up days, activities, and events, often leading up to a big event like homecoming. The week is designed to foster community and excitement, with themes varying widely from classics like Pajama Day and Twin Day to creative ideas like "Anything But a Backpack" Day.

Pep Rallies

A pep rally is a special school assembly designed to build enthusiasm, encourage school spirit, and support a team or special event, often before a big game. These lively gatherings typically include performances by the cheerleading and dance teams, the school band playing fight songs, skits, and fun competitions or games, all meant to unite students and faculty and create a sense of pride and positivity.



Winter Formal

A Winter Formal is a formal school dance held in the winter months, typically between December and February. Similar to a prom, but often open to all grades, it features formal attire like dresses and suits, dancing, and sometimes includes a meal and a "court" or "royalty" selection. Winter Formals often have themes, such as a "Winter Wonderland," and may follow a "Sadie Hawkins" format where girls ask the boys.



Understanding Standardized Tests: The SAT and ACT

what is it?

In the United States, standardized tests are exams that are administered and scored in a consistent, or "standard," manner. They are designed to provide colleges with a common data point that can be used to compare students from different high schools and educational backgrounds. For college admissions, the two primary standardized tests are the SAT and the ACT. Most colleges in the U.S. accept scores from either exam.

It is also important to note that some colleges are test-optional, meaning they don't require test scores for admissions.



The **SAT** is a standardized college entrance exam for students in grades 11 and 12, consisting of two main sections: Reading and Writing, and Math.
The digital test has a total length of 2 hours and 14 minutes. It is scored out of 1600 points.

The **ACT**, or **American College Testing** consists of four sections: English, Math, Reading, and Science. The Science section is unique to the ACT and tests a student's ability to interpret data and scientific reasoning rather than specific knowledge. It is scored on a scale from 1 to 36, which is an average of the four section scores.

Questbridge Scholarship

what is it?

The QuestBridge National College Match is a highly selective scholarship that connects high-achieving, low-income students with full four-year scholarships to top U.S. colleges.

It's essentially a "match" program: selected finalists who rank partner colleges are matched with one college, which grants a scholarship covering the full cost of attendance—including tuition, room and board, books, and travel expenses, with no student loans.