

Know Your School District: Tips for Families in Regular Education

Research shows that family engagement in a child’s education can boost their school success. You can better engage in your child’s education when you know your school district. This tip sheet provides you with ways to learn about your school district and be engaged. You can learn even more from the school district’s website or by calling or visiting the school district office. Speaking to your child’s teacher, guidance counselor, or school principal can also be helpful.

Policies and procedures

School districts have many policies that may affect your child. Knowing about these policies helps you advocate for your child when concerns or questions arise. District policies are often published in the student handbook and on district websites. Some of these policies may include:

- Transportation
- Bullying and harassment
- School discipline
- School choice
- Attendance
- Absentee and tardiness
- School year calendar
- Attendance area boundaries
- Deadlines for enrollment
- Extracurricular activities
- Dress code
- Graduation requirements

Course offerings and special programs

All public school districts teach the basic subjects (reading, writing, math, social studies, science, fine arts, and physical education), and some districts may offer special academic programs or courses. Some examples of these programs include:

- IB Programmes (K–12 International Baccalaureate curriculum)
- Magnet schools (special focus on an educational theme). Examples include STEAM (science, technology, engineering, art, and math), foreign language and culture, gifted learners, or environmental education.
- Title 1 services (also called targeted services – academic help for specific groups of children)
- AVID courses (Advancement Via Individual Determination – college and career readiness skills and classes for students in grades 7–12)
- Advanced or Honors level classes

- AP courses (Advanced Placement – classes that may offer college credit)
- Job certifications for EMT (Emergency Medical Tech) or CNA (Certified Nursing Assistant)
- CTE programs (Career and Technical Education – programs that teach skills for high demand careers)
- Programs that offer both high school and college credits at no cost to families:
 - Concurrent Enrollment (classes taught in high schools)
 - PSEO (Post-Secondary Educational Options – classes taught at a college)

To learn if your child’s school district offers any specialized programs, check the district website, or speak to your child’s teacher, guidance counselor, or principal.

Testing

Every public school district conducts state and/or district tests like the MCA (Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment) of all children in grades K–12. It is important to know what tests your child’s district uses, when they are given, and what the results mean. Discuss test results with your child’s teacher and ask if the district has any special programs (such as academic help or advanced classes) for your child. For more information about testing, refer to PACER’s handout *A Parents’ Guide to School Testing: What You Need to Know* [PACER.org/pdf/ge/GE-7.pdf](https://www.pacer.org/pdf/ge/GE-7.pdf).

Policy decisions

You do not have to be an education expert to ask good questions: families have an important role in helping make policy decisions at their child’s school and district. They can help identify issues, make decisions, and improve school programs. Becoming involved in advisory councils and district-wide committees gives families the opportunity to move from advocating for their own child to advocating for all children in the district. Family involvement on committees also works to increase achievement for all students. District-wide committees may include:

- Advisory committees on:
 - Curriculum
 - Space and facilities
 - Budget
 - District level work
- Parent advisory committees for:
 - American Indian Education
 - Title I Services (also called targeted services)
 - Gifted and Talented learners
- Special Education Advisory Council (SEAC): Each school district must have one, and at least 50 percent of the members must be parents/families of children receiving special education services.

Advocacy

There may be times when issues come up (such as budget cuts, bus routes, or staffing) that affect your child, all children in a particular program, or all students in the school district. Whatever the issue, families have the right to take an active role and to advocate for all children involved.

The school board is the best place to take your concerns. You can do this by contacting the school board members or attending a school board meeting. To do this, you will need to know the following information:

- Names of the school board members and their contact information
- Dates and times of school board meetings
- Location of the school board meetings
- The process to follow to be put on the agenda or to comment
- What matters are excluded from public discussion

You can find information about the school board on your district's website or by calling the school district office. Many local newspapers also publish information on school board meeting dates, times, and locations.

Reporting requirements.....

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), a federal law, has reporting requirements for public school districts. Each year, a "School Report Card" is issued for every school and school district. Reading this is a good place for you to learn about your child's school district. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, reporting requirements may temporarily change for the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years.

To access these report cards, go to the Minnesota Department of Education website at <https://rc.education.mn.gov/#mySchool/p--3>. You can search by district or school name. Some of the information includes:

- Contact information for the district office
- Student population and demographics
- Attendance rates
- Graduation rates
- Report on Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)
- The district ranking for the MCA (Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment) tests and the Basic Skills Tests

Learning about your child's school district may take some time and patience on your part, but the positive results of supporting your child in their education is worth the investment.