

HOW TO ENROLL A CHILD IN PUBLIC SCHOOL

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Every child of school age who is a resident of Pennsylvania has a right to public education. Making sure that your child enrolls and attends school is important for your child's education and future. Moving through these four steps will help you enroll your child in a public school (including a charter school and cyber charter school) as soon as possible.

1. DETERMINE WHERE THE CHILD CAN ATTEND SCHOOL

A child can attend school in the school district where they live with their parent or guardian, a foster parent, or a district resident who is not a parent but is caring for the child.¹ Please see the Education Law Center's fact sheet [How to Enroll a Child Living with Someone Other Than Their Parent](#) for information about how to enroll a child who lives with someone who is NOT their parent. In addition, a child who is living in a "children's institution" such as a group home or residential placement has the right to attend school in the school district where the residential facility is located.² A child who is experiencing homelessness has a right to attend school where they are currently staying, even without proof of residency, or where they have a substantial connection.³

2. BRING ENROLLMENT DOCUMENTS TO THE SCHOOL WHERE THE CHILD CAN ATTEND

A child can be enrolled by a parent, foster parent, guardian, caseworker, or anyone having control or care of the child. Go to the school or central registration office in the school district where you live. Bring with you:

- Documents that show that you live in the school district (see options below)
- Documents that show the child's age (does not need to be a birth certificate)
- Documents that show the child has been immunized. If you do not have record of the child's shots, tell the school district to call the former school or a doctor who has child's records.

You will also be asked to fill out a "sworn statement" about the child's discipline history, which the school district will give to you. Even though the school may ask for the child's entire discipline history,

¹ See 24 P.S. §§13-13-1302 and 13-1305 (children living in foster care); 22 Pa. Code § 11.11

² 24 P.S. § 13-1306, 22 Pa. Code § 11.18

³ See McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, 42 U.S.C. §11432(g)(3)(C); Basic Education Circular on *Education of Homeless Youth* at <https://www.education.pa.gov/Policy-Funding/BECS/uscode/Pages/EducationforHomelessYouth.aspx>

it's OK if you do not know it. Ultimately, you only need to say whether the child is currently expelled for possessing a weapon.⁴

Ask the school secretary to request the child's education records from their former school. The child's former school must send the records to the new school within ten business days.⁵

NOTE: Students experiencing homelessness and children in foster care have the right to enroll in school immediately without any required enrollment documents. See ELC's fact sheets on [School Stability and Immediate Enrollment for Children in Foster Care](#) and [The Rights of Students Experiencing Homelessness](#), both available at www.elc-pa.org.

3. ENSURE THE CHILD STARTS SCHOOL WITHIN 5 DAYS

The law says that the child must be enrolled within five business days of the school receiving all enrollment documents. If the child has not been notified that they can start attending school within five business days, call the district's registration office and ask them why the child has not been enrolled.⁶

If the school district does not allow the child to start after five business days, file a complaint with the Pennsylvania Department of Education. See ELC's fact sheet on the [Enrollment Complaint Process](#). You can also call the Department at 717-787-4860 or 717-783-6746.

4. DISCUSS THE CHILD'S NEEDS WITH THE SCHOOL

We recommend talking to an administrator or counselor at the new school about:

- **The credits required for graduation and credit transfer from the child's previous school.** Make sure the school will give the child credit for all the courses they have already taken.
- **The child's special education needs.** If the child has a disability, make sure the school has a copy of the IEP. The school must follow the old IEP until you agree on a new IEP with the new school. Request an IEP Team meeting with the new school as soon as possible. The school cannot delay the child's start of school because they are waiting to receive the IEP.
- **The child's needs for accommodations in school.** Share any "Section 504 Accommodations Plan" your child may have for a chronic illness or other disability.
- **Language instruction program.** If the child is an English Learner and is not proficient in speaking, reading, understanding, and writing English, talk to the school about the child's needs, prior language instruction, and the language instruction program at the new school.
- **Options for tutoring, vocational classes, and extracurricular activities,** even if the child is starting school midway through the school year. This can be very important for the child to connect to a new school.

⁴ See 24 P.S. § 13-1317(2)

⁵ 22 Pa. Code § 11.11(b)

⁶ *Id.*

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT ENROLLING IN SCHOOL

CAN THE SCHOOL DISTRICT ASK YOU TO PROVE WHERE YOU LIVE?

Yes, but the school district should let you prove where you live in a way that is easiest for you. You could bring any of the following that show you live at an address within the school district: gas, electric, or phone bills; lease for an apartment in the school district; government papers; car registration; or a paper signed by you in front of a notary that says where you and the child live.

CAN THE SCHOOL DISTRICT ASK YOU TO PROVE YOUR CHILD'S AGE?

Yes, but they can only require that you bring in one of the following: birth certificate, passport, baptism certificate, paper from a parent or relative signed in front of a notary (“Affidavit”), or records from an old school. Any of these will work – the school cannot require a copy of the birth certificate.

CAN A SCHOOL DISTRICT ASK ME FOR PROOF OF THE CHILD'S PHYSICAL OR DENTAL EXAMINATIONS, OR A PHYSICAL HEALTH OR MENTAL HEALTH HISTORY TO ENROLL?

No. Public schools can never require this information as a condition of enrollment.

ARE THERE OTHER DOCUMENTS THAT SCHOOLS ARE NOT ALLOWED TO ASK ME TO PROVIDE?

Public schools, including charter schools, can never ask for your or child's Social Security number or card, immigration documents or status,⁷ or information about why a child is living with you.

CAN A SCHOOL DISTRICT DENY ENROLLMENT BECAUSE THE CHILD WAS DISCIPLINED BY THE FORMER SCHOOL DISTRICT?

No. The new school district cannot “honor” the previous school district's discipline and deny or delay a child's enrollment based on information in the discipline records. The one exception is if the child is currently expelled for possessing a weapon – in which case, the new school district must still enroll the student but may place the child in an alternative program.

IF THE CHILD WAS IN A JUVENILE JUSTICE PLACEMENT AND NOW WANTS TO REENROLL IN THEIR PREVIOUS SCHOOL DISTRICT OR A NEW SCHOOL, CAN THE SCHOOL AUTOMATICALLY PLACE THE CHILD IN AN ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION PROGRAM?

No, the child has a right to an informal hearing to determine if the student is *currently* disruptive and cannot automatically be placed in an alternative education program. For more information about legal rights and new requirements that help keep students out of alternative education programs, see ELC's fact sheet, [AEDY Settlement: New Rules for Alternative Education in Pennsylvania](#).

⁷ *Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202(1982). Schools may not inquire about a child's immigration status.

CAN THE SCHOOL DISTRICT DELAY ENROLLMENT BECAUSE THEY NEED MORE TIME TO DECIDE THE CHILD'S CLASSROOM PLACEMENT, HOLD AN IEP TEAM MEETING, OR RECEIVE EDUCATION RECORDS?

No. A child is entitled to start school within five business days of providing the required enrollment documents. A school district cannot delay the child's start of school because they are waiting to receive the student's IEP or education records.

CAN A STUDENT BE IN SCHOOL IF THEY ARE 19 OR 20 YEARS OLD?

Yes, a child has the right to go to school in Pennsylvania until the end of the school term when they turn 21 or until they graduate with a regular high school diploma (whichever comes first), even if they already have a GED.⁸ This is true for all students, not only students with disabilities.

What to do if a school district refuses to enroll your child:

- Show the district this fact sheet
- Keep written documentation of all contact with the school district
- Contact the Schools Services Unit of the Pennsylvania Department of Education:
Monica Washington
Schools Services Unit, PA Department of Education
333 Market Street, Harrisburg, PA 19126-0333
mwashington@pa.gov
717-783-6746
- Contact the Education Law Center at 412-258-2120 (Pittsburgh) or 215-238-6970 (Philadelphia)
- File an Enrollment Complaint with the Pennsylvania Department of Education. For guidance, see ELC's fact sheet on the [Enrollment Complaint Process](#).

The Education Law Center-PA (ELC) is a nonprofit, legal advocacy organization with offices in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, dedicated to ensuring that all children in Pennsylvania have access to a quality public education. Through legal representation, impact litigation, trainings, and policy advocacy, ELC advances the rights of underserved children, including children living in poverty, children of color, children in the foster care and juvenile justice systems, children with disabilities, English learners, LGBTQ students, and children experiencing homelessness.

ELC's publications provide a general statement of the law. However, each situation is different. If questions remain about how the law applies to a particular situation, contact ELC's Helpline for information and advice — visit www.elc-pa.org/contact or call 215-238-6970 (Philadelphia) or 412-258-2120 (Pittsburgh) — or contact another attorney of your choice.

⁸ 22 Pa. Code § 11.12