

SCHOOLS SUPPLEMENT

The ABCs of Education Allowances

By Pamela Ward

Employees of government agencies assigned overseas are granted allowances to help defray the cost of an education for their children in kindergarten through 12th grade, one equivalent to that provided by public school systems in the United States.

In most cases, posts abroad are served by one or more English-language schools with an American curriculum. The majority of these are nongovernmental, nonprofit, nondenominational, independent schools, usually with a board of directors establishing policy and a superintendent, headmaster or principal as the senior administrator. Even though these schools may be called American, they are not entities of the U.S. government. Some receive government grants for specific purposes, but these grants represent a small percentage of the overall budget. Children of many nationalities attend these schools, including, in most schools, a significant percentage of host-country students.

The allowances for a specific post are determined by the fees charged by a school identified as providing a basic U.S.-type education. Parents may use this allowance to send their children to a different school of their choice, say a parochial or foreign-language institution, as long as the cost does not exceed that of the "base" school. If the alternative school is more expensive than the "base" model, the difference would be an out-of-pocket expense for the parent.

An allowance covers only expenses for those services usually available without cost in American public schools, including tuition, transportation and textbooks. Fees for lunches, trips, computers and school uniforms are not covered, even if required by the school.

Parents may also elect to homeschool their children while at post, using a home

study program. They will receive an allowance to purchase materials and services while posted abroad, but this allowance will not be continued if they are reassigned to the U.S.

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If a foreign post does not have a secular, English-language school with an American curriculum, or has such a school that goes only through certain grades, an away-from-post or "boarding school" allowance is provided. A lump sum, varying from post to post, is allotted to cover the estimated cost of tuition, room, board and travel to post during school vacations. Parents are free to choose the boarding school they prefer. There is no special funding for parents or students to visit schools in advance of application or for an interview, even if one is required.

The U.S. government does not provide an allowance for college or other post-secondary education. However, one round-trip per year to post is provided for students studying at universities in the U.S. Recent legislation has also provided this allowance for students studying at universities abroad, and it is expected that this

will be in effect in the next few months. The Office of Allowances will issue official notification when this becomes effective. Also allowed is the shipment of 250 pounds of unaccompanied air baggage or the equivalent cost in storage for each college or boarding school student.

All funding for education is processed by the financial management officer at the post where the employee is assigned. At some posts the embassy or consulate works very closely with the school or schools, and the billing is handled directly. In other instances, the employee will pay a school fee, or pay for an airline ticket or storage, and then submit bills to the FMO for reimbursement. Although a student may start school at the beginning of a semester if a parent has been officially assigned to a post, the parent may not be reimbursed for any school expenses until he or she arrives at post.

There are several offices in the Department of State prepared to help you understand how the educational allowances work, and what choices you have for your children. These include the Office of Overseas Schools (www.state.gov/m/a/os), the Office of Allowances (www.state.gov/m/a/als) and the Family Liaison Office (www.state.gov/m/dghr/flo/c1958.htm). We hope that you will get in touch with us if you have any questions about your situation. Although these offices are part of the Department of State, the same allowances apply to most civilian federal employees under chief-of-mission authority overseas. For information or assistance, e-mail FLOAskEducation@state.gov or call (202) 647-1076.

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