



Focus on the UNITED STATES School Program

"I like school in the U.S. and have made many friends. A lot of things surprised me, especially the differences between my culture and American culture, so I'm trying to share my perspectives and beliefs with them as they share theirs."

Rassi, participant from Indonesia

As a nation of immigrants, the U.S. is often described as a "melting pot," meaning that U.S. culture is a unified combination of the many cultures brought by people who were born in or came to live in the U.S. While Americans do generally share certain cultural traits, such as the value of hard work, independence and a direct style of communication, pockets of imported cultures exist in most cities. These continue to play a significant role in the daily lives of inhabitants and their values. Note that the picture of U.S. culture that is presented by the entertainment industry to the world is generally an exaggerated version of what a participant may find in typical U.S. towns. Generally, participants will find less violence, less wealth and less sexually open behavior than one might imagine from watching Hollywood movies or U.S. television programs. Participants will find, however, a country with a great variety of landscapes, climates and lifestyles. We hope that wherever you are placed, you will discover those things that make your community a unique and wonderful place to live.

AFS & Your Experience

AFS Intercultural Programs/USA has been in existence since 1947, when the American Field Service exchanged 52 young people from 11 countries that had been at war. Young American Field Service Volunteers drove ambulances during World War I. Then, during World War II, AFS Volunteers again rescued the battlefield wounded and helped liberate concentration camp survivors. After World War II, the drivers came together and searched for a way to stop the devastation of war from happening again. They believed—and AFS-USA believes today—that most hatred is based on fear and ignorance, and that if people know and understand one another, it is a lot harder to fight each other. The ambulance drivers created a non-profit student exchange organization called the American Field Service, now known as AFS Intercultural Programs.

Today, AFS-USA sends more than 1,500 students to 42 countries a year. In addition, AFS-USA places students from abroad with more than 2,700 U.S. families and is supported by more than 10,000 AFS Volunteers in the U.S.

AFS will be at your side throughout your intercultural exchange. Even before leaving your home country, you will participate in organized AFS orientations and have the

assistance of experienced AFS Volunteers. Once in your host country, you can rely on your local volunteer contact and other chapter volunteers to support you in your experience. Together we will ensure that you have an incredible experience abroad.

Landing in the U.S.

Participants are met by AFS staff and volunteers upon arrival at five international gateways: New York, Chicago, Houston, Los Angeles and Seattle. From these gateways, students then travel directly by bus, plane or train to their regional orientation sites for arrival orientation.

Arrival Orientation

As most students will be tired after their long journeys, the welcome orientation serves to introduce many topics that will be covered in greater detail at the post-arrival orientation that takes place locally three to six weeks later. Practical and essential information will be shared with participants, such as the name and contact information for each student's liaison and emergency contact information and procedures. There is also a session on what to expect in the first few days after arrival, including school registration. This 24-hour orientation also gives students a chance to meet AFS participants from around the world hosted in the same area.

Living in the U.S.

Lifestyle and Family Living

It is impossible to describe the typical American family because there really isn't one. The U.S. is a country founded by immigrants, and it takes pride in its diversity. It is also a country founded on the ideals of equality for all. Thus, women and men are viewed as equals. In many U.S. host families, the mother manages the home and is the authority figure.

Like AFS host families everywhere, each one is unique with its own rules and values. Since the U.S. is a multicultural society, your host family could be African-American, Hispanic-American, Asian-American or descendants of a variety of European nationalities and ethnicities. Your host family's cultural background will most likely influence the rules and values of their home lives.

Although AFS cannot say exactly what your family will be like, we can say this: All kinds of families make wonderful hosts. Your host family may include a mother, father and children. Some families have only one parent. You may be placed with host parents who do not have children. If you keep an open mind, you will find that there are wonderful advantages to every situation!

Many AFS host families are not as wealthy as the American families you see on television. In most families, all adult members of the family work. Unlike in many countries, it is not common for a family to have a maid or servants in the home. Family members, including the father and children, usually help with household work, cooking and other daily chores.

Many American families are actively religious. All religions are practiced in the U.S., but the majority of Americans are Protestant, Catholic or Jewish. While you are not required to attend religious services with your family, we encourage you to attend a service as

part of the intercultural learning experience. This is only one of many ways to demonstrate to your host family that you are interested in learning about their lifestyle and beliefs.

The U.S. is a nation of pet lovers. You will find that many American families have pets such as dogs, cats, rabbits, birds, etc. These pets, especially dogs and cats, are often treated as part of the family.

Most placements are with families in small towns and not in or near cities. While some participants may prefer to live in a larger city, the smaller community holds many advantages. In a smaller community, you will be less likely to blend in with the crowd, and people are likely to be more interested in learning about you and your culture. This environment will also force you to speak English rather than your native language, because while the U.S. is generally very diverse, there are many small towns where the inhabitants may never have met someone from your home country and/or who speaks your language.

Dress and Appearance

American teens dress in a style similar to teenagers everywhere; they wear jeans, T-shirts, sweaters and sportswear. In many U.S. regions, winters can be cold, so warm clothing such as a heavy jacket, heavy sweaters, woolen tights or long underwear, thick socks, gloves, scarves and boots are appropriate. For special occasions, dress that is more formal is expected. For example, girls may want to wear a dress or blouse and skirt or dress pants, and boys may want to wear a jacket, slacks and tie.

Diet and Meals

American eating habits vary among families. In general, breakfast is usually the smallest meal of the day (except on weekends when many people enjoy “brunch,” a combination of breakfast and lunch), followed by lunch at midday. It is rare for U.S. students to return home for their midday meal. Most either bring a lunch to school with them or purchase lunch in the school cafeteria. Dinner or supper is usually the largest meal of the day and is eaten between 6:00 p.m. and 8:00 p.m.

Most U.S. teenagers are allowed to “snack” (eat small amounts of food) between meals. In many households, children are expected to help prepare the meals and clean up afterwards. In some families, family members may eat at different times due to busy work and school schedules.

Portions may be larger than those you are accustomed to, especially in restaurants where “all you can eat” meals and self-service buffets are common. All varieties of food may be common, depending on your U.S. location. Fruits and vegetables are available year-round. Take-out and fast food are popular. You can drink water from a tap safely in virtually every U.S. community.

School

In the U.S., education is primarily the responsibility of the 50 states, not the national government in Washington, DC. Each state has its own education system, but state governments, in turn, give much of the responsibility to local school districts. There are more than 15,000 school districts in the U.S., and hundreds can be found in one state alone! As a result, procedures, schedules, required courses, etc. vary greatly from school to school.

In general, the school year is divided into two terms. The first term begins in late August or early September and lasts until late December. The second term begins in January and ends in late May or June. There are usually winter and spring vacations.

At the beginning of the school year, students meet with an advisor who helps them select classes. Usually five or six different classes are selected depending on the student's age, school record, abilities and wishes.

The school day begins between 7:00 a.m. and 8:30 a.m. and ends around 2:00 p.m. and 3:00 p.m. A typical class lasts about 50 minutes. Some schools now have what is called a block schedule, which typically consists of four blocks of 90 to 120 minutes each.

American classes usually do not have formal lectures. Teachers often prefer discussions in their classrooms, and expect students to ask questions and to contribute ideas and analysis. Class participation is a means for teachers to judge a student's understanding of a subject. A student's participation in class discussions may also be used to help determine the student's final grade.

Most teachers assign homework daily. The homework may be reading, answering questions or writing a paper. Many times these assignments are due the following day. However, larger homework assignments may be given a longer period of completion time. In nearly all classes, the teacher collects the homework and counts it as part of a student's grade. In the U.S., completion of homework is required; it is not just for practice. Examinations may include essays, short-answer and multiple-choice questions.

Teen Life

While every situation is unique, your social life will probably center around school, family and friends. Most teenagers in the U.S. are involved in school-based activities that take place after the school day ends, such as drama, choir, sports teams, chess, or international and community service clubs. Joining in these activities is a great way to meet people and explore different aspects of U.S. culture.

Most U.S. parents set a curfew (the time someone must return home) for their children, which is typically later on the weekends than during the week. Each family will have its own set of rules regarding going out. Some students will find their host parents' rules stricter than those of their own parents, and some will find them less strict. Whatever the case, it is important to follow the rules set by your host family. This will help establish a trusting and respectful relationship with them and ensure your safety.

AFS Activities

In addition to an orientation at your arrival, AFS-USA will provide you with several others. AFS orientations are a chance for participants to meet (often for a weekend or for a few days) and talk about expectations for the program and past experiences. Orientations involve participating in group activities and self-reflection. Sessions usually provide new information and ways of looking at things while also allowing participants to share points of view. AFS orientations are social, interactive and educational, bringing young people together from many countries and helping them to better understand their own intercultural learning experience.

Travel

Although it is natural for you to want to travel while in the U.S., AFS is not designed as a tourist program. AFS offers the rare opportunity to be immersed in a culture and a country. It is likely, however, that you will have some opportunities to travel with your host family, school, community organization, local chapter or AFS-USA. We strongly discourage traveling on your own or with friends.

Spending Money

Host families are asked to pay only for ordinary family events in which you are expected to participate. When you do such things as shopping for yourself or going out with friends, the expenses are your responsibility. We recommend that participants bring approximately \$150 dollars per month.

Safety and Support

During your stay, local AFS Volunteers will be available to assist you as you learn to live as an American. In the event of an emergency, AFS staff can be reached 24 hours a day by you in your host country and by your natural family at home.

For the welfare of participants, AFS worldwide has two rules: No driving and no use of drugs for non-medicinal purposes. AFS-USA has a third rule: No hitchhiking. While hitchhiking may be common in some countries, it is considered a potentially dangerous activity in the U.S. Any student who violates any of these rules will be automatically sent home.

Health Precautions

In addition to the precautions mentioned above, AFS suggests that you discuss the health recommendations for the U.S. with your personal doctor to determine what is best for you and your personal needs. You can easily find this information through your government or on the Internet. If you require any medical assistance during your stay, your host family or local volunteers will be ready to help find it. As an AFS participant, your medical expenses are covered for illness or injuries incurred while on the program, exclusive of pre-existing, dental or visual aid expenses.

Documents

You must have a passport that will be valid for six months longer than your intended stay in the U.S. In addition to your passport, you also need a visa to enter and reside in the U.S. AFS-USA will send the documents necessary to obtain your J-1 visa to your home country's AFS office. At that time, staff and volunteers in your home country will assist you in applying for your visa at the U.S. Consulate.

Program Prices

Please [contact the AFS office in your home country](#) for information about program price and scholarship possibilities and what the program price covers for the various program offerings. In most cases the program price covers the following: round-trip international travel with your AFS group; travel in the host country to your host family; travel from your host family to your international departure point; AFS's medical plan; placement with your host; orientation in your home country and your host country; 24 hour emergency assistance in your home and host countries; a global medical assistance organization to support extreme emergencies; a network of trained volunteers who support you throughout your experience.

In order to keep costs low and provide good service, AFS utilizes a network of volunteers and staff in 50+ countries around the world. Volunteers need training, support and assistance from professional staff in each country. Other expenses you will normally need to pay in addition to the program price: passport and visa fees, required inoculations, expenses for eyeglasses, contacts and dental care, school uniforms (where applicable) and personal spending money. Your housing and food are provided by your host family as part of their commitment to our program.

Country Information

Geography and Climate

In addition to the 50 states, the U.S. has several territories and possessions located in the Caribbean Sea and the Pacific Ocean.

Northwest of Canada is the state of Alaska. The state of Hawaii is located in the Pacific Ocean, southwest of California.

The U.S. is a varied land of forests, deserts, mountains, high flatlands and fertile plains. Almost every kind of climate can be found in the U.S., varying from state to state. The climate is mostly temperate, but tropical in Hawaii and Florida, and arctic in Alaska.

Population

There are more than 290,000,000 people living in the U.S. Ethnicities: White 73%, Black 12%, Hispanic 11%, Asian and Pacific Islander 3.5%, Native American 1%.

Language

English is the official language, but in about 18% of U.S. homes, more than one language is spoken.

The top 10 most widely spoken languages in the U.S. (according to the 2000 Census):

English: 215,423,557

Spanish: 28,101,052

Chinese: 2,022,143

French: 1,643,838

German: 1,383,442

Tagalog: 1,224,221

Vietnamese: 1,009,627

Italian: 1,008,370

Government

The U.S. government runs as a democracy. Governmental power and functions rest in three branches: the Executive, Judicial and Legislative. Through a system called separation of powers, each branch operates independently of the others.

Executive Branch

President: Leader of the country and Commander-in-Chief of the military.

Vice President: President of the Senate who becomes President if the elected President is unable to serve.

Departments: Department heads advise the President on policy issues and help execute those policies.

Independent Agencies: Help execute policy or provide special services.

Judicial Branch

The judicial branch of government was established with the creation of the Supreme Court. This court is the highest in the country and is vested with the judicial powers of government. There are lower Federal courts, but they were not created by the national Constitution. Rather, Congress deemed them necessary and established them using power granted from the Constitution.

Legislative Branch

The legislative or law-making branch of government was established with the formation of a bicameral Congress, consisting of the House of Representatives and the Senate. Citizens of each state elect members of the legislative branch to be their representatives.

Religion

Protestant 58%, Roman Catholic 21%, other Christian 6%, Jewish 2%, Muslim 2%, other 2%, none 9%.

Launching Your AFS Experience

Evaluations by previous participants support our belief that those students who prepare prior to leaving have the best experience. To familiarize yourself with life in the U.S., make use of your local library and/or the Internet. A lot of general information is available about the U.S. and its culture.

Although each participant's experience is unique, we strongly suggest that you speak with a recent AFS participant to the U.S. This person will be an excellent resource regarding living as an American. If you do not know any alumni, please contact your local volunteer or national AFS office. In addition, AFS-USA will provide you with a special packet of country-specific information.

Americans will be curious about your home community. You may be surprised to find out how much they already know about your country. Therefore, it is also helpful to be as informed as possible about current events in your community and country.

If you have not already received a full AFS application packet, please contact your local AFS Volunteer or national office to request one. We wish you a wonderful AFS experience!

Curiously U.S.



Capital City: Washington, DC



National independence: July 4, 1776



Highest point: Mt. McKinley, Alaska



Lowest point: Death Valley, California



Largest state: Alaska



Smallest state: Rhode Island



National bird: Bald Eagle



National flower: Rose



National anthem: The Star-Spangled Banner

How to Apply

To become a participant in this country's School Program, contact your nearest AFS office. To locate an AFS office, go to <http://www.afs.org/contact>

Student age (upon arrival)	15 years to 18 years, 5 months	
Country data	Size	About 3.5 million square miles
	Population	About 292 million
	Official language	English
	Government	Democracy
Currency	U.S. Dollar	
Useful websites	http://www.census.gov/index.html	
	http://bensguide.gpo.gov/subject.html	
AFS-USA website	www.afs.org/usa	

AFS program destinations are not always available to residents of all countries. If a program interests you, please contact your nearest AFS office to find out if it is an option for you. You can locate your nearest AFS office at <http://www.afs.org/contact>