

School Finance - School Choice

Choosing a School: A Parent's Guide to Educational Choices in Massachusetts

All school-age children who live in Massachusetts are entitled to attend a public school free of charge and all children between the ages of 6 and 16 must attend school. Most children attend school in their home district, the school district in which they live. In certain situations, parents may choose to enroll children in public schools outside of their home district. These choices include the inter-district school choice program, charter schools, vocational technical schools, Metco, the Massachusetts Virtual Academy, and the Massachusetts Academy of Math & Science at Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI). Parents may also choose to educate their children in non-public settings through private schools or home schooling. This advisory provides information and links to additional resources on these options.

I. Your Home School District

In general, children have a right to attend public school in the city or town where they actually reside, whether they live with their parents, other relatives, or in a foster or group home. If your child lives in a city or town that operates its own school district, this district is your child's home district. For example, students living in Boston are entitled to attend the Boston Public Schools. These districts are sometimes referred to as local or municipal school districts. Each local district is governed by a local school committee, whose members are either elected by the voters or appointed by the city's mayor.

Some cities and towns, particularly smaller towns, have joined together to establish a regional school district. For example, the Wachusett Regional School District has five member towns—Holden, Paxton, Princeton, Rutland, and Sterling. If your child lives in any one of those five towns, he or she has a right to attend school in the Wachusett Regional School District. The Wachusett Regional School District is your child's home district. Regional districts are governed by a regional school committee, whose members are either elected or appointed as provided in state law.

In some cases, a town may have a local school district for the lower grades and be a member of a regional district for the upper grades. For example, the town of Sturbridge has a local school district for grades K-6, and the town is a member of the Tantasqua Regional School District, which serves grades 7-12. If a child lives in Sturbridge and is in grades K-6, he or she has a right to attend the Sturbridge Public Schools. If a child lives in Sturbridge and is in grades 7-12, he or she has a right to attend school in the Tantasqua Regional School District.

A few towns do not operate their own school district and are not members of a regional school district. In these cases, the town is required to have an agreement with a nearby school district, under which the town pays tuition to that district to educate the town's students. For example, the town of Tyringham has a tuition agreement with the town of Lee under which all Tyringham students can attend the Lee Public Schools. If your child lives in Tyringham, he or she has a right to attend the Lee Public Schools, which is considered your child's home district.

Choosing a school within your home district. Some school districts have only one school serving each grade; others may have several schools for all or some grades. If your home district has more than one school for your child's grade level, the district's policy will determine which school students attend. In some cases your child might be assigned to a school based on where you live. In other cases, you might be able to express a choice as to which school your child will attend. Policies on how students are assigned to schools within a school district are set by the school committee. To find out more about the school assignment policies in your home district, you should contact your district's parent information center or [superintendent's office](#).

II. Attending Public School Outside Your Home District

There are several different programs that allow your child to attend public school outside his or her home district. Each program has its own rules regarding eligibility for admission.

A. The Inter-District School Choice Program

The inter-district school choice program allows a parent to enroll his or her child in a school district that is not the child's home district. Because of space limitations, not all school districts accept out-of-district students under this program. Every year the school committee in each school district decides whether it will accept new enrollments under this program and, if so, in what grades. The [school district profiles](#) page on the Department's website shows, for each district, whether they are accepting school choice students.

If you are interested in having your child attend school in another district under this program and that district is accepting students, you should contact the superintendent's office in the district in which you want to enroll your child. It is advisable to contact districts in advance, generally during the winter or spring prior to the year in which you want to enroll your child. Districts generally require the submission of an application. If more students apply than there are spaces available, the district will hold a lottery to select which students will be admitted. If a district has fewer applicants than it has seats for school choice students, it may choose to accept students at any time during the school year. A sibling of a child currently attending school in another district under school choice will receive preference in the admissions lottery.

Your home district does not have to approve your child's application for admission to another district. Your child is eligible to apply for the school choice program in another district even if your home district is not accepting enrollment through school choice.

Once your child is accepted into another district under school choice, he or she is entitled to attend that district's schools until high school graduation. You do not have to reapply each year.

Transportation is not provided for students attending another school district under this program. You are responsible for getting your child to and from the school.

For additional general information about the inter-district school choice program, contact the Department's [school finance office](#).

B. Charter Schools

Charter schools are public schools that operate independently of local school districts. Each school is governed by a board of trustees. The board of trustees receives a charter directly from the state Board of Education to operate a public school, after going through a rigorous application process. Charter schools are located throughout the state. A [listing of all charter schools](#) is available on the Department's website. Each charter school determines what grade levels it will serve and what particular programs it will offer, and that decision is contained in its charter.

Most charter schools are "Commonwealth" charter schools, and any student in the state can apply for admission. If more students apply to a charter school than there is space available, the charter school will hold a lottery to determine which students will be admitted. Enrollment preference is given to siblings of students who currently attend the school and to students living in the city or town where the charter school is located. Once a student is admitted to a charter school, he or she is entitled to attend in subsequent years without reapplying.

Some Commonwealth charter schools are designated as regional schools and serve several cities or towns. For regional charter schools, students living in any one of the cities or towns in the region receive enrollment preference.

A few charter schools are designated as Horace Mann charter schools. These schools, although still independent, have closer ties to the local school district.

Generally, transportation is provided to charter school students only if they live in the school district in which the charter school is located. If your child lives in a school district outside of the one in which the charter school is located, you are responsible for getting your child to and from the charter school.

The Board of Education must decide every five years whether to renew the school's charter. In addition, the Board may revoke a charter before the end of the five years if the school fails to meet certain requirements of its charter. If your child is attending a charter school and the school's charter is revoked or not renewed, your child will need to transfer back to his or her home district or select another option for enrolling outside of the home district.

For information about a particular charter school, or to apply for admission, [contact the school](#) directly. Most schools conduct their enrollment lotteries during January or February, so early applications are advised. For general information about the charter school program, contact the Department's [charter school office](#).

C. Vocational Technical Education Programs

In grades 9-12, students may choose to participate in vocational technical education programs, such as automotive technology, culinary arts, or design and visual communications, in preparation for a future career. Students in these programs take academic courses in addition to their technical courses and must meet the same requirements for high school graduation that all high school students must meet, including passing the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System or "MCAS" tests. These vocational technical education programs are approved by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and are sometimes referred to as "Chapter 74-approved" programs.

Several school districts offer vocational technical education programs within the district itself, either in the district's regular high school or in a separate vocational technical high school. Most cities and towns, however, choose to offer vocational technical education programs by joining a regional vocational school district. For example, the Greater Lowell Regional Vocational School District serves the city of Lowell and the towns of Dracut, Dunstable, and Tyngsborough. Each regional vocational technical school district operates a regional vocational technical high school that serves a number of cities and towns in its geographic area and offers a range of vocational technical education programs and academic courses.

If your city or town belongs to a regional vocational school district, your child is eligible to apply for admission for grades 9-12. Vocational technical high schools have admissions criteria and may have enrollment limits. Transportation is provided for students from the member towns. If you are interested, contact the vocational technical high school to which your town belongs. To see if your town belongs to a regional vocational high school, look up your town on the [school profile page](#) on the Department's website.

Out-of-District Vocational Technical Education Programs. If your child would like to attend a vocational technical education program other than the one in your home district or in the regional vocational district to which your town belongs, you have two choices. First, your child may apply to another vocational technical high school under the inter-district school choice program, described earlier, if that high school accepts school choice students. Students attending another vocational technical high school under the school choice program can elect any vocational technical program offered by that school.

Second, if your city or town does not offer the particular vocational technical education program in which your child is interested, either in its own high school or in the regional vocational technical high school to which your city or town belongs, your child may apply for admission, under the Chapter 74 non-resident option, to any vocational technical high school or other high school in the state that offers the program. To enroll through this option, your child must meet the school's admissions criteria. Some vocational technical high schools will admit out-of-district students only through the Chapter 74 non-resident option and will not admit out-of-district students through the inter-district school choice program. If your child is admitted through the Chapter 74 non-resident option, transportation will be provided. The Chapter 74 non-resident option is described in greater detail in the [program guidelines](#) on this website.

Out-of-district students enrolled through Chapter 74 may continue at the school only as long as they continue to be enrolled in the particular vocational technical program to which they were admitted. If a student wants to switch to a different program and that vocational technical education program is offered by your city or town, the student will have to return to the home district or seek admission to the regional vocational technical high school to which the city or town belongs.

Agricultural schools. The state has four vocational technical high schools that offer specialized agricultural programs in addition to other vocational technical education programs. The Norfolk County Agricultural School, located in Walpole, and the Bristol County Agricultural School, located in Dighton, give enrollment preference to residents of Norfolk and Bristol counties, respectively. The Essex North Shore Agricultural and Technical High School is located in Danvers and has seventeen member cities and towns and accepts non-resident students from other communities. The Smith Vocational and Agricultural School in Northampton is operated by the City of Northampton independent of the Northampton Public Schools. It gives enrollment preference to Northampton residents and also enrolls many students from nearby towns under the non-resident option in Chapter 74 described earlier. If your child is interested in any of these four schools, contact the school directly for additional information and enrollment applications. In addition to these four schools, other high schools offer programs in agriculture. Please check with your local high school and regional vocational technical high school to learn about their offerings.

For more information on vocational technical education, contact the Department's [career/vocational technical education unit](#).

D. Metco

The Metco program was established in 1966 to provide opportunities for minority students in Boston to attend school in one of the suburban school districts surrounding Boston. Today the Metco program serves about 3,000 Boston and Springfield students in grades K-12 who attend school in more than thirty suburban districts. Enrollment in the program is limited and there is a long waiting list. Students who are accepted into the program are assigned to a suburban district by the program; students do not choose the district that they will attend. Once enrolled, students are provided with transportation to and from the suburban district and a range of services to help them adjust academically and socially to their new district. For more information and to apply for the Boston area program, parents should contact [Metco, Inc.](#) For more information and to apply for the Springfield area program, contact the [Springfield Public Schools](#).

E. The Massachusetts Virtual Academy (MAVA)

A Commonwealth of Massachusetts Virtual School (CMVS) is a public school operated by a board of trustees where teachers primarily teach from a remote location using the Internet or other computer-based methods and students are not required to be located at the physical premises of the school. Each CMVS determines what grade levels it will serve and what particular programs it will offer. List of Massachusetts virtual schools:

CMVS	Grades Served	Opening
Massachusetts Virtual Academy at Greenfield Commonwealth Virtual School	K-12	now open
TEC Connections Academy (TECCA) Commonwealth Virtual School	K-12	2014-2015 school year

Any student in the state can apply for admission to a virtual school. If more students apply to a CMVS than there is space available, the school will hold a lottery to determine which students will be admitted. Once a student is admitted to a CMVS, he or she is entitled to attend in subsequent years without reapplying.

For information about a particular CMVS, or to apply for admission, contact the [school](#) directly. The resources below will help you determine whether you student is prepared to thrive in an online program. For information to determine whether you student is prepared to thrive in an online program, see [Frequently Asked Questions for Parents and Students](#).

F. Massachusetts Academy of Math & Science at WPI

The Massachusetts Academy of Math & Science at WPI, located in Worcester, is an independent public high school operated in partnership with Worcester Polytechnic Institute. It provides an advanced course of study, focusing on science and mathematics, for eleventh and twelfth graders. Admission is selective.

For further information, see the [Academy's website](#).

III. Private Education And Home Schooling

In addition to the public education options described above, parents may also choose to send their children to a private or parochial school or choose to educate their children at home. Private and parochial schools must be approved by the local school committee in order to enroll children of compulsory school age (6-16). Private and parochial schools charge tuition, although some may offer scholarships and other financial assistance. A list of the private and parochial schools in each town is included on the [school profile page](#) on this website.

Parents may also choose to educate their children at home. For a child of compulsory school age, the home schooling program must be approved in advance by the superintendent or school committee of the home district. For further information on this option, contact your [local superintendent's](#) office.