



# Indiana Department of Education

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## Choice Scholarship Program Frequently Asked Questions for Parents and Students 2015-2016 School Year Revised May 15, 2015

### General Questions

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**1) What is the Indiana Choice Scholarship program?**

Choice Scholarships, sometimes referred to as vouchers, provide State funding to qualifying students that can be used to offset tuition costs at participating schools. Students qualify based on student eligibility criteria and household income.

**2) Who administers the Choice Scholarship program?**

The Indiana Department of Education administers the Choice Scholarship Program. There are other groups that promote school choice in Indiana; however, the Department is responsible for determining eligibility and awarding scholarships.

**3) Where do I apply for the Choice Scholarship program?**

Parents and students will apply at a participating school.

**4) When can I apply for the program?**

The application window for the 2015-2016 school year opens on February 27, 2015 and closes on September 1, 2015.

**5) Which schools participate in the Choice Scholarship program?**

A list of participating schools can be found on the program website at [www.doe.in.gov/choice](http://www.doe.in.gov/choice). For the 2014-2015 school year, 314 schools participated in the program.

**6) How many years has the program been in existence?**

The program has been in place for four years beginning with the 2011-2012 school year.

### Eligibility Questions

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**1) What are the eligibility requirements for a Choice Scholarship?**

There are two components to determining eligibility:

1. Student eligibility criteria; and
2. Household income limits.

**2) What are the student eligibility criteria?**

To be eligible, a student must satisfy each of the following three initial requirements:

1. Have legal settlement in Indiana;
2. Be between the ages of 5 and 22 no later than August 1 of the school year; and
3. Be accepted for enrollment into a participating Choice Scholarship School.

After satisfying the three initial requirements listed above, there are seven different pathways that a student can satisfy to become eligible to participate in the Choice Scholarship Program. The seven pathways, labeled A through G, are outlined below. A student must satisfy only one of the seven pathways to be eligible.

**A. Continuing Choice Scholarship Student Pathway**

- i. The student received a Choice Scholarship in the school year that immediately precedes the school year for which the student is applying for a Choice Scholarship, and
- ii. The student is a member of a household with an annual income equal to or below 200% of the amount to qualify for the federal free or reduced lunch program.

**B. Previous Choice Scholarship Student Pathway**

- i. The student received a Choice Scholarship in a school year that does not immediately precede the school year for which the student is applying for a Choice Scholarship;
- ii. The student received a Choice Scholarship in the immediately preceding school year but the student exited the Choice School prior to the end of the school year; and,
- iii. The student is a member of a household with an annual income equal to or below 150% of the amount to qualify for the federal free or reduced lunch program.

**C. Previous Scholarship Granting Organization (SGO) Award Pathway**

- i. The student received an SGO Scholarship in a previous school year, including a school year that does not immediately precede the school year for which the student is applying for a Choice Scholarship.
- ii. The six approved Scholarship Granting Organizations (SGOs) are:
  - Elkhart County Community Foundation
  - Institute for Quality Education, Inc. (Formerly Educational Choice Charitable Trust)
  - School Scholarship Granting Organization of Northeast Indiana
  - Sagamore Institute Scholarships for Education Choice
  - The Lutheran Scholarship Granting Organization of Indiana
  - Tuition Assistance Fund of Southwestern Indiana (Closed February 2013)
- iii. The student is a member of a household with an annual income equal to or below 150% of the amount to qualify for the federal free or reduced lunch program.

**D. Special Education Pathway**

- i. The student has a disability that requires special education and related services;
- ii. An individualized education program (IEP) pursuant to IC 20-35 or a service plan pursuant to 511 IAC 7-34 has been developed for the student; and,
- iii. The student is a member of a household with an annual income equal to or below 200% of the amount to qualify for the federal free or reduced lunch program.

**E. "F" Public School Pathway**

- i. The student would be required to attend a specific public school based on their residence that has been assigned an "F" grade. Note: This pathway does not require prior attendance at the school, and
- ii. The student is a member of a household with an annual income equal to or below 150% of the amount to qualify for the federal free or reduced lunch program.

**F. Two-Semesters in Public School Pathway**

- i. The student was enrolled in kindergarten through grade 12 in a public school, including a charter school, in Indiana for at least two semesters immediately preceding the first semester for which the individual receives a Choice Scholarship, and
- ii. The student is a member of a household with an annual income equal to or below 150% of the amount to qualify for the federal free or reduced lunch program.

**G. Sibling Pathway**

- i. The sibling of the newly applying student received either a Choice Scholarship or an SGO scholarship in a preceding school year, including a school year that does not immediately precede the school year for which the student is applying for a Choice Scholarship, and
- ii. The student is a member of a household with an annual income equal to or below 150% of the amount to qualify for the federal free or reduced lunch program.

**3) Can kindergarten students apply for a Choice Scholarship?**

Yes, kindergarten students are eligible to apply provided they satisfy the student eligibility and household income criteria.

**4) If a child attends a public school for kindergarten, can this count toward the two semesters in public school requirement?**

Yes, kindergarten attendance may satisfy the two semesters in public school pathway requirement.

**5) What year A through F grades will be used to determine the F schools for eligibility purposes for the 2015-2016 Choice Scholarship Program?**

The A through F grades issued in the fall of 2014 for school performance in the 2013-2014 school year will be used to determine the F schools for eligibility purposes for the 2015-2016 Choice Scholarship Program.

**6) What does the term “sibling” mean for purposes of the Choice Scholarship Program?**

For purposes of the Choice Scholarship Program, the term “sibling” shall mean one of two or more individuals having one or both parents, guardians or custodians in common. The term does not require a consanguineous (blood) relationship between the individuals.

**7) When did the sibling of a student attempting to qualify under the sibling pathway have to receive a Choice Scholarship or SGO award for the sibling to be eligible?**

To be eligible under the sibling pathway, the student’s sibling had to receive a Choice Scholarship or SGO award in any previous year.

**8) What are the household income limits?**

The income guidelines for the 2015-2016 school year are posted on the Choice Scholarship Program website at [www.doe.in.gov/choice](http://www.doe.in.gov/choice).

**9) Is the household income of the foster parent included when determining whether the foster child is eligible to receive a Choice Scholarship?**

No. Under current State procedures, foster children are directly certified for the Free and Reduced School Lunch program, as well as, textbook rental assistance. If official documentation can be provided that verifies the student’s (current) foster status, the income verification process will not be required.

Notwithstanding additional guidance from the Department of Child Services (DCS) in the future, we recommend the school obtain an official email from the local DCS caseworker confirming foster care status. Please save that email for the school's records.

Additionally, if your household includes biological or adopted children in addition to foster children, payments received for serving as a foster parent will not be included in the household income calculation for purposes of determining eligibility for the biological or adopted children.

**10) What counts as income and who should be included in the household size?**

For questions about determining income and household size, please view the income verification document posted on the Choice Scholarship Program website at [www.doe.in.gov/choice](http://www.doe.in.gov/choice).

## **Application Process**

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**1) Who is responsible for determining whether a student is eligible for a Choice Scholarship?**

The participating Choice Scholarship School is responsible for determining whether the student meets the eligibility guidelines. As part of being "eligible", the participating school must have enrolled (or agree to enroll) the student and may do so on the condition of the student receiving a Choice Scholarship award. Income documentation establishing eligibility should be kept on file at the school.

**2) How is the amount of the Choice Scholarship award determined?**

The award is the lesser of:

1. Tuition and fees at the Choice School; or,
2. An amount based off the per-student State funding formula for the student's school corporation of residence, determined as follows:
  - 90% of the funding formula amount if the family income falls within 100% of the Reduced School Lunch eligibility.
  - 50% of the funding formula amount if the family income is above 100% but under 150% of the Reduced School Lunch eligibility.
  - 50% of the funding formula amount if the family income is above 100% but under 200% of the Reduced School Lunch eligibility if the student is considered a Continuing Choice Scholarship Student or if the student has a disability that requires special education.

**3) Where can I review the per-student State funding for the corporation of residence?**

This information is available on the Choice Scholarship Program website at [www.doe.in.gov/choice](http://www.doe.in.gov/choice).

**4) Can a student apply to the Indiana Department of Education for a Choice Scholarship award?**

No. A student must apply at a participating Choice Scholarship School. The school will then submit the student's application to the Indiana Department of Education (IDOE) for processing.

**5) How will families be notified of their award?**

The school will print the award letter for the family at the time the application is submitted and approved.

**6) Can a student submit an application to multiple schools?**

A student can only have one application submitted to one school at a time. If a student wishes to switch the school their award is for they can only do so during the application window, which is open from February 27 through September 1, 2015. The student would need to delete their application from the original school and reapply at the school the student now wishes to attend. After the September 1 application deadline, a student cannot change the school for their Choice Scholarship award.

## **Tuition and Fees**

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**1) Can a participating school charge tuition and fees in addition to what is covered by the Choice Scholarship award?**

Yes. The parent/guardian is responsible for any tuition and fees that the participating school charges beyond the Choice Scholarship amount. Parents should carefully read any agreement they sign with the school. The school's policies may include language requiring payment regardless of whether a Choice Scholarship is awarded. A Choice Scholarship School should not charge Choice Scholarship Students additional fees and costs that are not routinely charged to non-Choice eligible students.

**2) Will we receive additional funding if our student receives special education services?**

The parent or guardian of an eligible special education student will designate either the Choice School or the public school corporation as the special education service provider. If a family selects the Choice School as the service provider, the Choice School may be eligible to receive the state special education funding allocated for that student. This funding is to be used to provide special education services for the eligible student. For more information on the Choice Scholarship Program and special education, please review the Choice Scholarship and Special Education Services FAQ available at:

<http://www.doe.in.gov/sites/default/files/choice/choice-scholarship-and-special-ed-services-faq-9-25-13.pdf>

**3) Is there a limit of Choice Scholarship awards each school year?**

No, there is no limit to the number of scholarships that can be awarded each year.

## **Attendance and Payment Process**

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**1) Can a school discriminate in its application process?**

The school may not discriminate on the basis of race, color or national origin. Participating schools are also not allowed to set admission standards for Choice Scholarship students that are higher than the standards used for the rest of the students.

If the number of students applying for Choice Scholarship to a school exceed the number of "scholarship seats" available, the school must conduct a random lottery-styled drawing at a public meeting. Individual schools will have their own process in place to comply with this requirement.

**2) Can a student receive a Choice Scholarship after the school year has already begun?**

To be awarded a Choice Scholarship for the current school year, a complete application must be submitted for the student by the September 1 application deadline and the student must be fully enrolled and expected in attendance on the September count day.

**3) If a student receives a Choice Scholarship award and then decides to transfer within the same school year, what happens to the Choice Scholarship?**

As a condition of participation in the program, the IDOE requires schools to report the student as exiting on their Enrollment and Mobility (EM) Report within five business days of the student's withdrawal. If a payment for the student has already been made, the IDOE will contact the school to collect a prorated refund for the portion of the school year the student is not attending the Choice School. If the payment has not yet been made, it will be prorated by the IDOE to reflect the student's enrollment at the Choice School.

**4) Can a student transfer to a different Choice School and retain their Choice Scholarship?**

No. The Choice Scholarship is school specific. The student cannot change schools during the school year and use a Choice Scholarship to attend the second school. If the student changes schools after the September 1 application deadline, the student will forfeit the remaining amount of the Choice Scholarship.

**5) Can a student who has withdrawn from their Choice School return to the same Choice School at a later date in the school year and continue to receive their Choice Scholarship Award?**

No, if a student withdraws and is reported as exiting on the Enrollment and Mobility Report in compliance with the five day requirement, the student forfeits the remaining portion of their Choice Scholarship award, even if the student later returns to the same Choice School. Schools are encouraged to communicate to families that at the time the student is withdrawn, the student is no longer eligible to receive Choice Scholarship award funds for the remainder of the school year in which the student withdrew.

**6) How will the payment process work? Is there anything I need to do once school starts?**

The parent/guardian plays a very important role in the payment process. The Choice Scholarship award is designated directly to the participating school on the student's behalf. After the student Count Day in mid-September the school will provide the parent with an "Endorsement Form" which must be signed, dated and returned to the school. This Endorsement Form will instruct the State to provide payment to the school on the student's behalf. Without the completed endorsement form, the State will not make a payment for that student. There will be two Endorsement Form periods throughout the school year.

**7) What happens to the payment if the student withdraws before the school year is over? Are there any costs to the family beyond what is covered by the Choice Scholarship?**

The Choice Scholarship award is a year-long award. When a student withdraws from the participating school, the Choice Scholarship amount is prorated down to the number of days that the student was enrolled at the Choice School. For example, if the school year for XYZ School is 180 days and Student A was enrolled in the school for 45 days then withdrew, Student A would have been enrolled for 25% of the school year. If Student A's Choice Scholarship award was \$4,000, 25% or \$1,000 would be paid to the participating school on the student's behalf.

It is important for families to become familiar with the individual participating school's policies concerning student withdrawal and tuition payment. Individual school policies vary and may require that tuition and fee costs be paid for the full month for which the student withdraws or even for the full semester. The family is responsible for the discrepancy in tuition charges resulting from the State's system of prorating payments down to the day and the participating school's withdrawal and tuition payment policies.

**8) How often will State payments be made?**

At a minimum, Choice Scholarship payments will be made twice per year, once each semester.

**School Scholarship Tax Credit (SGO) Program**

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**1) What is the SGO Scholarship?**

The program provides a 50% State tax credit for contributions made to qualified Scholarship Granting Organizations (SGOs) which offer scholarships to low and middle income children to attend private schools of their choice. For more information about the SGO Scholarship please see the link below:

<http://www.doe.in.gov/choice/school-scholarships>

**2) Can a student who receives a Choice Scholarship also receive a SGO Scholarship?**

Yes. A student who meets the requirements for a Choice Scholarship could qualify for a SGO Scholarship as well, provided that the combination of the two amounts does not exceed tuition and fees at the school.

**Questions**

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**1. Who should I contact if I have questions?**

Your first point of contact should be the Choice School you are interested in having your student attend. The school can help you with enrollment and application questions. You may also contact the Department at [choiceschool@doe.in.gov](mailto:choiceschool@doe.in.gov) or (317)233-2200.