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F-1 STUDENT VISAS **AT-A-GLANCE**

What is an F-1 Visa?

An F-1 visa is a type of visa under which a non-immigrant student coming to the United States to pursue full-time academic training may be legally admitted. Students eligible for an F-1 visa include academic students in colleges, universities, seminaries, conservatories, academic high schools, other academic institutions, Fine Arts, and language training.

What is an I-20 form?

Form I-20 is the “Certificate for Eligibility for Nonimmigrant Student Status.” Any student seeking to obtain an F-1 visa must obtain a completed I-20 form from the school at which the student seeks to attend. A student will not be eligible to obtain an F-1 visa until an I-20 form has been issued for the student by the school.

Can any public or private school district issue an I-20 form or accept students with an F-1 Visa?

No. Only schools certified by the Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) may issue I-20 forms and enroll nonimmigrant students on an F-1 visa.

How does a school become SEVP certified?

To become SEVP certified, eligible schools must apply for certification with the United States Department of Homeland Security’s SEVP School Certification Branch, complete the certification process, and become approved by the Department.

What schools are eligible for SEVP certification approval?

To be eligible for certification approval, a school must be 1) a bona fide school; 2) an established institution of learning or other recognized place of study; 3) in possession of the necessary facilities, personnel, and finances to conduct instruction in recognized courses; and 4) engaged in instruction of those courses. Public high schools are eligible to be certified, however public elementary or junior high schools (grades K-8) are not eligible. Home schools, pre-schools, and schools whose programs are primarily online are also not eligible.

What does the school-certification process entail?

To become certified, a school must first submit the online Form I-17, “Petition for Approval of School for Attendance by Nonimmigrant Student,” and pay the non-refundable filing fee of \$1700. As part of its petition, the school is required to designate the individual(s) who will serve as the school’s principal designated school official (“PDSO”) and the designated school official(s) (“DSO”). SEVP will then review the petition for completeness, and may contact the school if additional information is required. If the petition is complete, SEVP will contact the school to schedule a site visit with a site inspector. If the school has more than one school or campus at which F-1 visa students will attend, the site inspector must conduct a separate site visit

for each location. The school will be charged a fee of \$655.00 per site visit (in addition to the \$1700 filing fee). School officials must also complete a web-based DSO Training course before the site visit. After the site visit, the school may be required to submit additional information to SEVP. An adjudicator will then review the petition and supporting documentation and makes the decision whether to approve the school for certification.

What are the responsibilities of the school’s PDSO and the DSO?

The PDSO acts as the school’s SEVP liaison and performs the SEVP recordkeeping and reporting requirements. A DSO is responsible for issuing and signing I-20 Forms, registering students in the web-based Student and Exchange Visitor System (“SEVIS”), and updating SEVIS records regarding the student’s arrival, program completion, and transfer. Multiple school officials may serve as a DSO, but only one official may serve as the school’s PDSO.

What is the purpose of the site visit?

The purpose of the site visit is to gather evidence on eligibility, review the facilities, and to interview personnel identified on the petition as a PDSO or a DSO.

How long does the school-certification process take?

The school-certification process typically takes four to six months from the date the petition is initially filed by the school. This time frame is largely dependent on the adjudicator’s caseload.

Can a school begin to accept F-1 visa students during the certification process?

No. While a school’s certification is pending, it may not issue I-20 forms or enroll nonimmigrant students on an F-1 visa.

If a school district currently accepts J-1 visa exchange students, does it still need to become SEVP certified to accept F-1 visa students?

Yes. The J-1 visa exchange program is separate and distinct from the F-1 visa classification. The J-1 visa exchange visitor program is administered by the Department of State, while the F-1 visa program is administered by the Department of Homeland Security.

Do all high schools have to become certified?

No. A high school district is not required to become SEVP-certified. If it is not certified, however, it may not issue I-20 forms for students seeking to attend the school on an F-1 visa. Based on a review of the current list of SEVP-approved schools, most public high school districts are not SEVP-certified.

Additional SEVP Certification Resources:

- 8 C.F.R. 214
- General Information and resources on F-1 Certification:
http://www.ice.gov/sevis/schools/new_schools/#
- 13-page Guidance Document on Certification Process:
http://www.ice.gov/doclib/sevis/pdf/i17_process.pdf
- SEVIS Online System: <https://egov.ice.gov/sevis/>
- List of SEVP approved schools:
<http://www.ice.gov/doclib/sevis/pdf/ApprovedSchools.pdf>