CCNETWORK Regional Comprehensive Center Northwest

The Visa Process

A PRACTICAL OVERVIEW FOR HIRING INTERNATIONAL TEACHERS

Background

When school districts hire teachers internationally, visas play a central role in determining how long a teacher may work in the United States, when they can begin employment, and what obligations districts must meet during the teacher's employment period. Visa requirements shape timelines, contracts, staffing continuity, and long-term workforce planning.

For districts that are new to international teacher recruitment, the visa process can be difficult to navigate. Visa options differ in duration, renewal rules, and district responsibilities, and these differences can have important implications for budgeting, onboarding, and retention. District leaders may be unsure which visa options are most commonly used in K–12 settings, how long those visas last, or what is involved in extending a teacher's authorization to work.

Together with the *International Recruitment 101* tip sheet and *Cost, Capacity, and Compliance* tip sheet, this resource is designed to help district leaders develop a foundational understanding of how visa requirements intersect with international recruitment and to plan responsibly for staffing continuity and compliance. The brief should not serve as legal guidance.

Tip Sheet Overview

This tip sheet provides a high-level overview of visa pathways commonly used by U.S. school districts to hire international teachers and explains what districts should understand about visa extensions and transitions. Districts seeking to hire international teachers should consult with legal professionals to ensure their efforts comply with current law.

In this tip sheet, you can find:

An overview of two common visa pathways for districts to consider when hiring international teachers

Strategies for extending visas

Side-by-side comparison of the two common visa pathways

Two Common Visa Pathways for International Teachers

School districts that hire teachers internationally typically rely on a limited number of visa pathways that authorize educators from other countries to work temporarily in K–12 schools in the United States. The visa type affects how long a teacher can remain in the district, how hiring timelines will unfold, and what planning responsibilities the district must manage over time.

The two visa pathways most commonly used by districts are the J-1 Exchange Visitor (Teacher) Visa and the H-1B Specialty Occupation Visa. Districts generally select between these options based on staffing needs, expected length of employment, internal capacity, and tolerance for timeline and cost variability (see the Appendix for a side-by-side comparison of the J-1 and H-1B visa options).

J-1 EXCHANGE VISITOR VISA

The J-1 Teacher Exchange Visa is the most frequently used visa pathway for international teachers in K–12 education. It is designed for temporary teaching placements through approved exchange programs and must be managed through a designated sponsor.

Typical features

- A three-year base term, with possible extensions of one to two years
- Must participate in an approved exchange program
- Sponsor organization manages immigration paperwork
- Commonly used for short- to medium-term staffing needs

Districts often choose the J-1 visa because it:

- Is commonly used by established international teacher programs
- Supports short- to medium-term staffing needs
- Operates within defined program timelines

Considerations

- Time-limited and may not allow long-term employment
- Extensions are not guaranteed
- Subject to federal program rules and processing timelines
- Districts must plan for staffing once the visa ends

Many states, including Alaska, and many districts participate in the J-1 Teacher Exchange Program. Recent administrative delays and a temporary interview pause also highlight the program's vulnerability to federal process changes.

TIPS TO IDENTIFY J-1 PARTNERS

Districts can find designated sponsor organizations for J-1 visas through BridgeUSA from the State Department. Organizations can place anywhere in the U.S., but some are local to Alaska.

H-1B SPECIALTY OCCUPATION VISA

The H-1B visa offers a work-based route for "specialty occupations" that allows employers to sponsor teachers for work in positions that meet specific criteria.

Typical features

- Three-year term with possible extension to six years
- District (or sponsor) files the petition
- Higher costs and more documentation
- May allow transition to permanent residency if the school district decides to file a petition for an employment-based green card

Districts may consider the H-1B pathway when:

- Longer-term employment is a priority
- The district has sufficient capacity to manage more complex coordination
- Budget and timeline flexibility are available
- Greater flexibility beyond exchange programs is needed

Considerations

- More expensive than J-1 programs
- Processing timelines may change
- Additional labor and reporting requirements may apply
- Policy changes can affect approval timelines and costs

For H-1B visas, policy volatility translates directly into staffing risk. A special H-1B rule went into effect in 2017 that allowed "school districts to obtain an unlimited number of H-1B visas for international teachers as long as the district has a qualifying affiliation agreement with an institution of higher education." Interview freezes or shifts in visa adjudication timelines can delay start dates, while rising visa fees, such as the $100,000 H-1B fee and new labor regulations can make H-1B pathways financially unsustainable for small or rural districts.

TIPS ABOUT H-1B EMPLOYERS

Districts can connect with local employers who have hired with H-1B visa through the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) H-1B Employer Data Hub to learn more about the process.

When to choose the J-1 visa	When to choose the H-1B visa
Best for short-to-medium term placements	Best for longer-term employment
Part of an established exchange program	District has staff capacity for managing H-1B requirements
Lower cost and fewer administrative requirements	Higher cost but allows more flexibility
Limited to temporary teaching assignments	May provide a path to permanent residency

How to Extend a Visa

For districts hiring teachers internationally, visas are time-limited by design. Extending a visa or transitioning a teacher to a different visa status is not automatic and often depends on strict timelines, eligibility requirements, and external approvals. As a result, visa extensions and transitions should be treated as part of long-term workforce planning rather than last-minute administrative tasks.

A visa extension allows a teacher to remain in the United States under the same visa category for an additional period of time, if eligible. A transition involves moving a teacher from one visa category to another, which may change the length of authorized stay and the district's responsibilities. Both options are subject to federal immigration rules and may not be available in all circumstances.

Districts should begin planning early if an internationally recruited teacher may need a visa extension or transition to a different status. Not all teachers will be eligible, and approvals are never guaranteed, so advance planning is essential.

PLANNING FOR VISA EXTENSIONS OR TRANSITIONS

When a teacher's visa may need to be extended or changed, districts should:

- ☑ Begin planning well in advance of the visa expiration date, often several months earlier. For H-1B status, extension petitions can generally be filed up to six months before the expiration of the current H-1B status. For J-1 status, extensions must be processed before the expiration date listed on the current Form DS-2019. Regulations require the extension to be completed by the program's Responsible Officer (RO) or Alternate Responsible Officer (ARO) while the exchange visitor's program remains active. Extension processes generally begin 3–6 months prior to the Form DS-2019 expiration date. These timelines are based on the current information that is available; it is always best to consult with an immigration lawyer to develop the most accurate timeline to meet the needs of your school or school district.
- ☑ Work with the sponsoring organization, partner program, or immigration attorney to understand the requirements, timelines, and limitations for extensions or changes in visa status.

- ☑ Confirm whether the teacher may be eligible for an extension, renewal, or transition to a different visa category.
- ☑ Align visa timelines with contract renewal, licensure requirements, and district staffing plans.
- ☑ Allow extra time for processing, recognizing that immigration approvals are outside district control.
- ☑ Avoid waiting until a visa is close to expiring, as this may limit available options.
- ☑ Stay informed about changes in immigration policies or processing timelines that could affect the placement.
- ☑ Maintain regular communication with the recruitment partner or sponsor and immigration professionals.
- ☑ Plan conservatively and prepare for the possibility that an extension or transition may not be approved.

Visa eligibility, extensions, and approvals are determined by federal authorities, and districts have limited control over processing timelines. Early planning can help reduce the risk of staffing disruptions and support continued compliance.

Conclusion

Visa pathways are a critical consideration for school districts hiring international teachers, shaping both the timeline and duration of employment. Understanding the differences between the J-1 and H-1B visas, along with their costs, requirements, and limitations, can help districts make informed staffing decisions and plan for long-term workforce stability. By planning early and coordinating with sponsors and legal professionals, districts can better navigate visa processes while reducing the risk of staffing disruptions.

Appendix. Side-by-Side Comparison of Visa Options

Feature	J-1 Exchange Visitor (Teacher)	H-1B Specialty Occupation
Primary purpose	Cultural exchange and temporary teaching	Employment in a specialty occupation
Typical use in K–12	Commonly used for international teacher recruitment programs	Used less frequently due to cost and complexity
Initial duration	Usually granted for a limited, defined period (a three-year base term and possible extensions of one to two years)	Typically granted in multi-year increments (an initial three-year stay with a potential extension of three years for a maximum of six years; in certain conditions, the maximum of six years may be extended)
Maximum length of stay	Time-limited, with strict caps (usually five years, except in certain situations)	Longer-term, but still time-limited (usually six years, except in certain situations)
Extension options	Limited and not guaranteed (possible extensions of one to two years)	Extensions possible but not automatic (possible extensions of three years)
Timeline sensitivity	Highly time-sensitive	Time-sensitive, with additional federal caps
District role	Works with sponsor organization; retains oversight responsibilities	Acts as employer sponsor; greater administrative burden
Teacher mobility*	Generally restricted; authorization is tied to the program and district placement	Limited mobility; changing districts requires new sponsorship and approval
Common planning challenge	End-of-program transitions and return requirements	Cost, processing time, and federal caps
Best suited for	Short- to medium-term staffing needs	Longer-term staffing with higher investment

*Teacher mobility refers to whether an internationally recruited teacher can change employers or districts without losing authorization to work in the United States.

Note: Specific eligibility, timelines, and requirements may vary. Districts should consult legal or immigration professionals for guidance on individual cases.

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