New F-1 Rule: Language School Students

Plain-English guidance for English and ESL students

> **Important:** This guide gives general educational information, not legal advice. The rule may be delayed, challenged, or changed. Confirm your personal case before acting.

Final rule: 91 FR 44976, published July 17, 2026 **Scheduled effective date:** September 15, 2026

What changed?

- The DHS final rule replaces Duration of Status (D/S) with a fixed admission period for many F-1 students starting September 15, 2026.
- After entry, reentry, or an approved Extension of Stay, you will normally have a date-specific I-94.
- Four years is not a lifetime limit. It is the maximum for one admission period.
- You may still enter the U.S. up to 30 days before the program start date on your I-20. That early window does not count against your maximum stay.

Students already in the U.S. under D/S on September 15, 2026

- You generally do not need to file Form I-539 immediately.
- Your transition period generally ends on the earlier of: the program end date on your current I-20, the end date on your OPT EAD card, or four years after September 15, 2026.
- Transition students keep the old 60-day grace period until they travel and reenter, or until USCIS approves an Extension of Stay. After that, the grace period becomes 30 days.

> **Travel warning.** Do not travel casually after September 15, 2026. Reentry can give you a fixed I-94 date and reduce your grace period from 60 days to 30 days.

The 24-month ESL limit

- Standalone English-language study is limited to a lifetime aggregate of 24 months under the new rule.
- The limit is prospective: ESL completed before September 15, 2026 does not count.
- The 24 months include school breaks and vacations.
- Time spent outside the U.S. during a break is not added back.
- Illness, disability, or an emergency generally does not extend the 24-month limit.
- You also get a separate 30-day period afterward to depart or seek other lawful status.

Pathway programs

- A true pathway program that combines ESL and a degree at the same institution may receive one admission period covering both programs, up to four years.

- Pathway rules are technical. Confirm with the school DSO before relying on this option.

Your next step

- If you will return home, finish your program and follow the departure rules.
- If you plan to continue studying, start planning early for a certificate or higher degree that fits your background.
- A new I-20 may not be enough if the new program goes beyond your authorized stay.
- English-only programs normally do not provide OPT.

Avoid these mistakes

- Do not assume every new I-20 automatically extends your stay.
- Do not wait until the last month to make a plan.
- Do not travel after September 15, 2026 without checking the I-94 and grace-period consequences.

> **Could this change?** The rule is classified as a major rule, so Congress has a limited window to pass a resolution of disapproval, and lawsuits are possible. Until something actually changes, plan as if the September 15, 2026 date will hold.

Questions in the Otips group

- Post general questions in the group. We answer there so everyone can learn from the response.
- Read earlier questions first. Someone may have already asked the same thing.
- Do not post private documents, passport numbers, SEVIS numbers, or bank statements in the group.
- Send personal documents privately to the Otips team.

For a personal review, prepare

- Current I-20
- I-94
- Passport and visa
- OPT EAD card, if any
- Highest diploma or degree
- Your planned next program and long-term goal

> **Contact Otips**
> Otips Inc. | otips.com | info@otips.com | +1 (415) 235-8080
> 1311 Park St STE 1006, Alameda, CA 94501

Sources: DHS Final Rule, 91 FR 44976; NAFSA final-rule analysis dated July 17, 2026. Otips Inc. (DBA Otips) is not a law firm and does not provide legal advice.