



# VERMONT COMMONS SCHOOL

SCHOLARSHIP | COMMUNITY | GLOBAL RESPONSIBILITY

## FINANCIAL AID: Frequently Asked Questions

A Vermont Commons School education represents a significant financial investment in your child's future. Vermont Commons' need based-tuition assistance program is designed to help make a VCS education accessible to qualified students who may not otherwise be able to afford to attend. All families are eligible to apply, and all financial data and proceedings are confidential.

Vermont Commons School allocates up to 16.5% of its annual operating budget for financial aid, which enables the school to provide financial assistance to approximately 30% of the student body, with an average award of \$12,500. Families receiving financial assistance are expected to contribute a minimum of 20% of Vermont Commons School annual tuition.

Vermont Commons School makes need-blind admissions decisions, independently of and in advance of financial assistance decisions. Vermont Commons School determines a family's need for financial assistance based on the School and Student Services (SSS) computation based on applicable tax returns and other supporting documentation. VCS follows National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) and the SSS Financial guiding principles in its financial aid policies and procedures.

Over time, the school has found several common questions and scenarios emerge regularly each year during the financial aid application process. For the convenience of families considering and/or applying for financial aid, we have compiled those frequently asked questions into this F.A.Q. list that will help clarify the school's process. Click the question to jump to the answer or simply scroll down to read through the full collection of information. The list below is not comprehensive, and families should always contact the business office with further questions or for more information as needed.

### **TIMELINE**

Q: [When are applications due?](#)

Q: [How long does it take to complete the financial aid application?](#)

Q: [My tax return from last year will not be completed by February 20th. What should I do?](#)

Q: [Will you award aid without having my most recent tax return?](#)

Q: [We enrolled after the Financial Aid deadline. Can I still apply?](#)

Q: [When will I hear what the financial aid award is?](#)

Q: [Can I get a fee waiver for the application?](#)

Q: [Do I need to complete the enrollment document and submit the first tuition payment without knowing my aid award?](#)

Q: [Do I need to apply each year?](#)

## **DOCUMENTATION**

Q: [What information will you need for support of our aid application?](#)

Q: [What if the required information we provide through the SSS portal does not indicate sufficient income or financial resources to pay for our basic daily living expenses?](#)

Q: [I own my own business. How does that impact my Financial Aid application?](#)

Q: [Why do I provide information regarding real estate that I own?](#)

## **HOUSEHOLD**

Q: [How do you account for families with multiple children attending VCS?](#)

Q: [My spouse and I are divorced. I don't want them to see my financial information? How does this work?](#)

Q: [My spouse and I are divorced and my spouse refuses to pay for private school tuition. Do they need to apply for aid?](#)

Q: [My spouse and I are divorced and we have it written in our divorce settlement that I am responsible for 100% of school costs?](#)

Q: [My spouse and I are divorced; they have no legal, custodial, or educational rights, and I have court documentation to verify this. Are they required to apply for Financial Aid?](#)

Q: [I live with someone I am not married to. How does this affect my application?](#)

Q: [My spouse does not work outside the home. How does that affect our application?](#)

## **AID DECISION**

Q: [How is aid determined?](#)

Q: [How does SSS calculate our need?](#)

Q: [Does SSS have a cap on family income above which financial aid will not be awarded?](#)

Q: [What if I need a few thousand dollars of financial aid? Do families ever receive smaller financial aid packages in this range?](#)

Q: [Are investments considered in the Financial Aid calculation?](#)

Q: [What about retirement funds? Are those considered in the Financial Aid calculation?](#)

Q: [I have invested in a 529 plan for my child to pay for college. Are those funds considered in the Financial Aid calculation?](#)

Q: [Can I expect the same level of aid each year?](#)

Q: [We could afford the prior year's tuition, but with next year's increase, we can no longer afford it. Are we excluded from applying for financial aid now, having not applied for it before?](#)

Q: [My family prioritizes camps, lessons, and/or vacations in addition to school? Is there a limit to what I can spend on those and still qualify for Financial Aid?](#)

## **TIMELINE**

### **Q: When are applications due?**

A: Financial Aid applications are due February 20th each year.

### **zQ: How long does it take to complete the financial aid application?**

A: We understand SSS asks you for a significant amount of information. VCS needs to get a complete picture of your financial ability to pay so that we can allocate our aid appropriately and fairly to ensure as many students that need aid can receive it and at the level needed to attend. Please don't be surprised if you need to spend an hour or more on your application. Additionally, VCS may have follow up questions or need additional documents after SSS completes their verification of your application.

### **Q: My tax return from last year will not be completed by February 20th. What should I do?**

A: We encourage you to still apply for aid by the deadline and upload your tax return as soon as it is available. Please upload all available documents when you submit your application. Any missing documents should be uploaded once they are available.

### **Q: Will you award aid without having my most recent tax return?**

A: Yes, we can award aid without having your most recent tax return. It is contingent on the successful submission of the tax return upon completion. If there are material differences your award may be revised. If we see substantial differences between years and do not have the most recent tax return available we may wait to award aid until your tax return is complete.

### **Q: We enrolled after the Financial Aid deadline. Can I still apply?**

A: Yes, you can still apply for aid. If you apply after the deadline, our aid could be limited so we encourage you to still apply ASAP.

### **Q: When will I hear what the financial aid award is?**

A: Our goal is to send the first round of aid awards by March 31st. This is dependent on the timely submission of a completed application including required documents that need to be uploaded directly to SSS. If your application is not complete for the first round of awards, we will be reviewing applications weekly thereafter and will award aid as soon as possible.

### **Q: Can I get a fee waiver for the application?**

A: SSS determines if a family receives a fee waiver upon submission of the application. At the payment page you will be told if you qualify for a waiver.

**Q: Do I need to complete the enrollment document and submit the first tuition payment without knowing my aid award?**

A: Yes, we need both the completion of the enrollment document and the first tuition payment of \$250 to award aid. This is refundable if we can't meet your need as long as you follow the timeline outlined in the award letter.

**Q: Do I need to apply each year?**

A: Yes. Applying for financial aid is an annual process. Aid is need based; the school needs to be able to see if your situation has changed from one year to another. You do need to demonstrate you have need each year.

## **DOCUMENTATION**

**Q: What information will you need for support of our aid application?**

A: We require several documents to be uploaded with your application. This includes your tax returns from the two most recent tax years, all W2 from the two most recent tax years, your current bank statements and mortgage statements.

**Q: What if the required information we provide through the SSS portal does not indicate sufficient income or financial resources to pay for our basic daily living expenses?**

A: This flags your Financial Aid application for further review and will require additional disclosure on your part through further financial documentation that will explain and create a complete picture of your financial situation.

**Q: I own my own business. How does that impact my Financial Aid application?**

A: It is typically very difficult for resources and assets from a business owned by an applicant not to be viewed as liquidable and able to be reallocated to pay directly for tuition. The burden is upon the applicant to provide concrete and third-party verified documentation that business resources and assets are immovably committed in the business activity and not instead used to pay for tuition.

**Q: Why do I provide information regarding real estate that I own?**

A: There is a cap on the total value of all real estate you may own and still qualify for financial aid. Real estate property, whether primary residence, investment property, joint ownership, or other real estate properties you own or have a share in are counted towards this cap. In 2023, \$500,000 is the cap for total real estate assets. Families with real estate holdings above this cap are ineligible for Financial Aid.

## **HOUSEHOLD**

### **Q: How do you account for families with multiple children attending VCS?**

A: SSS determines your ability to pay regardless of how many children will be attending. For example, a family may not qualify when sending just one student but might qualify when sending two. A family may qualify for one student and the Expected Family Contribution (EFC) would not change if applying for two students.

### **Q: My spouse and I are divorced. I don't want them to see my financial information? How does this work?**

A: VCS requires all parents to apply for aid. If you are divorced/separated you will each set up an account and be able to enter your individual information without the other seeing. SSS will combine your data and give a combined ability to pay.

### **Q: My spouse and I are divorced and my spouse refuses to pay for private school tuition. Do they need to apply for aid?**

A: Yes. VCS requires all parents to apply for aid. We expect all parents are in agreement about the decision to enroll and pay for the expenses.

### **Q: My spouse and I are divorced and we have it written in our divorce settlement that I am responsible for 100% of school costs?**

A: VCS requires all parents to apply for aid no matter what is written in your divorce settlement. We expect parents to be in agreement with the decision to enroll and pay for the expenses.

### **Q: My spouse and I are divorced; they have no legal, custodial, or educational rights, and I have court documentation to verify this. Are they required to apply for Financial Aid?**

A: This is the single exception when one biological parent is not required to apply in order for a Financial Aid application to be complete. Court documentation by the custodial parent must be supplied to the school prior to the application being reviewed.

### **Q: I live with someone I am not married to. How does this affect my application?**

A: SSS intends the application to capture resources available within a household to meet costs. This would include adults living in the household that are supporting the child to contribute towards school costs, and so the person you live with should also supply their information in your Financial Aid application.

### **Q: My spouse does not work outside the home. How does that affect our application?**

A: If one parent does not earn income and you do not have children at home that do not attend school, then VCS will impute income for that family based on the current minimum wage in Vermont. If there are children in school under the age of 12 then it will be computed at 30 hours per week. If all children are 12 and older it will be computed at 40 hours per week.

## **AID DECISION**

### **Q: How is aid determined?**

A: SSS takes your information and verifies it against the required documents you submit. They give the school an Expected Family Contribution (EFC) which is the amount SSS determines as your ability to pay. VCS reviews all applications and allocates aid based on the need of each family and the pool of funds available. Our goal is to give aid to all families in need.

### **Q: How does SSS calculate our need?**

A: SSS' calculation is proprietary. They own this information therefore they will not share it with us. SSS works to get a complete picture of your financial resources. Income and expenses as well as your assets and debt are included. They look at your current earnings from all sources. There are certain expenses, for example taxes, that use the actual amount from your tax return but others are assigned an allowance. They look at the value of all assets and your current mortgage. There is some debt that is not included in their calculation which would include but not limited to credit card debt and outstanding tax debt.

### **Q: Does SSS have a cap on family income above which financial aid will not be awarded?**

A: At current VCS tuition levels, VCS families with annual family income of over \$155,000 generally do not qualify for financial aid for one student. The caps for families with multiple students enrolled at Vermont Commons are proportionally higher, for example, a \$190,000 income cap for two VCS students, and so forth.

### **Q: What if I need a few thousand dollars of financial aid? Do families ever receive smaller financial aid packages in this range?**

A: Yes, this is a regular occurrence. Financial aid is allocated based upon each family's unique need, and awards range from several hundred dollars up to 80% of total tuition cost.

### **Q: Are investments considered in the Financial Aid calculation?**

A: Yes, all investments are considered by SSS as assets that can be reallocated to pay for tuition.

### **Q: What about retirement funds? Are those considered in the Financial Aid calculation?**

A: As with Real Estate, there is a cap on the amount of funds in a retirement plan that can be excluded from consideration for paying for tuition. It is calculated on a sliding scale, but in general retirement funds in excess of \$1 million by age 50 are considered as assets that can be reallocated to pay for tuition.

**Q: I have invested in a 529 plan for my child to pay for college. Are those funds considered in the Financial Aid calculation?**

A: Yes. Per recent federal legislation, 529 funds may be used without penalty to pay for private secondary education, and SSS considers those resources that can be reallocated to pay for tuition.

**Q: Can I expect the same level of aid each year?**

A: We can't guarantee the same level of aid each year. If your financial situation is not significantly different you should receive a similar aid package. If your financial situation is significantly different, you should anticipate a corresponding increase or decrease in Financial Aid. Furthermore, the school has a limited pool of financial aid available each year, and it is awarded based on current need and funds available, as well as prioritized on timeliness of requests. Your annual financial aid amount could change if we have a significant increase in need within our community or if you are delayed in reapplying and the pool of aid has already been allocated.

**Q: We could afford the prior year's tuition, but with next year's increase, we can no longer afford it. Are we excluded from applying for financial aid now, having not applied for it before?**

A: You are not excluded, and you should apply, particularly if your family income has not increased at the pace of tuition increases. Previous ability to pay tuition is not a consideration in SSS's calculation for current ability to pay tuition and is one of the main reasons for annual financial aid applications.

**Q: My family prioritizes camps, lessons, and/or vacations in addition to school? Is there a limit to what I can spend on those and still qualify for Financial Aid?**

A: Because Financial Aid is a grant, not a loan, and because it is carried by the school community—the other families in the VCS community with you—families are expected to prioritize tuition at Vermont Commons above all other discretionary activities of the student and family. While there is some allowance for camps, lessons, and/or vacations, the cap in 2023 is approximately \$2,500 total over the course of the year.