K12 ACADEMICS — STATE EDUCATION SERIES



Arkansas
Education Guide

A complete profile — schools, testing, graduation, accountability, school choice, teacher certification & financial aid, each in depth.

K12 ACADEMICS

Find Your Community

2026 EDITION

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

Everything about school in Arkansas.

This guide profiles **Arkansas**'s education system in seven parts, each a two-page deep dive with the key facts, plain-English explanations, and a link to the full, regularly-updated guide online. From K12 Academics, the world's largest education resource, online since 2004.

WHAT'S INSIDE

Education Overview · State Testing · Graduation Requirements · Accountability & Report Cards · School Choice · Teacher Certification · Financial Aid

SEARCH 200+ DIRECTORIES

K-12 Schools · Colleges & Universities · Vendors · Summer Programs · International Programs · Performers

Education Overview

EDUCATION IN ARKANSAS

Arkansas educates roughly 475,000 public K–12 students across about 230 school districts , overseen by the Arkansas Department of Education and its Division of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), along with the State Board of Education. In recent years Arkansas has been reshaped by the LEARNS Act of 2023 — one of the most sweeping...

WHO MUST ATTEND SCHOOL

- **Start age** — 5 (by August 1) — early compared with most states
- **End of compulsory age** — 17
- **Districts** — ~230 local school districts
- **Satisfying it** — Public, private, or homeschool

PRE-K IN ARKANSAS

Arkansas's state prekindergarten program is Arkansas Better Chance (ABC) — a high-quality, publicly funded pre-K program for at-risk and income-eligible 3- and 4-year-olds (not a universal program). Head Start also serves many eligible children, alongside private preschools and child care. Availability is targeted and varies by...

AT A GLANCE

Compulsory	Ages 5–17
Districts	~230
Testing	ATLAS · ACT
Diploma	22 units
Choice	Universal EFA

DISTRICTS, CHARTERS & OPEN ENROLLMENT

Arkansas's roughly 230 school districts range from large systems to small rural ones. The largest include Little Rock , Springdale , Bentonville , Rogers , and Fort Smith — with the fast-growing Northwest Arkansas region prominent among them. Arkansas also has public charter schools (both open-enrollment and district-conversion...

PRIVATE & INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS IN ARKANSAS

- **Catholic & parochial schools** — Diocese of Little Rock schools (such as Catholic High School for Boys, Mount St. Mary Academy, and the Benedictine boarding school Subiaco Academy)
- **Independent schools** — Nonprofit, board-governed schools such as Pulaski Academy and Episcopal Collegiate School (both in Little Rock)
- **Other religious & Christian schools** — A substantial network of Christian academies statewide
- **Specialty schools** — Montessori and schools for specific learning needs

READ ARKANSAS'S FULL EDUCATION OVERVIEW GUIDE
tools.k12academics.com →

State Testing

WHAT YOUR STATE TESTS

Arkansas uses ATLAS (Arkansas Teaching and Learning Assessment System), which replaced ACT Aspire , in grades 3–10, plus the ACT in high school. Run by the Arkansas Department of Education (DESE). There's no exit-exam gate.

WHICH TESTS, WHICH GRADES

- **ATLAS (grades 3–10)** — English language arts, mathematics, and science
- **ACT (grade 11)** — A statewide college-entrance opportunity — a real, college-usable score
- **Alternate assessment** — For eligible students with significant cognitive disabilities

FORMAT & SUBJECTS

ATLAS is online with varied item types; the ACT follows the national ACT format.

IS PASSING REQUIRED TO GRADUATE?

No exit-exam gate. Arkansas doesn't require passing a state test to graduate; students complete course and credit requirements. The ACT provides a college-usable score.

HOW IT'S SCORED

ATLAS reports performance levels; the ACT is scored 1–36.

AT A GLANCE

Grades 3–10	**ATLAS**
Subjects	**ELA, Math, Science**
Replaced	**ACT Aspire**
High school	**ATLAS + ACT**
Grad requirement?	**No exit-exam gate**
Format	**Online**

TESTING WINDOWS

ATLAS and the ACT are given in a spring window set by each district.

HOW TO PREPARE

- **ATLAS practice** — DESE provides practice materials matching the new online format
- **ACT prep** — Our ACT guide and free official ACT practice apply

PARTICIPATION & OPTING OUT

Students in tested grades participate. Ask your district about make-up windows.

ACCOMMODATIONS & MULTILINGUAL LEARNERS

Accommodations follow a student's IEP or 504 plan ; eligible students take the state's alternate assessment. Multilingual learners take an English proficiency test (WIDA ACCESS or the state equivalent) and may receive designated supports.

READ ARKANSAS'S FULL STATE TESTING GUIDE
tools.k12academics.com →

Graduation Requirements

AT A GLANCE

Arkansas requires 22 units under the Smart Core curriculum with no exit exam . Recent LEARNS Act changes added a computer science credit and reinforced financial literacy .

CREDIT & COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Arkansas' Smart Core (22 units) includes 4 English, 4 math, 3 science, 3 social studies, 1 computer science, 0.5 personal/family/consumer science, 0.5 physical education, 0.5 health, 1 fine arts, and electives. Districts may require more.

TESTING TO GRADUATE

No exit exam. Arkansas students take the ACT and state assessments, but a passing academic score is not required to graduate.

DIPLOMA TYPES & HONORS

Arkansas issues a standard diploma, with honors and the Seal of Biliteracy available. Strong records support the Academic Challenge Scholarship (see AR financial aid).

ALTERNATIVE PATHWAYS

Dual enrollment, AP, and CTE (with the ArFuture pathway) offer accelerated and career-focused routes.

AT A GLANCE

Units	22 (Smart Core)
Exit exam?	No
Also	Computer science & personal fina...
Test	ACT taken statewide
Confirm with	Your district

OTHER REQUIREMENTS

Arkansas requires a computer science credit and financial literacy under the LEARNS Act. Confirm details with your district.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

- **How many credits does Arkansas require?** — The state sets a minimum, but your district may require more — confirm locally.
- **Does Arkansas require a test to graduate?** — No — Arkansas has no exit exam; a passing test score is not required to graduate.
- **Are there different diploma types?** — Yes — plus honors designations and seals; see the diplomas section.
- **What if my student is behind on credits?** — Talk to the counselor about credit recovery and alternative pathways.
- **Where do I confirm the exact requirements?** — Your school counselor, district, and the state department of education.

READ ARKANSAS'S FULL GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS GUIDE
tools.k12academics.com →

Accountability & Report Cards

AT A GLANCE

Arkansas gives each school an ESSA School Index score that maps to an A-F letter grade , published on the My School Info portal.

HOW THIS STATE RATES SCHOOLS

The ESSA School Index combines weighted achievement, growth (value-added), graduation rate, English-learner progress, and school quality/student success (like attendance, science, and readiness) into a score that maps to an A–F grade. Growth is a key part — read it alongside the letter.

WHAT GETS MEASURED

- **Academic achievement** — How students score on state tests (proficiency in reading/ELA and math)
- **Academic growth / progress** — How much students improve year to year — not just where they land
- **Graduation rate** — For high schools (the 4-year cohort rate)
- **English-learner progress** — How English learners are progressing toward proficiency
- **School quality / student success** — An extra indicator — often attendance/chronic absenteeism, college/career readiness, or similar

FINDING & READING THE REPORT CARD

Look up any school on My School Info (myschoolinfo.arkansas.gov) . Review the index components (especially growth) and the trend, not just the letter.

AT A GLANCE

Format	**A-F (from the ESSA School Index)**
Tool	**My School Info**
Look up at	**myschoolinfo.arkansas.gov**

HOW FAMILIES SHOULD USE RATINGS

- **Read it in context** — A school's score reflects its students' circumstances too, not only its quality
- **Look at growth, not just scores** — Growth shows how much a school moves students — often more telling than raw proficiency
- **Check the trend** — Is the school improving over time?
- **Look past the summary** — Dig into the underlying data (subgroups, attendance, readiness)
- **Then visit** — Data raises questions; a visit answers them (see our guide on evaluating a school)

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

- **How does Arkansas rate schools?** — Arkansas assigns an A-F grade from the ESSA School Index (achievement, growth, and more).
- **What do the ratings measure?** — Test scores, growth, graduation rate, English-learner progress, and a school-quality indicator.
- **Where do I look up my school?** — On the state's official report-card portal (see below).
- **Should I choose a school by its rating alone?** — No — use it as a starting point, weigh growth and context, and visit.
- **What are CSI and TSI?** — Federal labels for schools flagged for Comprehensive or Targeted Support and Improvement.

READ ARKANSAS'S FULL ACCOUNTABILITY & REPORT CARDS GUIDE
tools.k12academics.com →

School Choice

AT A GLANCE

Arkansas created the Children's Educational Freedom Account (ESA) through the LEARNS Act . After a phase-in, it became universal (all K-12 students eligible) in 2025–26. It provides funds for private-school tuition and approved expenses. Arkansas also has a public charter sector.

THIS STATE'S CHOICE PROGRAMS

The Children's Educational Freedom Account (ESA) deposits funds (tied to per-pupil funding, reported around $7,000+) into an account for tuition and approved expenses . Eligibility phased up to universal — all Arkansas K-12 students can now apply, subject to available funding.

ELIGIBILITY

The ESA is now universal (all Arkansas K-12 students eligible), though funding is appropriated annually. Confirm current amounts and any caps.

APPLYING

Apply through the Arkansas Department of Education's ESA program. Watch the window and confirm requirements.

LEGAL & LEGISLATIVE STATUS

The program is facing a legal challenge but has operated during the litigation — confirm the current status.



AT A GLANCE

Program	Children's Educational Freedom A...
Type	Universal ESA (LEARNS Act)
Status	Fully phased in (2025–26)
Note	Facing a legal challenge
Confirm with	The state program

PUBLIC SCHOOL CHOICE, TOO

- **Open enrollment / transfers** — Attend a public school outside your zone, where allowed (see our finding-your-school guide)
- **Charter schools** — Tuition-free public schools of choice (where available)
- **Magnet schools** — Tuition-free public schools with a specialized focus
- **Homeschooling** — Legal in all 50 states (rules vary)

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

- **Does Arkansas have a private-school-choice program?** — Yes — Arkansas has the universal Children's Educational Freedom Account ESA (via LEARNS); facing a legal challenge.
- **What's the difference between an ESA and a voucher?** — A voucher pays a private school directly; an ESA is a flexible parent-managed account for many approved expenses.
- **What is a tax-credit scholarship?** — Donors get a tax credit for giving to organizations that fund private-school scholarships.
- **Is there public school choice too?** — Yes — open enrollment, charters, and magnets (plus homeschooling).
- **Where do I confirm the details?** — On the official state program site (see below).

READ ARKANSAS'S FULL SCHOOL CHOICE GUIDE
tools.k12academics.com →

Teacher Certification

HOW LICENSURE WORKS HERE

Arkansas licenses teachers through the Arkansas Department of Education (DESE) . You complete an approved program, pass the required Praxis exams (and a reading test), and earn an Initial License , later a Standard License .

WHICH TESTS THIS STATE USES

- **Praxis Subject Assessments** — Content test(s) for your license area
- **Praxis PLT** — Principles of Learning and Teaching (pedagogy) for your grade band
- **Foundations of Reading** — Required for elementary and some other candidates — reflecting the science of reading
- **Note** — Basic-skills requirements may be met via Praxis Core or qualifying scores — confirm current options

WHAT YOU NEED TO GET LICENSED

- **A bachelor's degree** — From an accredited college or university
- **A state-approved teacher-preparation program** — Completed at a college or through an approved alternative route
- **Student teaching / clinical practice** — Supervised classroom experience
- **Pass the required exams** — See the exams section above
- **A background check** — Fingerprint-based criminal background check
- **Apply to the state** — Submit your application and documents to the licensing agency

AT A GLANCE

Agency	Arkansas Dept. of Education (DES...
Content & pedagogy	Praxis Subject + PLT
Reading	Foundations of Reading
License	Initial — then Standard

OTHER PATHS INTO TEACHING

Most states offer alternative routes for career-changers and those with a degree in another field. In Arkansas, these typically let you start teaching while completing licensure requirements — through district or university alternative-certification programs, residencies, or emergency/provisional permits. Requirements (and the exams) are...

RECIPROCITY & OUT-OF-STATE LICENSES

- **Interstate agreements** — Most states participate in the NASDTEC Interstate Agreement, which eases (but doesn't guarantee) recognition of an out-of-state license
- **You may still owe exams** — States often require you to meet their own testing (or coursework) requirements, sometimes within a grace period
- **Check both states** — Confirm the specific steps with Arkansass agency and your current state

READ ARKANSAS'S FULL TEACHER CERTIFICATION GUIDE
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Financial Aid

THE STATE AID PICTURE

Arkansas funds state aid largely from the state lottery, administered by the Arkansas Division of Higher Education (ADHE) , with a broad merit scholarship and a workforce-focused grant.

MERIT & LOTTERY SCHOLARSHIPS

- **Arkansas Academic Challenge Scholarship** — The state's main lottery-funded scholarship for Arkansas students meeting GPA/ACT requirements at eligible in-state colleges.
- **Governor's Distinguished Scholarship** — A top-tier merit award (full costs at many colleges) for the highest-achieving Arkansas graduates.

PROMISE & FREE-COLLEGE PROGRAMS

The Arkansas Future Grant (ArFuture) covers tuition/fees for students in STEM and regional high-demand programs at Arkansas two-year colleges (with mentoring and an in-state work commitment).

COLLEGE SAVINGS (529 PLAN)

Arkansas's Brighter Future 529 (GIFT Plan) offers a state income tax deduction for contributions.

DEADLINES & TIMING

State deadlines are typically much earlier than the federal FAFSA deadline , and some aid is first-come, first-served until funds run out. File the FAFSA as soon as it opens (in the fall) and confirm the state's specific priority date.



AT A GLANCE

Merit (lottery)	**Academic Challenge Scholarship**
Free CC (high-demand)	**ArFuture Grant**
Top merit	**Governor's Distinguished Scholar...**
529 plan	**Brighter Future (GIFT)**
Agency	**Arkansas DHE**

APPLYING & THE STATE AGENCY

- **File the FAFSA early** — It's the trigger for state grants and many scholarships
- **Register with Arkansas Division of Higher Education** — Create the state agency's student account to track and claim awards
- **Confirm your details** — Verify residency, GPA, and enrollment as required
- **Meet any extra requirements** — Some programs need a separate form, GPA, or service commitment
- **Reapply every year** — State aid is awarded annually

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

- **How do I get Arkansas state aid?** — File the FAFSA (and any state form) by the deadline; Arkansas Division of Higher Education administers the programs.
- **Is it need-based or merit?** — Both — Arkansas offers need-based grants and merit scholarships.
- **Are the deadlines earlier than federal?** — Usually yes — file early, as some aid is first-come.
- **Can I use it out of state?** — Most Arkansas aid is for in-state schools; check each program.
- **Does this list private scholarships?** — No — this guide covers official state programs only.

READ ARKANSAS'S FULL FINANCIAL AID GUIDE
tools.k12academics.com →

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