K12 ACADEMICS — STATE EDUCATION SERIES



California 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 California.

This guide profiles **California**'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

CALIFORNIA — PART 1 OF 7

Education Overview

EDUCATION IN CALIFORNIA

California runs the nation's largest public education system — roughly 5.8 million K–12 students across about 1,000 school districts and 58 county offices of education , overseen by the California Department of Education (CDE) , the elected State Superintendent, and the State Board of Education. Funding flows through the Local Control...

WHO MUST ATTEND SCHOOL

- **Start age** — 6 (by September 1)
- **End of compulsory age** — 18
- **Kindergarten** — Optional; TK/K available earlier
- **Districts** — ~1,000, with 58 county offices of education

UNIVERSAL TRANSITIONAL KINDERGARTEN (TK)

California has made a landmark early-childhood investment: Transitional Kindergarten (TK) is now universal as of the 2025–26 school year, available free to all children who turn 4 by September 1 at their local public school (the phase-in that began in 2012 reached its finish line). TK is a play-based first year of a two-year kindergarten...

AT A GLANCE

Compulsory	**Ages 6–18**
Districts	**~1,000**
Testing	**CAASPP**
Diploma	**State min + local**
Choice	**No vouchers**

DISTRICTS & CHARTERS

California's roughly 1,000 school districts range from the enormous to the tiny. The Los Angeles Unified School District is the second-largest in the nation, followed by districts such as San Diego Unified , Fresno Unified , and Long Beach Unified . California also has a large charter-school sector (among the biggest in the country)...

PRIVATE & INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS IN CALIFORNIA

- **Independent schools** — Nonprofit, board-governed, tuition-funded schools — including nationally known day schools (Harvard-Westlake, Marlborough, Polytechnic, Crossroads...
- **Catholic & parochial schools** — A very large network across the Archdioceses of Los Angeles, San Francisco, and San Diego and other dioceses
- **Other religious schools** — Christian, Jewish, and other faith-based options
- **Specialty schools** — Waldorf (California has many), Montessori, and schools for specific learning needs

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

CALIFORNIA — PART 2 OF 7

State Testing

WHAT YOUR STATE TESTS

California's statewide testing is the CAASPP — the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress , run by the California Department of Education. It's built on the Common Core (ELA and math) and the Next Generation Science Standards (science), and is delivered by computer . California has no high-school exit exam — students...

WHICH TESTS, WHICH GRADES

- **Smarter Balanced — ELA** — English language arts/literacy in grades 3–8 and grade 11
- **Smarter Balanced — Math** — Mathematics in grades 3–8 and grade 11
- **CAST (California Science Test)** — Science in grades 5 and 8, and once in high school (grade 10, 11, or 12)
- **CAA (California Alternate Assessments)** — For students with significant cognitive disabilities
- **ELPAC** — A separate English Language Proficiency Assessment for English learners

FORMAT & SUBJECTS

The Smarter Balanced tests are computer-adaptive — the difficulty adjusts to the student — and include a performance task : an extended activity that asks students to apply skills across several standards, plus varied item types (selected response, constructed response, graphing, and more). CAST is a computer-based science test aligned...

AT A GLANCE	
Main system	**CAASPP**
Grades	**3–8 + 11 (ELA/Math)**
Science	**Grades 5, 8 & once in HS**
ELA/Math test	**Smarter Balanced**
Science test	**CAST**
Format	**Computer-adaptive**

IS PASSING REQUIRED TO GRADUATE?

No. California eliminated its high-school exit exam years ago, so students do not need to pass CAASPP to earn a diploma. State tests are used for school accountability and program improvement , not to gate graduation. (Local districts set their own course and credit requirements.)

HOW IT 'S SCORED

Smarter Balanced reports four levels — Standard Not Met, Nearly Met, Met, and Exceeded — with "Met" or "Exceeded" indicating on-track, college-and-career-ready performance. Reports also show performance by claim/area so families see specific strengths and gaps. CAST reports science achievement levels.

TESTING WINDOWS

CAASPP is given in a spring testing window that each district schedules within the state's overall window (generally late winter through spring). Exact dates vary by district — check with your school.

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

Graduation Requirements

AT A GLANCE

California requires students to complete a set of required courses to earn a high school diploma — there is no exit exam (the CAHSEE was repealed in 2015). The state sets minimum course requirements , and districts frequently require more credits, so your local requirements are what ultimately matter.

CREDIT & COURSE REQUIREMENTS

California's state minimum includes required year-long courses across core subjects — typically three years of English, two of math (including Algebra I), two of science (biological and physical), three of social studies (world history, U.S. history, and a semester each of government and economics), one year of visual/performing arts...

TESTING TO GRADUATE

No graduation exam. California does not require a high school exit exam. Students still take state assessments (like the CAASPP/Smarter Balanced tests), but a passing score is not required to graduate.

DIPLOMA TYPES & HONORS

California issues a standard high school diploma. Honors and recognitions include the Golden State Seal Merit Diploma (for demonstrated mastery) and the State Seal of Biliteracy (for proficiency in English and another language). Individual districts may offer additional honors.

AT A GLANCE

Exit exam?	**No (repealed in 2015)**
Based on	**Course/credit completion**
State minimum	**Specific required courses**
Districts	**Often require more credits**
Honors	**Golden State Seal; Seal of Bilit...**
Confirm with	**Your district**

ALTERNATIVE PATHWAYS

Students who need flexibility can pursue options like credit recovery , adult education, or the California High School Proficiency Exam (CHSPE), which provides an equivalent certificate. Talk to a counselor about the best path.

OTHER REQUIREMENTS

California has enacted a requirement for a personal finance course for graduation, phasing in for future graduating classes — confirm the current timeline with your district. Requirements can also include health and other locally set courses.

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

Accountability & Report Cards

AT A GLANCE

California does not give schools a single letter grade or star rating. Instead, it uses the California School Dashboard — a color-coded report across multiple measures — plus each school's School Accountability Report Card (SARC) .

HOW THIS STATE RATES SCHOOLS

The California School Dashboard shows performance on each measure using five colors : blue (highest), green, yellow, orange, and red (lowest) . Colors reflect both current results and improvement , so a school can rise by getting better even if scores aren't top. There's no single overall grade — you read the colors across measures.

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

AT A GLANCE	
Format	**Color dashboard (5 colors)**
Tool	**California School Dashboard**
Also	**School Accountability Report Car...**
No single	**A-F grade**
Look up at	**caschooldashboard.org**

FINDING & READING THE REPORT CARD

Look up any school on the California School Dashboard (caschooldashboard.org). Each school also publishes a School Accountability Report Card (SARC) with achievement, resources, class sizes, and demographics. Read the dashboard colors by measure and note the trend.

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)

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

School Choice

AT A GLANCE

California does not have a statewide private -school-choice program (no ESA, voucher, or tax-credit scholarship). But California offers extensive public school choice — it has one of the largest charter-school sectors in the country, plus magnets and open enrollment.

THIS STATE'S CHOICE PROGRAMS

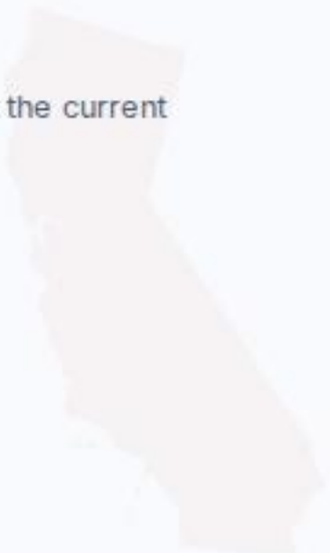
There is no ESA, voucher, or tax-credit scholarship for private school in California. Efforts to create one have not become law. Families seeking a private school pay tuition (though schools often offer financial aid — see our private-school aid guide).

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)

LEGAL & LEGISLATIVE STATUS

School-choice proposals appear periodically in California but none has been enacted. Confirm the current status if you've heard of a new proposal.



AT A GLANCE

Private choice?	**No statewide program**
Public choice	**Charters, magnets, open enrollme…**
Charters	**Among the most in the nation**
Homeschool	**Legal (via several options)**
Confirm with	**Your district**

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

- **Does California have a private-school-choice program?** — No — California has no statewide private-school-choice program, but strong public choice (charters, magnets, open enrollment).
- **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 CALIFORNIA'S FULL SCHOOL CHOICE GUIDE
tools.k12academics.com →

Teacher Certification

HOW LICENSURE WORKS HERE

California teaching credentials are issued by the Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CTC) . You earn a preliminary credential first, then clear it to a professional (clear) credential . California is known for having several assessments — though it has been modernizing them , adding alternatives to some tests.

WHICH TESTS THIS STATE USES

- **CBEST** — Basic skills — though California now allows alternatives (like qualifying coursework or other test scores) to satisfy the basic-skills requirement
- **CSET** — Subject-matter competence — or you can satisfy it through an approved subject-matter program
- **Reading instruction** — A literacy performance assessment (which has replaced the former RICA) for multiple-subject and education-specialist candidates
- **CalTPA** — A teaching performance assessment completed during your program

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	Commission on Teacher Credential...
Basic skills	CBEST (with alternatives)
Subject matter	CSET (or approved coursework)
Reading	Literacy performance assessment
Performance	CalTPA

OTHER PATHS INTO TEACHING

Most states offer alternative routes for career-changers and those with a degree in another field. In California, 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)...

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 Californias agency and your current state

READ CALIFORNIA'S FULL TEACHER CERTIFICATION GUIDE
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CALIFORNIA — PART 7 OF 7

Financial Aid

THE STATE AID PICTURE

California offers some of the nation's most generous state financial aid , administered by the California Student Aid Commission (CSAC) . It ranges from need-based Cal Grants to the Middle Class Scholarship and free community college through the California College Promise . Undocumented students apply via the California Dream Act...

NEED-BASED STATE GRANTS

- **Cal Grant A, B & C** — The main need-based awards — you don't pick a type; CSAC assigns one based on your FAFSA/CADAA, verified GPA, need, and college. Cal Grant A/B help...
- **Chafee Grant** — For current and former foster youth pursuing college or career training.
- **Student Success Completion Grant** — Additional aid for community-college students carrying more units

MERIT & LOTTERY SCHOLARSHIPS

- **Middle Class Scholarship (MCS)** — For low-to-middle-income undergraduates at UC and CSU — based on your remaining cost of attendance after other aid.

PROMISE & FREE-COLLEGE PROGRAMS

The California College Promise Grant waives enrollment fees for eligible community-college students, and the California College Promise can make the first year or two free at participating community colleges.

COLLEGE SAVINGS (529 PLAN)

California's ScholarShare 529 is the state's tax-advantaged college-savings plan (earnings grow tax-free for qualified education expenses).

AT A GLANCE	
Need-based	Cal Grant A, B & C
Middle-income	Middle Class Scholarship
Community college	California College Promise
Foster youth	Chafee Grant
529 plan	ScholarShare 529
Agency	CSAC

APPLYING & THE STATE AGENCY

- **File the FAFSA early** — It's the trigger for state grants and many scholarships
- **Register with CSAC (WebGrants 4 Students)** — 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

DEADLINES & TIMING

The priority Cal Grant deadline is March 2 (with an additional September 2 deadline for some community-college awards). File the FAFSA/CADAA and submit your verified GPA to CSAC by then.

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