K12 ACADEMICS — STATE EDUCATION SERIES



Illinois
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 Illinois.

This guide profiles **Illinois**'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 ILLINOIS

Illinois educates roughly 1.9 million public K–12 students across a remarkably large number of districts — about 850 , including many small elementary-only and high-school-only districts, plus Chicago Public Schools , the nation's fourth-largest district. The system is overseen by the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) and a State...

WHO MUST ATTEND SCHOOL

- **Start age** — 6 (by September 1)
- **End of compulsory age** — 17 (or high school completion)
- **Districts** — ~850 — one of the most in the nation
- **Satisfying it** — Public, private/parochial, or homeschool

PRESCHOOL FOR ALL & SMART START

Illinois funds Preschool for All (PFA) — state-funded preschool for 3- and 4-year-olds, prioritized for children who are at-risk or from lower-income families. Through the Smart Start Illinois initiative, the state is expanding toward preschool access for every 3- and 4-year-old whose family wants it, adding thousands of new seats, and...

AT A GLANCE

Compulsory	Ages 6–17
Districts	~850
Testing	IAR · SAT
Diploma	State min + local
Choice	Limited

DISTRICTS & CHARTERS

Illinois's ~850 districts are unusually varied — some serve only elementary grades, some only high school, and some are unit (K–12) districts. By far the largest is Chicago Public Schools (CPS) , followed by suburban districts around Chicago and downstate systems in Rockford , Aurora , Springfield , and elsewhere. Illinois has a...

PRIVATE & INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS IN ILLINOIS

- **Catholic & parochial schools** — The Archdiocese of Chicago runs one of the country's largest Catholic school systems, alongside downstate dioceses — with schools such as Loyola...
- **Independent schools** — Nonprofit, board-governed schools such as the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools , the Latin School of Chicago , Francis W. Parker School, and...
- **Other religious schools** — A strong Lutheran (LCMS) network, plus Jewish, Christian, and other faith-based schools
- **Specialty schools** — Montessori, Waldorf, and schools for specific learning needs

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

State Testing

WHAT YOUR STATE TESTS

Illinois measures learning through the IAR — the Illinois Assessment of Readiness — in grades 3–8, plus a science test and a college-entrance test in high school. A notable recent change: Illinois switched its grade-11 test from the SAT to the ACT beginning in 2024–25 . All are run by the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) and...

WHICH TESTS, WHICH GRADES

- **IAR (grades 3–8)** — English language arts and mathematics, given online each spring
- **Illinois Science Assessment (ISA)** — Science in grades 5 and 8, and once in high school (biology)
- **ACT (grade 11)** — Illinois's high-school college-entrance test — taken by all 11th graders (Illinois moved from the SAT to the ACT starting 2024–25)
- **DLM alternate assessment** — For eligible students with significant cognitive disabilities
- **ACCESS for ELLs** — English proficiency test for multilingual learners

FORMAT & SUBJECTS

The IAR is online and includes varied item types — math problems that ask students to explain their reasoning, and reading questions that require analyzing text and writing well-developed responses. It reports a Lexile (reading) and Quantile (math) measure. The grade-11 ACT follows the national ACT format.

TESTING WINDOWS

IAR is given in a spring window (roughly March–May) set by each district. The ISA and the grade-11 ACT are also administered in spring. Confirm exact dates with your school.

AT A GLANCE

Grades 3–8	**IAR (ELA & Math)**
Science	**ISA — grades 5, 8, HS**
High school	**ACT in grade 11**
Recent change	**Switched SAT → ACT (2024–25)**
Grad requirement?	**Yes — take the grade-11 test**
Format	**Online**

IS PASSING REQUIRED TO GRADUATE?

Taking the grade-11 college-entrance test (now the ACT) is a graduation requirement in Illinois — but there is no minimum score you must earn to graduate; students simply must sit for it. The IAR and ISA are accountability tests, not diploma gates. Districts set course and credit requirements.

HOW IT'S SCORED

The IAR reports research-informed performance levels indicating whether students are meeting grade-level expectations and are on track for college and career, plus Lexile/Quantile measures. The grade-11 ACT is scored 1–36 like the national test and can also be used for college applications.

PARTICIPATION & OPTING OUT

Students in tested grades participate in state assessments. Ask your district about make-up windows and any questions about participation.

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

Graduation Requirements

AT A GLANCE

Illinois requires students to complete required courses to graduate — there is no exit exam . The state sets minimum course requirements (including civics), and districts commonly add more.

CREDIT & COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Illinois' state minimums include 4 years of English, 3 of math, 2 of science, 2 of social studies (including U.S. history and a semester of civics), 1 year of music/art/foreign language/CTE, and additional required areas (like health and physical education). Districts set the total and may require more.

TESTING TO GRADUATE

No graduation exam. Illinois does not require an exit exam. Students take state assessments (including the SAT for accountability), but a passing score isn't required to graduate.

DIPLOMA TYPES & HONORS

Illinois issues a standard high school diploma, with the State Seal of Biliteracy and Seal of Civic Readiness available. Districts may offer honors recognitions.

AT A GLANCE

Exit exam?	**No**
Based on	**Course/credit completion**
Civics	**Required course**
Also	**Consumer education / financial l...**
Districts	**Often require more**
Confirm with	**Your district**

OTHER REQUIREMENTS

Illinois requires a semester of civics , consumer education (which covers financial literacy), and health/PE. Confirm the full list with your district.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

- **How many credits does Illinois require?** — The state sets a minimum, but your district may require more — confirm locally.
- **Does Illinois require a test to graduate?** — No — Illinois 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 ILLINOIS'S FULL GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS GUIDE
tools.k12academics.com →

ILLINOIS — PART 4 OF 7

Accountability & Report Cards

AT A GLANCE

Illinois assigns each school a summative designation (a tiered label, not a letter grade or stars) and publishes a rich Illinois Report Card for every school.

HOW THIS STATE RATES SCHOOLS

Illinois uses four designations : Exemplary (top 10%), Commendable (no underperforming groups, not in the top or bottom tier), Targeted (one or more underperforming student groups), and Comprehensive (bottom 5%). These are based on ESSA indicators like proficiency, growth, graduation, English-learner progress, and climate/attendance.

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	**Summative designations (4 tiers)**
Tiers	**Exemplary, Commendable, Targeted...**
Tool	**Illinois Report Card**
Look up at	**illinoisreportcard.com**

FINDING & READING THE REPORT CARD

Look up any school on the Illinois Report Card (illinoisreportcard.com) , which shows the designation plus detailed data on achievement, growth, finances, teachers, and climate. Read the designation and the underlying data together.

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

School Choice

AT A GLANCE

Illinois' private-school-choice program has expired . The state's Invest in Kids tax-credit scholarship program ended on January 1, 2024, making Illinois the first state to roll back a private-choice program. Illinois still offers public choice (charters, magnets, open enrollment).

THIS STATE'S CHOICE PROGRAMS

There is currently no active private-school-choice program in Illinois. The former Invest in Kids tax-credit scholarship expired after the legislature did not renew it. Families seeking a private school now pay tuition (with financial aid often available).

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

The Invest in Kids program expired in 2024 . New proposals may appear — confirm the current status before assuming a program exists.



AT A GLANCE

Private choice?	Program expired (2024)
Was	Invest in Kids tax-credit schola…
Now	Public choice only
Public choice	Charters, magnets, open enrollme…
Confirm with	Your district

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

- **Does Illinois have a private-school-choice program?** — Not currently — Illinois's Invest in Kids tax-credit program expired in 2024; only public choice remains.
- **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 ILLINOIS'S FULL SCHOOL CHOICE GUIDE
tools.k12academics.com →

Teacher Certification

HOW LICENSURE WORKS HERE

Illinois issues the Professional Educator License (PEL) through the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) . You complete an approved program, pass the required ILTS content test and a teaching performance assessment, and apply for licensure.

WHICH TESTS THIS STATE USES

- **Basic skills** — The Test of Academic Proficiency (TAP) — though Illinois often lets qualifying ACT/SAT scores satisfy this, or waives it
- **Content-area test** — An ILTS content test for your endorsement area
- **edTPA** — A teaching performance assessment during student teaching (confirm current status, as Illinois has revisited this requirement)

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	Illinois State Board of Educatio...
Basic skills	TAP or ACT/SAT (often waivable)
Content	ILTS content-area test
Performance	edTPA (confirm current status)

OTHER PATHS INTO TEACHING

Most states offer alternative routes for career-changers and those with a degree in another field. In Illinois, 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 Illinoiss agency and your current state

READ ILLINOIS'S FULL TEACHER CERTIFICATION GUIDE
tools.k12academics.com →

Financial Aid

THE STATE AID PICTURE

Illinois administers state financial aid through the Illinois Student Assistance Commission (ISAC) . Its cornerstone is the need-based Monetary Award Program (MAP) Grant , whose funds are limited — so filing the FAFSA early is essential.

NEED-BASED STATE GRANTS

- **Monetary Award Program (MAP) Grant** — Illinois's main need-based grant for residents at approved in-state colleges — first-come while funds last, so file early.
- **Illinois National Guard Grant** — Tuition assistance for eligible Guard members.

MERIT & LOTTERY SCHOLARSHIPS

- **AIM HIGH Grant** — A merit-based program at Illinois public universities (each sets its own criteria).

COLLEGE SAVINGS (529 PLAN)

Illinois offers the Bright Start and Bright Directions 529 plans, with a state tax deduction for Illinois taxpayers.

LOAN FORGIVENESS & SERVICE PROGRAMS

ISAC runs teacher and other loan-repayment/forgiveness programs for service in high-need Illinois fields — check current offerings.



AT A GLANCE

Need-based	**Monetary Award Program (MAP)**
Merit	**AIM HIGH**
529 plan	**Bright Start / Bright Directions**
Agency	**ISAC**
Apply by	**FAFSA or Alternative App**
Note	**MAP funds are limited — file ear...**

APPLYING & THE STATE AGENCY

- **File the FAFSA early** — It's the trigger for state grants and many scholarships
- **Register with ISAC** — 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

MAP funds are limited and awarded first-come , so file the FAFSA as soon as it opens . 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.

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

KEEP EXPLORING

Find Your Community.

One of 51 state guides in the largest education resource online. Explore **1,297 free guides** plus directories of schools, colleges & more in your community.

tools.k12academics.com →

K12 ACADEMICS

k12academics.com

© 2004–2026 K12 Academics