K12 ACADEMICS — STATE EDUCATION SERIES



Montana
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 Montana.

This guide profiles **Montana**'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 MONTANA

Montana educates roughly 150,000 public K–12 students across about 400 school districts — a large number of mostly small, rural units (including many elementary-only (K–8) districts alongside high school districts), reflecting Montana's vast, sparsely populated geography. Public education is overseen by the Montana Office of Public...

WHO MUST ATTEND SCHOOL

- **Start age** — 7
- **End of compulsory age** — 16 (or 8th-grade completion, whichever is later)
- **Districts** — ~400, many small and rural
- **Satisfying it** — Public, private, or homeschool

PRE-K IN MONTANA

Montana is one of only a handful of states with no ongoing state-funded prekindergarten program — the state does not appropriate funds for public pre-K. Early learning is instead provided through federal Head Start (including tribal Head Start programs), private preschools, and child care, with some communities offering locally funded...

AT A GLANCE

Compulsory	Ages 7–16
Districts	~400
Testing	Smarter Bal. · ACT
Diploma	~20 units
Choice	Tax-credit / ESA

DISTRICTS & NEW CHARTERS

Montana's largest districts include Billings (the state's largest), Missoula , Great Falls , Bozeman , and Kalispell — but most of the state's ~400 districts are small and rural. In a landmark 2023 change , Montana authorized charter schools through two laws: the Public Charter Schools Act (charters approved by local school boards...

PRIVATE & INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS IN MONTANA

- **Catholic & parochial schools** — Diocese of Helena and Diocese of Great Falls-Billings schools (such as Loyola Sacred Heart in Missoula and Billings Central Catholic)
- **Independent & Christian schools** — A modest number of independent, classical, and Christian schools
- **Specialty schools** — Montessori and schools for specific learning needs

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

State Testing

WHAT YOUR STATE TESTS

Montana uses the Smarter Balanced assessment for ELA and math in grades 3–8, the Montana Science Assessment (MSA) , and the ACT with Writing in grade 11. Run by the Montana Office of Public Instruction (OPI). There's no exit-exam gate.

WHICH TESTS, WHICH GRADES

- **Smarter Balanced — ELA & Math** — Grades 3–8 (computer-adaptive with a performance task)
- **Montana Science Assessment (MSA)** — Science in grades 5, 8, and once in high school
- **ACT with Writing (grade 11)** — The statewide high-school test — a real, college-usable score
- **Montana Alternate** — For eligible students

FORMAT & SUBJECTS

Smarter Balanced is computer-adaptive ; the grade-11 ACT follows the national ACT format (with Writing).

IS PASSING REQUIRED TO GRADUATE?

No exit-exam gate. Montana doesn't require passing a state test to graduate; districts set course and credit requirements. The grade-11 ACT provides a college-usable score.

HOW IT'S SCORED

Smarter Balanced reports four levels (Level 3+ meets standard); the grade-11 ACT is scored 1–36.

AT A GLANCE

Grades 3–8	**Smarter Balanced**
Science	**Montana Science gr 5, 8, HS**
High school	**ACT with Writing (gr 11)**
Grad requirement?	**No exit-exam gate**
Format	**Computer-adaptive**
Standards	**Montana Content Standards**

TESTING WINDOWS

Testing runs in a spring window set by each district.

HOW TO PREPARE

- **ACT prep for grade 11** — Our ACT guide and free official ACT practice apply
- **State practice tests** — The state provides free practice materials matching the real format

PARTICIPATION & OPTING OUT

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

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 MONTANA'S FULL STATE TESTING GUIDE
tools.k12academics.com →

Graduation Requirements

AT A GLANCE

Montana sets a state minimum of 20 units with no exit exam , and — as a strong local-control state — districts set most of the specifics.

CREDIT & COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Montana's 20-unit minimum includes 4 English, 2 math, 2 science, 2 social studies, 1 arts, 1 health/PE, 1 CTE, and electives. Districts commonly require more and set the details.

TESTING TO GRADUATE

No exit exam. Montana students take state assessments (including the ACT), but a passing score is not required to graduate.

DIPLOMA TYPES & HONORS

Montana issues a standard diploma, with the Seal of Biliteracy available. Districts may add honors.

ALTERNATIVE PATHWAYS

Dual enrollment and CTE offer accelerated pathways.

AT A GLANCE

Units	**20 (state minimum)**
Exit exam?	**No**
Districts	**Set most requirements**
Confirm with	**Your district**

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

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

Accountability & Report Cards

AT A GLANCE

Montana publishes school and district data and identifies lower-performing schools for support under ESSA — rather than assigning a single letter grade or star rating.

HOW THIS STATE RATES SCHOOLS

Montana reports proficiency, growth, graduation, English-learner progress, and school-quality measures , and identifies schools for comprehensive or targeted support . Read across the indicators and any support status.

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 Montana's data reporting (GEMS and report cards, via the Office of Public Instruction). Review the indicators and the trend.

AT A GLANCE

Format	**Data reporting + support identif...**
No	**Single grade or stars**
Tool	**GEMS / report cards**
Look up at	**opi.mt.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 Montana rate schools?** — Montana uses state data reporting plus federal support identification — not a single grade or stars.
- **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 MONTANA'S FULL ACCOUNTABILITY & REPORT CARDS GUIDE
tools.k12academics.com →

School Choice

AT A GLANCE

Montana has a tax-credit scholarship program and a newer Education Savings Account for students with disabilities . These are targeted/limited rather than universal. Montana also has a newer public charter framework.

THIS STATE'S CHOICE PROGRAMS

Montana's tax-credit scholarship lets donors fund private-school scholarships in exchange for a tax credit. The state also created an ESA for students with disabilities . Both are limited in scope (and, as with new programs, funding may need reauthorization). Confirm current programs and eligibility.

ELIGIBILITY

The special-needs ESA is disability-based ; the tax-credit scholarship has its own rules and cap. Neither is universal. Confirm current criteria.

APPLYING

Apply through the relevant program (the Office of Public Instruction / a scholarship organization). Confirm windows and requirements.

LEGAL & LEGISLATIVE STATUS

Montana's special-needs ESA is newer and its funding may depend on further legislative action — confirm the current status.

AT A GLANCE

Programs	Special-needs ESA + tax-credit s...
Type	Targeted/limited
Note	New special-needs ESA; confirm f...
Plus	Public charters (newer)
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 Montana have a private-school-choice program?** — Yes (limited) — Montana has a tax-credit scholarship and a special-needs ESA (not universal).
- **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 MONTANA'S FULL SCHOOL CHOICE GUIDE
tools.k12academics.com →

Teacher Certification

HOW LICENSURE WORKS HERE

Montana licenses teachers through the Montana Office of Public Instruction (OPI) . You complete an approved program, pass the required Praxis content exam(s), and earn a Class 2 Standard License (advancing to Class 1 with a master's).

WHICH TESTS THIS STATE USES

- **Praxis Subject Assessments** — Content test(s) for your endorsement area — the primary testing requirement
- **Note** — Montana generally does not require a separate stand-alone basic-skills test — confirm current requirements

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

KEEPING YOUR LICENSE CURRENT

Initial licenses are typically valid for a set number of years and renewed by completing continuing education / professional development (and sometimes advancing to a professional-level license). Confirm the renewal cycle and requirements with the state.

AT A GLANCE

Agency	Montana Office of Public Instruc...
Content	Praxis Subject Assessments
License	Class 2 Standard (Initial)
Note	No separate basic-skills test ty...

OTHER PATHS INTO TEACHING

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

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

Financial Aid

THE STATE AID PICTURE

Montana's state aid is coordinated by the Montana University System (Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education), with a merit scholarship and need-based grants.

NEED-BASED STATE GRANTS

- **Montana Higher Education Grant (MHEG)** — Need-based aid for Montana residents at eligible in-state colleges — limited funds.
- **Montana Promise** — A last-dollar community-college promise (where offered).

MERIT & LOTTERY SCHOLARSHIPS

- **Montana University System Honor Scholarship** — A merit tuition award for high-achieving Montana high-school graduates attending a Montana University System campus (with a separate Community...
- **Governor's Best & Brightest / merit awards** — Additional state merit programs, subject to funding.

COLLEGE SAVINGS (529 PLAN)

Montana's Achieve Montana 529 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	**MUS Honor Scholarship**
Need-based	**Montana Higher Education Grant**
529 plan	**Achieve Montana**
Agency	**Montana University System (OCHE)**

APPLYING & THE STATE AGENCY

- **File the FAFSA early** — It's the trigger for state grants and many scholarships
- **Register with Montana University System** — 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 Montana aid?** — File the FAFSA (and any state form) by the deadline; Montana University System administers the programs.
- **Is it need-based or merit?** — Both — Montana offers need-based and merit programs.
- **Are the deadlines earlier than federal?** — Usually yes — file early, as some aid is first-come.
- **Can I use it out of state?** — Most aid is for in-state schools (with exceptions); check each program.
- **Does this list private scholarships?** — No — this guide covers official programs only.

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

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