K12 ACADEMICS — STATE EDUCATION SERIES



North Carolina
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 North Carolina.

This guide profiles **North Carolina**'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 NORTH CAROLINA

North Carolina educates roughly 1.5 million public K–12 students across about 115 school districts — mostly county-based , including two of the nation's largest: Wake County (Raleigh) and Charlotte-Mecklenburg . Public education is overseen by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (DPI) , the State Board of Education, and...

WHO MUST ATTEND SCHOOL

- **Start age** — 7
- **End of compulsory age** — 16
- **Districts** — ~115, mostly county-based
- **Satisfying it** — Public, private, or registered home school

PRE-K IN NORTH CAROLINA

North Carolina does not offer a universal pre-K program. State-funded early education runs primarily through NC Pre-K — a high-quality program for eligible (largely at-risk and income-qualified) 4-year-olds — supported by Smart Start (local early-childhood partnerships) and Head Start . The state has expanded NC Pre-K over time but it...

AT A GLANCE

Compulsory	Ages 7–16
Districts	~115
Testing	EOG/EOC · ACT
Diploma	22 units
Choice	Opportunity Sch.

DISTRICTS & CHARTERS

North Carolina's largest districts are among the biggest in the country: Wake County Public Schools (Raleigh) and Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools , followed by Guilford , Winston-Salem/Forsyth , and Cumberland . North Carolina also has a large and growing charter-school sector — roughly 200 charters, with no statewide cap (the cap was...

PRIVATE & INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS IN NORTH CAROLINA

- **Independent schools** — Nonprofit, board-governed schools such as Charlotte Latin , Charlotte Country Day, and Providence Day (Charlotte), and Ravenscroft, Cary Academy, and...
- **Catholic & parochial schools** — Diocese of Charlotte and Diocese of Raleigh schools (such as Charlotte Catholic and Cardinal Gibbons)
- **Other religious schools** — A large Christian network, plus Quaker (Carolina Friends) and other faith-based schools
- **Specialty schools** — Montessori and schools for specific learning needs

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

State Testing

WHAT YOUR STATE TESTS

North Carolina uses End-of-Grade (EOG) tests in grades 3–8 and End-of-Course (EOC) tests in high school, run by the NC Department of Public Instruction and aligned to the NC Standard Course of Study. North Carolina also administers the ACT to all 11th graders . There's no separate exit exam — EOC results count toward the course grade .

WHICH TESTS, WHICH GRADES

- **End-of-Grade (grades 3–8)** — Reading and Mathematics each year; Science in grades 5 and 8
- **End-of-Course (high school)** — English II, NC Math 1, NC Math 3, and Biology
- **The ACT (grade 11)** — Given to all 11th graders as a college-readiness measure (WorkKeys is offered to CTE concentrators)
- **NC Check-Ins** — Optional interim assessments teachers use to monitor progress during the year
- **NCEXTEND1** — Alternate assessment for eligible students; multilingual learners take ACCESS for ELLs

FORMAT & SUBJECTS

EOG and EOC tests are given online (with paper accommodations) and are multiple-choice plus some technology-enhanced items. EOCs are subject end-of-course exams taken when a student finishes the matching course.

HOW IT'S SCORED

EOG and EOC results report achievement levels 1–5 , with Level 3 the grade-level proficiency bar and Levels 4–5 indicating college-and-career readiness. The grade-11 ACT is scored 1–36 and is usable for college applications.

AT A GLANCE	
Grades 3–8	**EOG (Reading & Math)**
Science	**EOG — grades 5 & 8**
High school	**EOC in 4 courses**
EOC weight	**≥20% of course grade**
Grade 11	**ACT**
Grad requirement?	**No exit-exam gate**

IS PASSING REQUIRED TO GRADUATE?

No exit-exam gate. Students don't need to pass a state test to graduate. Each EOC must count for at least 20% of the student's final grade in that course, so it affects the course grade and credit rather than serving as a pass/fail hurdle. Districts set course and credit requirements.

TESTING WINDOWS

EOG and most EOC tests are given in a spring window (EOCs also in fall/for block scheduling). The grade-11 ACT is administered on a set spring date. Exact dates are set by the state and district.

HOW TO PREPARE

- **Released forms & practice** — NCDPI publishes released test forms and practice items matching the real format
- **ACT prep for grade 11** — Since 11th graders take the ACT, our ACT guide and free official ACT practice apply
- **Course-aligned review** — EOCs test the specific course content

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

Graduation Requirements

AT A GLANCE

North Carolina uses the Future-Ready Core course of study, requiring a state minimum of 22 credits — with no exit exam . End-of-course (EOC) tests count as part of the course grade , not as a separate gate.

CREDIT & COURSE REQUIREMENTS

The Future-Ready Core (22 credits) includes 4 English, 4 math (through Math III), 3 science, 4 social studies, 1 health/PE, and electives (including a recommended CTE, arts, or world-language focus). Districts may require more.

TESTING TO GRADUATE

No exit exam. Students take EOC tests in certain courses (Math I & III, English II, Biology), and the score counts as a percentage of the final course grade — there is no separate test to pass to graduate.

DIPLOMA TYPES & HONORS

North Carolina issues a standard diploma, with the Seal of Biliteracy and honors options. High achievers may qualify for state scholarship programs (see NC financial aid).

ALTERNATIVE PATHWAYS

Students may earn credit through Career and College Promise dual enrollment, CTE, and credit recovery. A counselor can map the best path.

AT A GLANCE

Framework	**Future-Ready Core**
Credits	**22 (state minimum)**
Exit exam?	**No**
EOC tests	**Count toward course grade**
Districts	**Often require more**
Confirm with	**Your district**

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

- **How many credits does North Carolina require?** — The state sets a minimum, but your district may require more — confirm locally.
- **Does North Carolina require a test to graduate?** — No — North Carolina has no exit exam; EOC scores count toward the course grade.
- **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 NORTH CAROLINA'S FULL GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS GUIDE
tools.k12academics.com →

Accountability & Report Cards

AT A GLANCE

North Carolina gives each school an A-F performance grade , published on the NC School Report Cards . The grade is based mostly on test achievement, with a portion for growth.

HOW THIS STATE RATES SCHOOLS

The A-F grade comes from a 0–100 score that is 80% school achievement (test proficiency and, for high schools, other measures) and 20% academic growth . The score maps to a letter (A through F). Note the heavy weight on achievement means the grade partly reflects student demographics — read the growth component too.

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 the NC School Report Cards . Review the growth rating (Exceeded/Met/Not Met) alongside the letter grade — growth often tells you more about the school's effect.

AT A GLANCE

Format	**A-F school performance grades**
Scale	**0–100 mapped to a letter**
Mix	**80% achievement, 20% growth**
Tool	**NC School Report Cards**
Look up at	**ncreportcards.ondemand.sas.com**

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 North Carolina rate schools?** — North Carolina assigns an A-F grade from a 0–100 score (80% achievement, 20% growth).
- **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 NORTH CAROLINA'S FULL ACCOUNTABILITY & REPORT CARDS GUIDE
tools.k12academics.com →

School Choice

AT A GLANCE

North Carolina has a voucher -based choice system — the Opportunity Scholarship , which was expanded to broad (near-universal) eligibility in 2024 — plus the ESA+ account for students with disabilities and a public charter sector.

THIS STATE'S CHOICE PROGRAMS

The Opportunity Scholarship provides funds to help pay private-school tuition, now open to a broad range of families (with award amounts scaled by income). The ESA+ provides a flexible account for students with disabilities. Both are administered by the state.

ELIGIBILITY

Opportunity Scholarship eligibility is now broad (available across income levels, with larger awards for lower-income families). ESA+ has disability-based eligibility. Confirm current income tiers and amounts.

APPLYING

Apply through the North Carolina State Education Assistance Authority (NCSEAA) . Watch the application window and confirm requirements.

AT A GLANCE

Flagship	**Opportunity Scholarship (voucher...**
Eligibility	**Expanded to broadly universal**
Also	**ESA+ (students with disabilities...**
Plus	**Public charters**
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 North Carolina have a private-school-choice program?** — Yes — North Carolina has the Opportunity Scholarship voucher (broadly expanded) plus ESA+ for disabilities.
- **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 NORTH CAROLINA'S FULL SCHOOL CHOICE GUIDE
tools.k12academics.com →

Teacher Certification

HOW LICENSURE WORKS HERE

North Carolina issues teaching licenses through the NC Department of Public Instruction (DPI) . You complete an approved program, pass the required exams, and earn an Initial Professional License , later a Continuing Professional License .

WHICH TESTS THIS STATE USES

- **Praxis Subject Assessments** — For most secondary and many other areas
- **Pearson Foundations of Reading** — Required for elementary (and some other) candidates — reflecting the science of reading
- **Pearson General Curriculum** — Required for elementary candidates (multi-subject)
- **Note** — A teaching performance component may apply through your program — 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

AT A GLANCE

Agency	**NC Dept. of Public Instruction**
Most areas	**Praxis Subject Assessments**
Elementary	**Pearson: Foundations of Reading...**
License	**Initial Professional — then Cont...**

OTHER PATHS INTO TEACHING

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

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 North Carolinas agency and your current state

READ NORTH CAROLINA'S FULL TEACHER CERTIFICATION GUIDE
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Financial Aid

THE STATE AID PICTURE

North Carolina's state financial aid is administered through the College Foundation of North Carolina (CFNC) and the State Education Assistance Authority. Its flagship is the Next NC Scholarship , which combines federal and state aid to cover tuition and fees for many students at the state's community colleges and public universities.

NEED-BASED STATE GRANTS

- **Next NC Scholarship** — Combines the federal Pell Grant with state aid to cover (or more than cover) tuition and fees for eligible North Carolina students — at community...
- **NC Community College Grant** — Need-based aid for students at NC community colleges.
- **NC Need-Based Scholarship** — Need-based aid for students at eligible private, nonprofit NC colleges.

COLLEGE SAVINGS (529 PLAN)

North Carolina's NC 529 Plan is the state's tax-advantaged college-savings plan.

LOAN FORGIVENESS & SERVICE PROGRAMS

North Carolina runs service-based programs such as the NC Teaching Fellows (forgivable loans for future teachers) — check current offerings with CFNC.

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

Main program	**Next NC Scholarship**
Community college	**Tuition-free for many**
Private colleges	**NC Need-Based Scholarship**
529 plan	**NC 529**
Agency	**CFNC / NC SEAA**
Apply by	**FAFSA**

APPLYING & THE STATE AGENCY

- **File the FAFSA early** — It's the trigger for state grants and many scholarships
- **Register with CFNC** — 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 North Carolina state aid?** — File the FAFSA (and any state form) by the deadline; CFNC administers the programs.
- **Is it need-based or merit?** — Both — North Carolina 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 North Carolina aid is for in-state schools; check each program.
- **Does this list private scholarships?** — No — this guide covers official state programs only.

READ NORTH CAROLINA'S FULL FINANCIAL AID GUIDE
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