K12 ACADEMICS — STATE EDUCATION SERIES



Pennsylvania
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 Pennsylvania.

This guide profiles **Pennsylvania**'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

PENNSYLVANIA — PART 1 OF 7

Education Overview

EDUCATION IN PENNSYLVANIA

Pennsylvania educates roughly 1.7 million public K–12 students through an unusually decentralized system of about 500 local school districts — a strong local-control tradition that contrasts sharply with county-based states. Public education is overseen by the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) and the State Board of Education...

WHO MUST ATTEND SCHOOL

- **Start age** — 6 (by Sept 1); may wait a year if the child turns 6 after Sept 1
- **End of compulsory age** — 18 (or upon graduation)
- **Applies to** — Public, private, parochial, charter/cyber, and approved home education
- **Attendance** — Unexcused absences trigger notice and an improvement conference

PRE-K IN PENNSYLVANIA

Unlike some states, Pennsylvania does not offer a universal, income-blind pre-K program — instead it targets publicly funded early education to families who need it most. Key programs include Pre-K Counts (state-funded, high-quality pre-K for at-risk 3- and 4-year-olds, based on income and other factors), the Head Start State...

PENNSYLVANIA'S TAX-CREDIT SCHOLARSHIPS

- **EITC — Educational Improvement Tax Credit** — Scholarships for eligible students (with household income limits) to attend a participating private school; also funds educational-improvement and...
- **OSTC — Opportunity Scholarship Tax Credit** — Targeted tuition assistance for students who live in the attendance boundary of a public school ranking in the bottom 15% statewide by test scores....

AT A GLANCE

Compulsory	**Ages 6–18**
Districts	**~500**
State Tests	**PSSA · Keystone**
Diploma	**Local + pathways**
Choice	**Tax-credit**

DISTRICTS, CHARTERS & CYBER CHARTERS

- **Charter schools** — Publicly funded, independently run brick-and-mortar schools (under Article XVII-A of the School Code)
- **Cyber charter schools** — Full-time online public schools serving students statewide — PA is a national leader (e.g., PA Cyber, Commonwealth Charter Academy, Agora)
- **Magnet & selective schools** — Especially in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh
- **Career & technical centers** — Regional CTE programs

PRIVATE & INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS IN PENNSYLVANIA

- **Independent schools** — Nonprofit, board-governed schools such as The Haverford School, The Baldwin School, Episcopal Academy, and William Penn Charter (Philadelphia area)...
- **Catholic & parochial schools** — A very large network across the Archdiocese of Philadelphia and dioceses statewide (such as the Jesuit St. Joseph's Prep and La Salle College High)
- **Other religious schools** — A strong Quaker (Friends) network reflecting Pennsylvania's heritage, plus Jewish, Christian, and other faith-based schools
- **Specialty schools** — Montessori, Waldorf, and schools for specific learning needs

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

State Testing

WHAT YOUR STATE TESTS

Pennsylvania uses two main assessments: the PSSA (Pennsylvania System of School Assessment) in grades 3–8, and the Keystone Exams — end-of-course tests in high school. Both are run by the Pennsylvania Department of Education and aligned to the PA Core Standards. The Keystones connect to graduation, but through flexible "Pathways to...

WHICH TESTS, WHICH GRADES

- **PSSA (grades 3–8)** — English Language Arts and Mathematics each year; Science in grades 4 and 8
- **Keystone Exams (high school)** — End-of-course tests in Algebra I, Literature, and Biology , taken when students finish the matching course
- **PASA** — Pennsylvania Alternate System of Assessment for eligible students
- **ACCESS for ELLs** — English proficiency assessment for multilingual learners

FORMAT & SUBJECTS

Both the PSSA and Keystones are given as online or paper tests with multiple-choice and open-ended items, in a spring window (and additional Keystone windows). Keystones are subject end-of-course exams.

IS PASSING REQUIRED TO GRADUATE?

Yes — but flexibly. Pennsylvania requires students to demonstrate proficiency to graduate, and the Keystones are one way to do it. Under the state's Pathways to Graduation , students who don't reach proficiency on a Keystone can meet the requirement through alternative pathways — a composite score, career/technical evidence...

AT A GLANCE	
Grades 3–8	**PSSA**
Subjects	**ELA, Math; Science gr 4 & 8**
High school	**Keystone Exams**
Keystone subjects	**Algebra I, Literature, Biology**
Grad requirement?	**Yes — via Pathways**
Format	**Online/paper**

HOW IT 'S SCORED

PSSA and Keystone results report performance levels (commonly Below Basic, Basic, Proficient, and Advanced); "Proficient" is the target and the Keystone bar for the exam-based graduation pathway. Reports show performance by area to guide instruction.

TESTING WINDOWS

PSSA is given in a spring window . Keystones have multiple windows (winter, spring, and summer) since students take them upon finishing Algebra I, Literature, or Biology. Exact dates are set by PDE and your district.

HOW TO PREPARE

- **Released items & practice** — PDE publishes item samplers and practice materials for both the PSSA and Keystones — the best format practice
- **Course-aligned review** — Keystones test the specific course, so strong classwork plus targeted review works best
- **Know your pathway** — If a Keystone is a challenge, learn which graduation pathway fits you

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

PENNSYLVANIA — PART 3 OF 7

Graduation Requirements

AT A GLANCE

Pennsylvania uses a flexible pathways system (under Act 158) to demonstrate readiness for graduation, rather than a single exit exam. Students can meet the requirement through one of several pathways — and districts set the credit requirements .

CREDIT & COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Pennsylvania does not set a single statewide credit total — districts establish credit and course requirements . Confirm your district's specific credits (English, math, science, social studies, arts/humanities, and electives).

TESTING TO GRADUATE

Students demonstrate postsecondary readiness through one of several pathways : proficiency on the Keystone Exams (Algebra I, Literature, Biology), an alternative assessment, an evidence-based/grade pathway, a CTE pathway, or an evidence-of-readiness pathway. So a single test score is not the only route.

DIPLOMA TYPES & HONORS

Pennsylvania issues a standard high school diploma (with district honors). The Seal of Biliteracy is available.

AT A GLANCE

Statewide	**Pathways system (Act 158)**
Assessment	**Keystone Exams (one pathway)**
Not a strict	**Exit exam — multiple pathways**
Credits	**Set by districts**
Confirm with	**Your district**

ALTERNATIVE PATHWAYS

The five Act 158 pathways (Keystone proficiency, Keystone composite, alternative assessment, evidence-based, and CTE concentrator) give students multiple ways to qualify — a family-friendly design for different strengths.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

- **How many credits does Pennsylvania require?** — The state sets a minimum, but your district may require more — confirm locally.
- **Does Pennsylvania require a test to graduate?** — Not a single exit exam — students choose among several pathways (including Keystone Exams).
- **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 PENNSYLVANIA'S FULL GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS GUIDE
tools.k12academics.com →

PENNSYLVANIA — PART 4 OF 7

Accountability & Report Cards

AT A GLANCE

Pennsylvania uses the Future Ready PA Index — a dashboard of indicators for each school — rather than a single letter grade or star rating.

HOW THIS STATE RATES SCHOOLS

The Future Ready PA Index reports a range of measures: test achievement , academic growth (PVAAS) , graduation and attendance , English-learner progress , career readiness , and more. Instead of boiling it to one grade, it shows the full picture across indicators (often against statewide goals).

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 Future Ready PA Index (futurereadypa.org) . Because there's no single grade, read across the indicators — especially growth (PVAAS) — and note the trend.

AT A GLANCE	
Format	Future Ready PA Index (dashboard...
No	Single grade or stars
Shows	Achievement, growth, graduation...
Tool	Future Ready PA Index
Look up at	futurereadypa.org

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 Pennsylvania rate schools?** — Pennsylvania uses the Future Ready PA Index, a dashboard of indicators (no single grade or star rating).
- **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 PENNSYLVANIA'S FULL ACCOUNTABILITY & REPORT CARDS GUIDE
tools.k12academics.com →

School Choice

AT A GLANCE

Pennsylvania has two well-known tax-credit scholarship programs — the Educational Improvement Tax Credit (EITC) and the Opportunity Scholarship Tax Credit (OSTC) — plus a large public charter and cyber-charter sector. It does not currently have a statewide ESA or voucher.

THIS STATE'S CHOICE PROGRAMS

Under EITC and OSTC , businesses (and some individuals) donate to scholarship organizations in exchange for a state tax credit ; those organizations award private-school scholarships to income-eligible students (OSTC prioritizes students in lower-performing school zones). Both programs are capped , so scholarships are limited by...

ELIGIBILITY

Scholarships are for income-eligible students (with OSTC adding a lower-performing-school-zone priority), subject to program caps. Confirm current income limits.

APPLYING

Apply through a participating scholarship organization (find them via the PA Department of Community & Economic Development / a school). Confirm the list and requirements.

AT A GLANCE

Programs	**EITC & OSTC (tax-credit scholars…**
Type	**Tax-credit scholarships (income-…**
No	**Statewide ESA or voucher**
Plus	**Public charters & cyber charters**
Confirm with	**A scholarship organization**

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 Pennsylvania have a private-school-choice program?** — Yes — Pennsylvania has the EITC and OSTC tax-credit scholarships (income-limited, capped); no statewide ESA/voucher.
- **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 PENNSYLVANIA'S FULL SCHOOL CHOICE GUIDE
tools.k12academics.com →

Teacher Certification

HOW LICENSURE WORKS HERE

Pennsylvania issues the Instructional I certificate (advancing to Instructional II) through the Pennsylvania Department of Education . You complete an approved program and pass the required tests — Pennsylvania uses a mix of Praxis and its own PECT exams depending on your area.

WHICH TESTS THIS STATE USES

- **Praxis** — Subject Assessments (and, where required, core/basic-skills tests) for most secondary and many other areas
- **PECT (Pennsylvania Educator Certification Tests)** — Used for PreK-4 , PreK-4 & special education , and some other specific certificates
- **Basic skills** — Often satisfied via Praxis Core or qualifying SAT/ACT 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	Pennsylvania Department of Educa...
Most areas	Praxis subject & core tests
PreK-4 & special ed	PECT modules
Certificate	Instructional I — then II

OTHER PATHS INTO TEACHING

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

READ PENNSYLVANIA'S FULL TEACHER CERTIFICATION GUIDE
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Financial Aid

THE STATE AID PICTURE

Pennsylvania's state financial aid is administered by PHEAA (the Pennsylvania Higher Education Assistance Agency). Its main program is the need-based PA State Grant , which — unusually — can be used at some approved out-of-state schools.

NEED-BASED STATE GRANTS

- **PA State Grant** — The main need-based grant for Pennsylvania residents; usable at approved in-state and some out-of-state schools.
- **PA Targeted Industry Program (PA-TIP)** — Aid for students in approved programs in high-priority industries (energy, advanced manufacturing, and more).

COLLEGE SAVINGS (529 PLAN)

Pennsylvania offers PA 529 plans — the Guaranteed Savings Plan (GSP) and the Investment Plan (IP) — with a state tax deduction.

APPLYING & THE STATE AGENCY

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

AT A GLANCE

Need-based	PA State Grant
Targeted fields	PA-TIP
529 plan	PA 529 (GSP & IP)
Agency	PHEAA
Out-of-state?	PA State Grant usable at some
Apply by	FAFSA + state grant form

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.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

- **How do I get Pennsylvania state aid?** — File the FAFSA (and any state form) by the deadline; PHEAA administers the programs.
- **Is it need-based or merit?** — Both — Pennsylvania 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 Pennsylvania aid is for in-state schools; check each program.
- **Does this list private scholarships?** — No — this guide covers official state programs only.

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

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