K12 ACADEMICS — STATE EDUCATION SERIES



South Dakota
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 South Dakota.

This guide profiles **South Dakota**'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 SOUTH DAKOTA

South Dakota educates roughly 145,000 public K–12 students across about 150 school districts — many of them small and rural, with enrollment concentrated around Sioux Falls and Rapid City. Public education is overseen by the South Dakota Department of Education and the State Board. South Dakota's system is firmly public-school centered ....

WHO MUST ATTEND SCHOOL

- **Start age** — 6 (by September 1)
- **End of compulsory age** — 18 (or graduation)
- **Districts** — ~150, many small and rural
- **Satisfying it** — Public, private, or home (alternative) instruction

PRE-K IN SOUTH DAKOTA

South Dakota is one of only a handful of states with no 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 6–18**
Districts	**~150**
Testing	**Smarter Balanced**
Diploma	**22 units**
Choice	**Open enrollment**

DISTRICTS & CHOICE WITHIN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

South Dakota's largest districts are Sioux Falls and Rapid City , followed by fast-growing suburban districts like Harrisburg and Brandon Valley , and Aberdeen . A distinctive feature: South Dakota has no charter schools and no magnet schools — so public-school choice happens almost entirely through open enrollment (below) rather than...

PRIVATE & INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS IN SOUTH DAKOTA

- **Catholic & parochial schools** — Diocese of Sioux Falls and Diocese of Rapid City schools (such as O'Gorman High School in Sioux Falls)
- **Other religious schools** — A network of Christian and Lutheran schools (such as Sioux Falls Christian)
- **Specialty schools** — Montessori and schools for specific learning needs

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

SOUTH DAKOTA — PART 2 OF 7

State Testing

WHAT YOUR STATE TESTS

South Dakota uses the Smarter Balanced assessment for ELA and math in grades 3–8 and grade 11, plus the South Dakota Science test. Run by the South Dakota Department of Education. There's no exit-exam gate.

WHICH TESTS, WHICH GRADES

- **Smarter Balanced — ELA & Math** — Grades 3–8 and grade 11 (computer-adaptive with a performance task)
- **South Dakota Science** — Grades 5, 8, and 11
- **SD Alternate** — For eligible students

FORMAT & SUBJECTS

Smarter Balanced is computer-adaptive ; the science test is computer-based.

IS PASSING REQUIRED TO GRADUATE?

No exit-exam gate. South Dakota doesn't require passing a state test to graduate; districts set course and credit requirements.

HOW IT'S SCORED

Smarter Balanced reports four levels (Level 3+ meets standard); the science test reports achievement levels.

AT A GLANCE

ELA/Math	**Smarter Balanced**
Grades	**3–8 and 11**
Science	**SD Science gr 5, 8, 11**
Grad requirement?	**No exit-exam gate**
Format	**Computer-adaptive**
Standards	**South Dakota Standards**

TESTING WINDOWS

Testing runs in a spring window set by each district.

HOW TO PREPARE

- **Practice & training tests** — The state provides free practice tests for the computer-adaptive format
- **Apply skills** — Smarter Balanced rewards reasoning across standards

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 SOUTH DAKOTA'S FULL STATE TESTING GUIDE
tools.k12academics.com →

SOUTH DAKOTA — PART 3 OF 7

Graduation Requirements

AT A GLANCE

South Dakota requires 22 units with no exit exam . Students can earn Advanced or Career endorsements, and personal finance is part of the requirements.

CREDIT & COURSE REQUIREMENTS

South Dakota's 22 units include 4 English, 3 math, 3 science, 3 social studies, 1 world language/CTE/fine arts, 0.5 personal finance/economics, 0.5 PE, 0.5 health, and electives. Districts may require more.

TESTING TO GRADUATE

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

DIPLOMA TYPES & HONORS

South Dakota issues a standard diploma, with Advanced and Career endorsements and the Seal of Biliteracy available. Strong records support Opportunity/Build Dakota programs (see SD financial aid).

ALTERNATIVE PATHWAYS

Dual credit, AP, and CTE offer accelerated and career-focused pathways.

AT A GLANCE

Units	22
Exit exam?	No
Endorsements	Advanced & Career
Also	Personal finance
Confirm with	Your district

OTHER REQUIREMENTS

South Dakota requires a personal finance component. Confirm details with your district.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

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

SOUTH DAKOTA — PART 4 OF 7

Accountability & Report Cards

AT A GLANCE

South Dakota rates schools using a School Performance Index (SPI) — a points/index score — on the South Dakota Report Card , and identifies schools for support under ESSA.

HOW THIS STATE RATES SCHOOLS

The SPI awards points across achievement, growth, graduation, English-learner progress, attendance, and (for high schools) college/career readiness , producing an index used to identify schools for support . Read the index components (especially growth) alongside the score.

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 South Dakota Report Card (sdschools.sd.gov) . Review the SPI components and the trend.

AT A GLANCE	
Format	School Performance Index (points...
Tool	South Dakota Report Card
Also	Support identification
Look up at	sdschools.sd.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 South Dakota rate schools?** — South Dakota uses a School Performance Index (a points score) plus support identification.
- **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 SOUTH DAKOTA'S FULL ACCOUNTABILITY & REPORT CARDS GUIDE
tools.k12academics.com →

School Choice

AT A GLANCE

South Dakota has the Partners in Education Tax Credit program — a tax-credit scholarship (funded by insurance-company donations) that helps income-eligible students attend participating private schools — plus public open enrollment. It does not have an ESA or voucher.

THIS STATE'S CHOICE PROGRAMS

Under the Partners in Education program, insurance companies receive a tax credit for donating to scholarship organizations, which award private-school scholarships to income-eligible students . The program is capped , so scholarships are limited by available funds.

ELIGIBILITY

Scholarships are for income-eligible students (with income thresholds), subject to the program cap. Confirm current income limits.

APPLYING

Apply through a participating scholarship organization . Confirm the list and requirements.

AT A GLANCE

Program	Partners in Education (tax-credi...
Type	Tax-credit scholarship (income-l...
Funded by	Insurance-company tax credits
Plus	Public open enrollment
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 South Dakota have a private-school-choice program?** — Yes (limited) — South Dakota has the Partners in Education tax-credit scholarship (no ESA or 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 SOUTH DAKOTA'S FULL SCHOOL CHOICE GUIDE
tools.k12academics.com →

Teacher Certification

HOW LICENSURE WORKS HERE

South Dakota certifies teachers through the South Dakota Department of Education . You complete an approved program, pass the required Praxis exams, complete the state's Indian Studies requirement, and earn a certificate.

WHICH TESTS THIS STATE USES

- **Praxis Subject Assessments** — Content test(s) for your certification area
- **Praxis PLT** — Principles of Learning and Teaching (pedagogy) for your grade band
- **South Dakota Indian Studies** — A required course specific to South Dakota (a distinctive state requirement)
- **Note** — Requirements vary by area — confirm your specific tests

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	South Dakota Department of Educa...
Content & pedagogy	Praxis Subject + PLT
Also	South Dakota Indian Studies requ...
Certificate	Initial — then renewable

OTHER PATHS INTO TEACHING

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

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

Financial Aid

THE STATE AID PICTURE

South Dakota's state aid is administered with the South Dakota Board of Regents and Department of Education, emphasizing merit and workforce-aligned scholarships.

MERIT & LOTTERY SCHOLARSHIPS

- **South Dakota Opportunity Scholarship** — A merit award (up to a set total over four years) for students who complete a rigorous high-school curriculum and meet ACT requirements, attending an...

PROMISE & FREE-COLLEGE PROGRAMS

The Dakota Corps Scholarship covers tuition for students entering critical-need occupations who commit to work in South Dakota, and the Build Dakota Scholarship offers full-ride awards for high-need technical programs (with an in-state work commitment).

COLLEGE SAVINGS (529 PLAN)

South Dakota's CollegeAccess 529 is the state's college-savings plan (South Dakota has no state income tax).

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	**SD Opportunity Scholarship**
Critical-need service	**Dakota Corps Scholarship**
Technical (full-ride)	**Build Dakota Scholarship**
529 plan	**CollegeAccess**
Agency	**SD Board of Regents**

APPLYING & THE STATE AGENCY

- **File the FAFSA early** — It's the trigger for state grants and many scholarships
- **Register with South Dakota Board of Regents** — 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 South Dakota aid?** — File the FAFSA (and any state form) by the deadline; South Dakota Board of Regents administers the programs.
- **Is it need-based or merit?** — Both — South Dakota 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 SOUTH DAKOTA'S FULL FINANCIAL AID GUIDE
tools.k12academics.com →

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