K12 ACADEMICS — STATE EDUCATION SERIES



Tennessee

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 Tennessee.

This guide profiles **Tennessee**'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 TENNESSEE

Tennessee educates roughly 1 million public K–12 students across about 147 school districts (county, city, and special school districts), plus the state-run Achievement School District, overseen by the Tennessee Department of Education and the State Board. Tennessee is notable at both ends of the K–20 pipeline. It pioneered Tennessee...

WHO MUST ATTEND SCHOOL

- **Start age** — 6 (by August 15)
- **End of compulsory age** — 17 (through 18/graduation)
- **Districts** — ~147, plus the Achievement School District
- **Satisfying it** — Public, private, or home school

PRE-K IN TENNESSEE

Tennessee does not offer a universal pre-K program. Its state-funded Voluntary Pre-K (VPK) provides free preschool for eligible (largely at-risk and income-qualified) 4-year-olds through school districts, alongside Head Start and child-care assistance. Access is targeted rather than universal. Because publicly funded seats are limited...

AT A GLANCE

Compulsory	Ages 6–17
Districts	~147
Testing	TCAP · EOC
Diploma	22 credits
Choice	EFS (universal)

DISTRICTS, CHARTERS & THE ASD

Tennessee's largest districts include Memphis-Shelby County Schools , Metro Nashville , Knox County (Knoxville), Rutherford County , and Williamson County . Tennessee has a substantial charter-school sector — authorized by districts or the statewide Tennessee Public Charter School Commission . Tennessee is also known for its Achievement...

PRIVATE & INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS IN TENNESSEE

- **Independent schools** — Nonprofit, board-governed schools such as Montgomery Bell Academy , Harpeth Hall, and University School of Nashville; Memphis University School and...
- **Catholic & parochial schools** — Diocese of Nashville, Memphis, and Knoxville schools (such as Father Ryan and Christian Brothers)
- **Other religious & Christian schools** — A large network of Christian and faith-based schools
- **Specialty schools** — Montessori and schools for specific learning needs

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

TENNESSEE — PART 2 OF 7

State Testing

WHAT YOUR STATE TESTS

Tennessee's testing program is TCAP (Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program), which includes the TNReady assessments in grades 3–8 and End-of-Course (EOC) exams in high school. It's run by the Tennessee Department of Education and aligned to the Tennessee Academic Standards. Tennessee has no separate exit exam — EOC results count...

WHICH TESTS, WHICH GRADES

- **TNReady (grades 3–8)** — English language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies
- **End-of-Course (high school)** — English I & II, Algebra I & II, Geometry, Biology, and U.S. History & Geography
- **TCAP-Alt** — Alternate assessment for eligible students; WIDA ACCESS for multilingual learners

FORMAT & SUBJECTS

TNReady and EOC exams are online (with paper accommodations), combining multiple-choice, constructed-response, and writing items. EOCs are subject end-of-course tests.

IS PASSING REQUIRED TO GRADUATE?

No exit-exam gate. Students aren't required to pass a state test to graduate; instead each EOC counts as a percentage of the final grade in that course (set by state policy), so it affects the course grade and credit. Districts set course and credit requirements. Tennessee also has a third-grade reading promotion/retention law with...

AT A GLANCE	
Program	**TCAP (incl. TNReady)**
Grades 3–8	**ELA, Math, Science, Soc. Studies**
High school	**End-of-Course (EOC)**
EOC weight	**Portion of course grade**
Grad requirement?	**No exit-exam gate**
Format	**Online**

HOW IT 'S SCORED

TNReady and EOC results report levels — Below, Approaching, Met, and Exceeded Expectations. The EOC scale score converts into the course-grade contribution.

TESTING WINDOWS

TNReady (grades 3–8) is given in a spring window ; EOCs run in fall, spring, and summer windows tied to course completion. Exact dates are set by the state and district.

HOW TO PREPARE

- **Practice tools & released items** — The state and its testing vendor provide practice tests matching the real online format
- **Course-aligned review** — EOCs test the specific course
- **Grade-3 reading support** — Because of the third-grade reading law, focus on reading early

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

Graduation Requirements

AT A GLANCE

Tennessee requires 22 credits with no exit exam . End-of-course (TCAP/EOC) tests count as a portion of the final course grade , and students must take the ACT or SAT .

CREDIT & COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Tennessee's 22 credits include 4 English, 4 math (including Algebra I & II and Geometry), 3 science, 3 social studies, 2 world language, 1 PE/wellness, 1 fine arts, and elective focus courses. Districts may require more.

TESTING TO GRADUATE

No exit exam. EOC assessments count as a percentage of the course grade . All students must take the ACT or SAT (a score isn't required to graduate, but the test must be taken).

DIPLOMA TYPES & HONORS

Tennessee issues a standard diploma, with honors, distinction, and the Seal of Biliteracy available. Strong records support HOPE scholarship eligibility (see TN financial aid).

ALTERNATIVE PATHWAYS

CTE, dual enrollment, and Early Postsecondary Opportunities (AP/IB/local dual credit) offer accelerated pathways.

AT A GLANCE

Credits	**22**
Exit exam?	**No**
EOC tests	**Count toward course grade**
Also	**ACT/SAT required**
Confirm with	**Your district**

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

- **How many credits does Tennessee require?** — The state sets a minimum, but your district may require more — confirm locally.
- **Does Tennessee require a test to graduate?** — No — Tennessee has no exit exam; EOC scores count toward the course grade, and the ACT/SAT must be taken.
- **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 TENNESSEE'S FULL GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS GUIDE
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Accountability & Report Cards

AT A GLANCE

Tennessee assigns each school an A-F letter grade (one of the states that report an overall letter grade), published on the TN School Report Card .

HOW THIS STATE RATES SCHOOLS

Tennessee's A-F grade is built from several components: achievement, growth (TVAAS), progress toward English-language proficiency, closing gaps for student groups , and (for high schools) readiness and graduation . Growth (TVAAS) is a key part — read it alongside the letter.

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 TN School Report Card (reportcard.tnedu.gov) . Review the growth (TVAAS) and component grades and the trend, not just the overall letter.

AT A GLANCE

Format	**A-F letter grades**
Based on	**Achievement, growth, gaps & read...**
Tool	**TN School Report Card**
Look up at	**reportcard.tnedu.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 Tennessee rate schools?** — Tennessee assigns an A-F letter grade based on achievement, growth (TVAAS), gaps, and readiness.
- **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 TENNESSEE'S FULL ACCOUNTABILITY & REPORT CARDS GUIDE
tools.k12academics.com →

School Choice

AT A GLANCE

Tennessee enacted a universal Education Savings Account (ESA) program in 2025 (the Education Freedom Act), providing eligible students about $7,000 to spend on approved education expenses. Tennessee also has the Individualized Education Account (IEA) for students with disabilities.

THIS STATE'S CHOICE PROGRAMS

The Education Freedom Scholarship (ESA) gives eligible families roughly $7,000 per student — which must first be used for tuition but can also cover other approved expenses. It started with a cap of 20,000 scholarships (with half reserved for lower-income students and students with disabilities), and lawmakers have moved to raise the cap...

ELIGIBILITY

The new ESA is universal-eligible but capped — so not every applicant is guaranteed a funded seat, with priority for lower-income families and students with disabilities. Confirm current caps and priorities.

APPLYING

Apply through the Tennessee Department of Education's ESA program. Watch the application window and confirm requirements.

LEGAL & LEGISLATIVE STATUS

The new program is the subject of ongoing litigation and is still ramping up — confirm the current status, caps, and rules.

AT A GLANCE

New program	**Universal ESA (Education Freedom...**
Amount	**$7,000 per student**
Cap	**Started at 20,000 (rising)**
Also	**IEA (students with disabilities)**
Note	**Under legal challenge**
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 Tennessee have a private-school-choice program?** — Yes — Tennessee enacted a universal ESA (~$7,000) in 2025, plus the IEA for disabilities (program under legal challenge).
- **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 TENNESSEE'S FULL SCHOOL CHOICE GUIDE
tools.k12academics.com →

Teacher Certification

HOW LICENSURE WORKS HERE

Tennessee licenses teachers through the Tennessee Department of Education . You complete an approved program, pass the required Praxis exams, and earn a Practitioner License , later a Professional License .

WHICH TESTS THIS STATE USES

- **Praxis Subject Assessments** — Content test(s) for your endorsement area
- **Praxis PLT** — Principles of Learning and Teaching (pedagogy) for the appropriate grade band
- **edTPA** — A teaching performance assessment (confirm current status)
- **Note** — Basic-skills requirements may be met via Praxis Core or qualifying 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	**Tennessee Department of Educatio...**
Content & pedagogy	**Praxis Subject + PLT**
License	**Practitioner — then Professional**
Also	**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 Tennessee, 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 Tennessees agency and your current state

READ TENNESSEE'S FULL TEACHER CERTIFICATION GUIDE
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Financial Aid

THE STATE AID PICTURE

Tennessee is a national leader in tuition-free community college , and its lottery-funded programs are administered by the Tennessee Student Assistance Corporation (TSAC) . Its centerpiece is Tennessee Promise , alongside the merit-based HOPE Scholarship .

NEED-BASED STATE GRANTS

- **Tennessee Student Assistance Award (TSAA)** — The state's need-based grant — file the FAFSA early, as funds are limited.
- **Dual Enrollment Grant** — Funds eligible high-school students taking college courses.

MERIT & LOTTERY SCHOLARSHIPS

- **Tennessee HOPE Scholarship** — A lottery-funded merit scholarship for students meeting GPA/test-score requirements at eligible Tennessee colleges.
- **Wilder-Naifeh Technical Skills Grant** — For students in Tennessee College of Applied Technology (TCAT) programs.

PROMISE & FREE-COLLEGE PROGRAMS

Tennessee Promise provides tuition-free community and technical college (last-dollar) to recent high-school graduates who complete the steps (application, mentoring, and community service). Tennessee Reconnect extends tuition-free community college to adults returning to school.

COLLEGE SAVINGS (529 PLAN)

Tennessee's TNStars College Savings 529 Program is the state's tax-advantaged plan.

AT A GLANCE

Merit	**Tennessee HOPE Scholarship**
Free community college	**Tennessee Promise**
Adults	**Tennessee Reconnect**
Need-based	**TSAA**
529 plan	**TNStars**
Agency	**TSAC**

APPLYING & THE STATE AGENCY

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

Tennessee Promise has an early fall deadline in senior year, and TSAA funds run out quickly — file the FAFSA early. 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...

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