K12 ACADEMICS — STATE EDUCATION SERIES

Washington, D.C.
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 Washington, D.C..

This guide profiles **Washington, D.C.**'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 WASHINGTON, D.C.

The District of Columbia educates roughly 96,000 public K–12 students — and, because it's a federal district rather than a state, its governance is unusual. Instead of a single state department, the District has the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) (which performs "state-level" functions), DC Public Schools (DCPS)...

WHO MUST ATTEND SCHOOL

- **Start age** — 5
- **End of compulsory age** — 18
- **System** — DCPS + independent public charter LEAs
- **Satisfying it** — DCPS, charter, private, or home instruction

UNIVERSAL PRE-K

Washington, D.C. is a national leader in early education, offering free universal prekindergarten to all 3- and 4-year-olds — one of the highest pre-K enrollment rates in the country . Pre-K is delivered through DCPS schools, public charter schools, and community-based organizations (with Head Start integrated into the mix). Because...

AT A GLANCE

Compulsory	**Ages 5–18**
Schools	**DCPS + charters**
Testing	**DC CAPE**
Diploma	**24 cr + service**
Choice	**Charters / voucher**

DCPS & CHARTER SCHOOLS

The District's public schools come in two forms. DC Public Schools (DCPS) is the traditional district — about 115 schools led by a Chancellor under the Mayor. Alongside it, the District has one of the country's largest public charter sectors : roughly 130 charter campuses educating about 45% of all public-school students — one of the...

PRIVATE & INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS IN D.C.

- **Independent schools** — Nonprofit, board-governed, tuition-funded schools such as Sidwell Friends , St. Albans , National Cathedral School , Georgetown Day School , and...
- **Catholic & parochial schools** — Archdiocese of Washington schools, including Gonzaga College High School
- **Other religious & Friends schools** — Quaker, Jewish, and other faith-based options
- **Specialty schools** — Montessori and schools for specific learning needs

READ WASHINGTON, D.C.'S FULL EDUCATION OVERVIEW GUIDE
tools.k12academics.com →

State Testing

WHAT YOUR STATE TESTS

Washington, D.C. gives a statewide assessment — the DC CAPE (which replaced PARCC) — in ELA and math for grades 3–8 and high school, plus a science test. D.C. also offers a free PSAT/SAT . Run by the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE). There's no exit-exam gate.

WHICH TESTS, WHICH GRADES

- **DC statewide ELA & Math** — Grades 3–8 and high school
- **DC Science Assessment** — At designated grades
- **PSAT/SAT** — Offered free to high-schoolers — a college-usable score
- **MSAA / alternate** — For eligible students

FORMAT & SUBJECTS

The DC assessment is online with varied item types; the SAT follows the national digital SAT format.

IS PASSING REQUIRED TO GRADUATE?

No exit-exam gate. D.C. doesn't require passing a state test to graduate; schools set course and credit requirements. The free SAT provides a college-usable score.

HOW IT'S SCORED

The DC assessment reports performance levels; the SAT is scored 400–1600.

AT A GLANCE

System	DC statewide assessment (DC CAPE...
Grades	3–8 and HS
Subjects	ELA, Math, Science
Also	Free PSAT/SAT
Grad requirement?	No exit-exam gate
Format	Online

TESTING WINDOWS

Testing runs in a spring window .

HOW TO PREPARE

- **SAT prep for grade 11** — Our SAT guide and free Khan Academy Official SAT Practice apply
- **State practice tests** — The state provides free practice tests 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 WASHINGTON, D.C.'S FULL STATE TESTING GUIDE
tools.k12academics.com →

Graduation Requirements

AT A GLANCE

Washington, D.C. requires 24 credits and a distinctive 100 hours of community service to graduate, with no exit exam . Requirements are set by the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) .

CREDIT & COURSE REQUIREMENTS

D.C.'s 24 Carnegie units include 4 English, 4 math, 4 science (with labs), 4 social studies, 2 world language, 1.5 PE/health, 0.5 art, 0.5 music, and electives.

TESTING TO GRADUATE

No exit exam. D.C. students take state assessments, but a passing score is not required to graduate.

DIPLOMA TYPES & HONORS

D.C. issues a standard diploma, with the Seal of Biliteracy available. Strong records support DCTAG and DC scholarship eligibility (see DC financial aid).

ALTERNATIVE PATHWAYS

Dual enrollment and AP offer accelerated routes; credit recovery helps students who fall behind.

AT A GLANCE

Credits	**24 (Carnegie units)**
Exit exam?	**No**
Distinctive	**100 hours of community service**
Agency	**OSSE**
Confirm with	**Your school**

OTHER REQUIREMENTS

D.C. famously requires 100 hours of community service to graduate — a distinctive requirement. Confirm how your school structures it.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

- **How many credits does Washington DC require?** — The state sets a minimum, but your district may require more — confirm locally.
- **Does Washington DC require a test to graduate?** — No — D.C. has no exit exam, but students must complete 100 hours of community service.
- **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 WASHINGTON, D.C.'S FULL GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS GUIDE
tools.k12academics.com →

Accountability & Report Cards

AT A GLANCE

Washington, D.C. rates schools with the STAR framework — a 1 to 5 star rating — on the DC School Report Card , administered by the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE).

HOW THIS STATE RATES SCHOOLS

The STAR rating combines points across academic achievement, academic growth, English-learner progress, graduation and on-track measures, attendance, and school-environment indicators, producing a 1–5 star rating. More stars mean stronger performance; growth is heavily weighted.

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 DC School Report Card (dcschoolreportcard.org) . Review the STAR framework components (especially growth) and the trend, not just the stars.

AT A GLANCE

Format	**STAR framework (1–5 stars)**
Tool	**DC School Report Card**
Agency	**OSSE**
Look up at	**dcschoolreportcard.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 Washington DC rate schools?** — Washington, D.C. uses the STAR framework (1–5 stars) on the DC School Report Card.
- **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 WASHINGTON, D.C.'S FULL ACCOUNTABILITY & REPORT CARDS GUIDE
tools.k12academics.com →

School Choice

AT A GLANCE

Washington, D.C. has the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program — a voucher for lower-income students that is federally funded (the only such program in the country). D.C. also has one of the largest public charter sectors anywhere — a big share of D.C. students attend charters.

THIS STATE'S CHOICE PROGRAMS

The DC Opportunity Scholarship provides vouchers to help income-eligible D.C. students attend participating private schools. Because it's federally funded , its continuation depends on Congress — confirm the current status and funding. Separately, D.C.'s public charter schools enroll a large portion of students and use a common lottery.

ELIGIBILITY

The Opportunity Scholarship is for lower-income D.C. residents (with income limits and priority rules). Confirm current eligibility.

APPLYING

Apply for the Opportunity Scholarship through its administering organization; apply to charters via the common lottery (My School DC). Confirm windows and requirements.

LEGAL & LEGISLATIVE STATUS

The DC Opportunity Scholarship is federally funded , so its funding depends on Congress and can change — confirm the current status.

AT A GLANCE

Program	DC Opportunity Scholarship (vouc...
Distinctive	Federally funded (unique)
For	Lower-income D.C. students
Plus	Very large public charter sector
Confirm with	The program administrator

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 Washington DC have a private-school-choice program?** — Yes — D.C. has the federally funded DC Opportunity Scholarship (a voucher for low-income students) plus a very large charter sector.
- **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 WASHINGTON, D.C.'S FULL SCHOOL CHOICE GUIDE
tools.k12academics.com →

Teacher Certification

HOW LICENSURE WORKS HERE

Washington, D.C. licenses teachers through the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) . You complete an approved program, pass the required Praxis exams, and earn an Initial Credential , later a Standard Credential .

WHICH TESTS THIS STATE USES

- **Praxis Core** — Basic skills — or satisfied with qualifying scores
- **Praxis Subject Assessments** — Content test(s) for your certification area
- **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	OSSE (D.C.)
Basic skills	Praxis Core (or qualifying score...
Content	Praxis Subject Assessments
License	Initial — then Standard

OTHER PATHS INTO TEACHING

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

READ WASHINGTON, D.C.'S FULL TEACHER CERTIFICATION GUIDE
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Financial Aid

THE STATE AID PICTURE

Washington, D.C.'s state-equivalent aid is administered by the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) . Its signature program, DCTAG , effectively makes public colleges nationwide affordable at in-state prices for D.C. residents.

NEED-BASED STATE GRANTS

- **DC Tuition Assistance Grant (DCTAG)** — Pays up to $10,000 per year toward the difference between in-state and out-of-state tuition at public colleges nationwide, and up to $2,500/year at...
- **Mayor's Scholars Undergraduate Program** — A last-dollar scholarship for D.C. residents attending participating local universities.

PROMISE & FREE-COLLEGE PROGRAMS

DC Futures provides last-dollar aid and coaching for D.C. adults pursuing in-demand credentials at participating local universities (subject to funding and current-cohort limits).

COLLEGE SAVINGS (529 PLAN)

The DC College Savings Plan (DC529) offers a tax deduction for D.C. taxpayers.

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

Flagship	DCTAG (up to $10k/yr)
Adults	DC Futures
Last-dollar	Mayor's Scholars
529 plan	DC529
Agency	OSSE
Apply via	DC OneApp

APPLYING & THE STATE AGENCY

- **File the FAFSA early** — It's the trigger for state grants and many scholarships
- **Register with DC Office of the State Superintendent of Education** — 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 Washington DC aid?** — File the FAFSA (and any state form) by the deadline; DC Office of the State Superintendent of Education administers the programs.
- **Is it need-based or merit?** — Both — Washington DC 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 WASHINGTON, D.C.'S FULL FINANCIAL AID GUIDE
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