K12 ACADEMICS — FOUNDER'S GUIDE SERIES

How to Start a School in the United States

A plain-English, sourced founder's guide: the ten steps every school shares, plus the charter, private, faith-based, microschool and special-education paths, with real timelines, costs and the agencies that have the final word.

K12 ACADEMICS

Find Your Community

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How to use this guide. Almost every hard requirement is set by your **state**, and rules change often. This guide teaches the process and the decision points; for the rules that apply to you, use the links in **Sources & Authorities** at the back.

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PART 1 OF 7

How to Start a School: The Ten-Step Founding Process

Every U.S. school, charter, private, faith-based, microschool or special-education, is built on the same ten steps. Where the paths split is at authorization and funding. This is the shared backbone.

AT A GLANCE

Applies to	**All school types**
Steps	**10**
Decides the path	**Authorization & funding**
Legal form	**Usually 501(c)(3)**
See also	**Accreditation, School Types**
Scope	**United States**

THE IDEA

One backbone, five paths

Opening a school looks different for a public charter, a tuition-funded private academy and a ten-student microschool, but the founding work is remarkably similar. Every founder writes a mission, forms a legal entity, builds a board, budgets, finds a compliant building, hires and screens staff, and enrolls students. The real fork in the road is **who authorizes the school** and **where the money comes from**. This page walks the shared ten steps; the five path pages then show exactly where each type diverges.

A note that saves heartache: almost every hard requirement, licensing, registration, teacher rules, zoning, is set by your **state**, not by Washington. The U.S. Department of Education says it “does not have jurisdiction over private elementary and secondary schools” and that regulating them is “primarily the responsibility of state and local governments”. Treat the state link-outs here as your real rulebook.

STEP 1–2

Mission, model and legal entity

Start with a clear mission, the educational model (grade span, pedagogy, schedule, who you serve) and evidence of demand: parent surveys, interest lists, letters of support and local enrollment data. Charter authorizers score this as your “theory of action”; private founders use the same work to test whether the tuition price will hold.

Then form the legal entity. Charters almost always need a nonprofit; independent schools are typically board-governed 501(c)(3) nonprofits; proprietary private schools and many microschools use an LLC instead. The nonprofit sequence: file articles of incorporation, adopt bylaws and a conflict-of-interest policy, get an EIN, then file for federal tax exemption.

> The single most common school tax trap: schools **cannot** use the cheap $275 Form 1023-EZ. You must file the full Form 1023 ($600 user fee), and a private school must adopt and publicize a racially nondiscriminatory policy under IRS Rev. Proc. 75-50 (Rev. Proc. 2019-22 now lets you post it on your

website).

STEP 3

Governance and the founding board

Most state nonprofit laws require at least three directors; authorizers and accreditors want a board that mixes education, finance, legal, facilities and fundraising skills. The board hires and evaluates the head of school, approves the budget and audit, and holds fiduciary oversight, with a chair, treasurer and secretary. Keeping board and management roles separate is something charter authorizers look at closely.

One branch flag worth knowing now: a charter board is a **public body**, subject to open-meetings, public-records and ethics laws. A private school board is not.

STEP 4–5

Budget, facilities and zoning

Build at least a three-year (ideally five-year) budget with monthly cash flow for Year 0 and Year 1. Personnel is almost always the largest line, followed by facilities, then furniture, technology and curriculum, plus pre-opening salaries, insurance, legal, audit and enrollment marketing. Public charter money arrives per-pupil and often in arrears; private tuition arrives in deposits and installments, so *timing* of cash is the early risk.

On the building, most new schools lease. Expect several code layers: local zoning (is a school a permitted use?), building/occupancy classification, the fire marshal, the health department and ADA accessibility. A note for the small-and-scrappy: Florida's HB 1285 (2024) now lets private schools use library, museum, theater and church space without rezoning, and child-care licensing is the hidden trap for microschools, see Microschools.

STEP 6–7

Curriculum, staffing and credentials

Charters teach to state standards and give state tests; most private schools must cover broad subjects but not adopt state standards or testing. Staffing is where credential rules vary most. The Education Commission of the States reports 23 states require charter teachers to be certified, while private-school certification is mostly optional, see Teacher Certification. Fingerprint background checks are standard for public and charter schools and required for private schools in some states.

- **Heaviest credential rules:** special-education approved schools (licensed clinicians required).
- **Then:** charter schools, in the 23 states that mandate certification.
- **Lighter:** accredited private schools.
- **Lightest:** unaccredited private schools and microschools.

STEP 8–10

Enrollment, insurance and ongoing compliance

Charters enroll any student, charge no tuition and run a **lottery** when demand exceeds seats (most states allow sibling and staff preferences). Private and faith-based schools may set admissions criteria but, as 501(c)(3)s, must follow the nondiscrimination policy. Special-education students arrive through district IEP placement.

Carry the standard insurance package, general liability, property, directors-and-officers, abuse/molestation, workers' comp and cyber, before you open; authorizers and landlords will ask for certificates. Then plan for the ongoing load: an annual audit and state reporting for charters, an annual affidavit or registration for private schools, accreditation cycles (Cognia and ACSI review every six years), and IRS Form 990 each year.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Do I need a nonprofit to start a school? Not always. Charter schools almost always need a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, and independent schools usually are one. Proprietary (for-profit) private schools and many microschools form an LLC instead. Only a nonprofit can receive tax-deductible donations.

Can I use the quick Form 1023-EZ for a school? No. The IRS bars schools from the streamlined 1023-EZ. You must file the full Form 1023 ($600 fee) and adopt a racially nondiscriminatory policy under Rev. Proc. 75-50.

How long does it take to open a school? It depends on the type: roughly 18–36 months for a charter, 12–24 months for a private school, as little as 3–12 months for a microschool, and 2–4 years for a special-education school to reach full publicly funded placements.

Who regulates the kind of school I want to open? Your state, in almost every case. Charters go through a state-authorized body; private schools register (or not) with the state; special-education schools need separate state program approval. Use the link-outs on each path page.

What is the first concrete step? Write the mission and model, then test real demand (surveys, interest lists). Everything else, entity, board, budget, building, depends on knowing exactly who you will serve and whether enough families want it.

READ THIS SECTION ONLINE

tools.k12academics.com/start-a-school/the-founding-process/

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PART 2 OF 7

How to Start a Charter School

Charter schools are public, publicly funded and free to families, but you need a public authorizer's approval and 18 to 36 months of lead time. Here is the authorizer map, the application, the timeline and the funding.

AT A GLANCE

Type	**Public, tuition-free**
Gate	**Authorizer contract**
Timeline	**18–36 months**
Startup grant	**CSP: ~$315K–$1.9M**
States with charter law	**46 + DC (ECS)**
Admissions	**Open, by lottery**

THE MODEL

Public schools, independently run

A charter school is a tuition-free public school run by an independent nonprofit under a performance contract (a “charter”) with a public authorizer. In exchange for freedom from some district rules, it is held to academic, financial and operational targets and is reviewed on a cycle, usually every five years. The federal Charter Schools Program is the main startup funder.

Charters are a large sector: federal data (NCES Digest 2022) counts 7,847 public charter schools among 99,239 public schools. But the law is uneven, the Education Commission of the States reports 46 states plus DC have charter laws; North Dakota's 2025 law is the newest, and Nebraska, South Dakota and Vermont have none. (Counts differ slightly by source because of how Kentucky's struck-down law is treated, check the current state status.)

WHO APPROVES

Finding your authorizer

The National Association of Charter School Authorizers notes that nearly 90% of authorizers are local school districts, and in six states districts are the *only* option. Other states add independent chartering boards (the DC Public Charter School Board, Colorado Charter School Institute, Indiana Charter School Board, and commissions in Alabama, Tennessee and Georgia), state education agencies or boards, universities (SUNY, Central Michigan), and even city governments and nonprofits. Your first task is identifying which authorizer you can apply to, and that decides your deadlines and rubric.

WHERE IT IS EASIER

Charter-friendly vs. not

The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools ranks state laws each year. Its 13th edition put these at the top and bottom:

Strongest charter laws	Weakest charter laws
Indiana	Wisconsin
Colorado	Virginia
Alabama	Alaska
Minnesota	Kansas
Florida	Maryland (district-only)

This matters because the same application is far more likely to be approved, and far better funded, in a state with multiple authorizers and strong startup support.

THE APPLICATION

What a charter petition contains

A charter application (or petition) is a detailed proposal. Expect to cover:

- Educational program and theory of action
- Evidence of community need and enrollment demand
- Governance structure and founding-board bios
- A multi-year budget and cash-flow plan
- A facilities plan
- Staffing, special-education and English-learner plans
- Enrollment, lottery and discipline policies
- Measurable performance goals

Most authorizers add a **capacity interview** with the founding board and a public hearing. Nearly all states require a founding board of about five to seven members as part of the petition.

HOW LONG

Real timelines and deadlines

Plan on roughly 18 to 36 months from forming the team to opening day: 6–12 months to build the team and write the application, 4–9 months for authorizer review, then a 12–18 month pre-opening year (the federal planning grant funds up to 18 months). A few concrete state deadlines:

State / authorizer	Key deadline
Tennessee	Letter of intent 60+ days out; application due Feb 1 of the year before opening
Colorado (CSI)	Rolling cycle; e.g. LOI June, application July, board action October
Minnesota	Authorizer files affidavit at least 14 months before July 1 of the opening year
Pennsylvania	Application due Nov 15; decision within 75 days of the first hearing

Iowa	Approved schools open two school years after the contract is signed

IF YOU ARE DENIED

Appeals and funding

Denial is not always the end. Many states let you appeal a district's no to a state board or commission, Alabama (to the Public Charter School Commission within 30 days), Colorado (to the State Board within 30 days), Tennessee (to the Public Charter School Commission, which can become your authorizer), West Virginia (to the state board within 30 days), and Florida (to the Charter School Appeal Commission). In some states your only route is to reapply.

On money: the main startup source is a federal CSP subgrant, applied for through your state, with ceilings that run roughly $315K to $1.9M per school (California's max is $1.9M over 36 months; Georgia's up to $1.5M; Tennessee's $750K). FY2024 state-entity awards totaled about $377 million nationally. State per-pupil funding begins only once students enroll, and facilities funding is usually thinner than for district schools.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

How much does it cost to start a charter school? Roughly $0.3M to $2M or more before opening. The federal Charter Schools Program provides startup subgrants from about $315,000 to $1.9 million per school depending on the state; state per-pupil funding then begins at enrollment.

How long does it take to open a charter school? Commonly 18 months to 3 years from forming a founding team to opening, depending on your state's authorization timeline, facilities and funding.

Who approves a charter school? A public authorizer. Nearly 90% are local school districts; many states also allow independent charter boards, the state education agency, universities, and in a few cases cities or nonprofits.

Can a private school become a charter school? Only by ceasing to operate as a private entity, obtaining a charter from a qualified authorizer, and reopening as a public school that meets all state requirements.

What if the district denies my application? Many states allow an appeal to a state board or independent commission, often within 30 days. Rules vary by state, and in some states reapplying is the only option.

READ THIS SECTION ONLINE
tools.k12academics.com/start-a-school/charter-schools/

PART 3 OF 7

3 How to Start a Private or Independent School

There is no public authorizer here, the gate is your state's registration or licensure, which in many states is very light, and the school runs on tuition and philanthropy.

AT A GLANCE

Type	**Tuition-funded**
Gate	**State registration/licensure**
Legal form	**Nonprofit or proprietary**
Accreditation	**Usually voluntary**
Timeline	**12–24 months**
Admissions	**School sets criteria**

THE MODEL

Independent of the public system

A private school is funded by tuition and private giving rather than public per-pupil dollars, so it answers to its board and families rather than to a public authorizer. “Independent” usually means a self-governing nonprofit with its own board (the NAIS model); “proprietary” means an owner- or company-operated school. Both can be accredited, but only a nonprofit can take tax-deductible gifts.

THE REAL GATE

How light (or heavy) your state is

How much the state regulates private schools varies enormously. Start every plan from the U.S. Department of Education's State Regulation of Private Schools map, then go to your state agency. The spectrum:

Regulation level	Examples
Very light / none	Missouri (no registration at all); California (annual affidavit only); Kentucky (optional)
Register with conditions	Alabama (non-church private schools register annually)
Licensure	Pennsylvania (secular schools licensed by the State Board of Private Academic Schools; religious exempt)
Heavier / local approval	Several Northeastern states require state or local approval for compulsory-attendance credit

THE BUILD

Entity, building, staff, students

The founding backbone applies in full, see the ten-step process. The private-specific decisions are: choose nonprofit vs. proprietary (nonprofit for donations and most grants); meet your state's registration or licensure requirement (which may be nothing more than an annual affidavit); and decide your admissions and tuition model. Teacher certification is usually *not* required, Missouri, for example, states certification is “not required by Missouri state statute for teachers in nonpublic schools”, though background checks are mandated in some states.

ACCREDITATION

Voluntary, but it opens doors

Accreditation is voluntary in most states, but it matters for credit transfer, college-admissions credibility, parent confidence and, in some states, school-choice funding eligibility. See our Accreditation section for how it works. Common K-12 accreditors include Cognia, the regional associations (Middle States, WASC, NEASC) and state independent-school associations.

- **Cognia:** membership first, then an Initial Accreditation Review granting a two-year initial term; “in general, Initial Accreditation can be completed within six months”, with continuing reviews at least every six years.
- **Timeline reality:** most accreditors only accept a school after it has operated for about a year, so expect 1–3 years after opening to reach full accreditation.

THE FINANCES

Tuition, aid and philanthropy

Private schools live on net tuition (gross tuition minus financial aid), plus annual-fund and capital giving, endowment and, increasingly, ESA and voucher dollars where the state allows. For scale, NAIS member benchmarks for 2024–25 show average day tuition of $32,251 and median enrollment of 364, but those describe established, well-resourced schools and overstate what a brand-new school can charge. Build your model on realistic local tuition and conservative enrollment ramp-up.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Do I have to register a private school with the state? It depends entirely on your state. Missouri does not regulate private schools at all, California requires only an annual affidavit, while Pennsylvania licenses secular private schools. Check the U.S. Department of Education's state regulation map.

Do private-school teachers need to be certified? In most states, no. Some states require background checks or certain qualifications, but teacher certification is generally optional for private schools, unlike most charter and public schools.

Is accreditation required for a private school? Usually not by the state, but it is often needed for credit transfer, college-admissions credibility and, in some states, eligibility for school-choice funding. It typically takes 1–3 years after opening.

What is the difference between independent and private? “Independent” usually means a nonprofit school governed by its own board (the NAIS model). “Private” is the broader category and includes both nonprofit and for-profit (proprietary) schools.

How is a private school funded? Mainly by tuition, plus charitable giving and endowment. In a growing number of states, families can also use education savings accounts or vouchers to pay tuition.

READ THIS SECTION ONLINE
tools.k12academics.com/start-a-school/private-independent-schools/ →

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How to Start a Faith-Based School

A religious school follows the private-school path plus a denominational layer, and in many states it enjoys a church-school exemption from state regulation. Both facts shape the build.

AT A GLANCE

Type	**Private, religious**
Extra layer	**Denominational approval**
State rule	**Often exempt (church schools)**
Funding	**Tuition + parish/denomination**
Accreditation	**e.g. ACSI, Cognia**
Timeline	**18–36 months**

THE MODEL

Private schooling with a faith mission

A faith-based school is a private school with a religious mission, so it inherits the entire private-school path and adds two things: a **denominational approval layer**, and, in many states, a **church-school exemption** from state regulation. Understanding both early prevents surprises.

THE FAITH LAYER

Denominational approval

Religious bodies set their own gates. In Catholic education, canon law provides that “no school is to bear the name Catholic school without the consent of competent ecclesiastical authority” (canon 803 §3), and diocesan policy turns this into a real process. The Diocese of Columbus, for example, requires groups to obtain the superintendent's approval before any formal steps, the bishop's written permission for non-parish groups, and a professional feasibility study with five-year enrollment and financial plans. The Archdiocese of Washington states plainly that “all proposed new Catholic schools shall be approved by the Archbishop”.

Protestant and other Christian schools often work through ACSI (the Association of Christian Schools International), which requires membership first (2026–27 dues start at a $425 minimum, scale to about $17/student, and cap near $12,743, plus a $299 admin fee).

THE STATE SIDE

Church-school exemptions

Many states exempt church-run schools from the registration and approval rules that apply to secular private schools:

- **Alabama:** church schools (run as a ministry of a local church, taking no state or federal funding) are exempt from annual registration, and nonpublic schools are “not subject to licensure or regulation by the state”.

- **Pennsylvania:** licensure is “not required for non-secular schools”.
- **Kentucky:** a church school need only notify the local board of enrolled students.
- **Nebraska (Rule 13):** schools may elect exemption from state approval on sincerely-held religious-belief grounds.

> Exemption from *education* regulation does **not** exempt you from fire, health and building codes, from IRS nondiscrimination rules (for a separately incorporated school), or from school-choice program rules if you accept ESA or voucher money. And some special-education placement systems fund only *nonsectarian* schools, for example California's NPS certification.

ACCREDITATION

Faith-specific options

Faith-based schools can pursue mainstream accreditation (Cognia, regional associations) or faith-specific bodies like ACSI. ACSI accepts an accreditation application only after a school has operated close to a year, candidacy can run 1–3 years, and re-accreditation is every six years. A newer ACSI **Foundational Accreditation** path, built partly so schools can join state choice programs, offers a one-day visit and a nonrenewable three-year term for schools that are new or opening within the year.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Do I need the bishop's or denomination's permission to open a religious school? For a Catholic school, yes, the diocesan bishop's consent is required to use the name “Catholic” and to open, including a feasibility study. Other denominations and associations such as ACSI have their own membership and approval steps.

Are church schools exempt from state regulation? In many states, yes. Alabama, Pennsylvania, Kentucky and others exempt church-run schools from registration or licensure. But they still must meet fire, health and building codes and IRS rules.

Can a faith-based school get accredited? Yes, through mainstream accreditors like Cognia or faith-specific bodies like ACSI. Accreditation usually comes a year or more after opening and runs on a six-year cycle.

Can families use vouchers or ESAs at a religious school? In many states with school-choice programs, yes, but accepting that money usually brings program rules (and sometimes testing requirements) with it. Some special-education placement funding, however, is limited to nonsectarian schools.

Does a church school still need its own 501(c)(3)? Not necessarily, a school run as a ministry of a church may operate under the church's exemption. A separately incorporated school files its own Form 1023 and follows IRS nondiscrimination rules.

READ THIS SECTION ONLINE
tools.k12academics.com/start-a-school/faith-based-schools/ →

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PART 5 OF 7

How to Start a Microschool or Learning Pod

The same ten-student program can legally be a private school, a group of homeschoolers, or a licensed child-care operation, depending on your state. Classification is everything.

AT A GLANCE

Type	**Very small school/pod**
Sector size	**~75,000 nationwide**
Gate	**Depends on state classification**
Funding	**Tuition + ESA funds**
Timeline	**3–12 months**
Risk	**Child-care licensing**

THE MODEL

A real, fast-growing sector

A microschool is a very small school, often 10 to 25 students with one or two guides. The National Microschooling Center estimates roughly 75,000 microschools serving about 1.5 million students nationwide, and its 2026 Sector Analysis studied 1,000 of them across all 50 states, DC and Puerto Rico. Half report families receiving state school-choice funding, three in five rely mainly on tuition, and about two-thirds meet full-time.

Because the sector is new, the law has not caught up, and **how your state classifies you** is the whole game.

THE REAL QUESTION

Which legal box are you in?

The same program can land in very different legal boxes:

- **Registered private school** (about a third of microschools) — inherits the private-school rules for your state.
- **Homeschool group** (the largest share) — families are counted as homeschoolers under your state's homeschool law.
- **Unlicensed / unrecognized** — operating without official state recognition, workable in light-touch states, risky elsewhere.
- **Licensed child care** — the trap: in several states a multi-family, paid, full-day program is treated as child care and needs a license.

STATE MODELS

How a few states handle it

A snapshot of the range:

State	How it treats microschools

West Virginia	A dedicated microschool statute (SB 268, 2022); file a notice of intent, no enrollment cap
Florida	Register as a private school; HB 1285 (2024) lets you use library/museum/theater/church space without rezoning
California / Missouri	Private-school route with minimal rules (affidavit / none)
IL, ME, MA, OR	Often face child-care or private-school licensing if multiple families pay for care

ACCREDITATION & FUNDING

Newer, smaller-friendly options

Most microschools are not accredited, the NMC's 2026 survey found about 67% are not, though 87% say they would like to be. Newer, small-school-friendly accreditation paths (Middle States' Next Generation Accreditation, the Texas Microschool Accreditation Service) are opening up. Funding is mostly tuition plus ESA dollars, though eligibility often depends on being a registered or accredited private school, in Iowa, for instance, most microschools are blocked from the state ESA program.

> Startup cost is an order of magnitude below a conventional school, but zoning, child-care licensing and insurance are where microschool projects most often fail. Clear those three before you enroll a single family.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What exactly is a microschool? A very small school, often 10–25 students with one or two teachers or "guides." Legally it may be treated as a private school, a homeschool group, or a child-care program depending on the state.

Do I need a license to start a microschool? Maybe. In light-touch states you may only need a private-school affidavit; in several states a paid, multi-family, full-day program is treated as child care and needs a license. Check your state before enrolling families.

Can microschool families use ESA or voucher funds? Often yes, but eligibility usually requires being a registered or accredited private school. Some states (e.g. Iowa) largely block microschools from their ESA programs.

How much does it cost to start a microschool? Far less than a conventional school, typically a low-five- to low-six-figure range (an estimate; no national dataset exists). The main risks are zoning, child-care licensing and insurance rather than raw cost.

Does a microschool need to be accredited? Not usually, about two-thirds are not. Newer accreditation paths designed for very small schools are emerging, and accreditation can help with credibility and school-choice eligibility.

READ THIS SECTION ONLINE

tools.k12academics.com/start-a-school/microschools/

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PART 6 OF 7

How to Start a Special-Education School

The most regulated route. On top of private-school licensing you need a second, program-level state approval before districts can place students and pay tuition, plus licensed clinical staff.

AT A GLANCE

Type	**Approved private / nonpublic**
Gate	**State program approval**
Funding	**District IEP tuition**
Staff	**Licensed clinicians required**
Timeline	**2–4 years to full funding**
Oversight	**Annual monitoring**

THE MODEL

Where districts place and pay

A special-education school (often called an “approved private school” or “nonpublic school” for students with disabilities) serves students whose needs a district cannot meet in-house. It is the most regulated path, because public dollars follow the student. On top of ordinary private-school steps, you need a separate **state program approval** before districts can place students there and pay tuition, and you must staff it with licensed clinicians.

THE SECOND GATE

Program-level state approval

Two state models show how this works:

- **Pennsylvania (Approved Private School):** the school is licensed by the State Board of Private Academic Schools, and then *each* special-education program must be approved by the Secretary, after the program “has been in operation for at least 1 year”. The state conducts an on-site evaluation. PA approves funding for about 4 chartered and 33 non-charter approved private schools serving 4,000+ students.
- **California (certified Nonpublic School):** the CDE certifies NPSs within 120 days, re-certifies annually (apply Aug 1–Oct 31), and the school must be “nonpublic, nonsectarian”. Fees are tiered by capacity.

STAFFING

Licensed clinicians, not just teachers

Beyond special-education-certified teachers (see Special Education and Teacher Certification), you must employ the licensed related-service providers each student's IEP calls for: speech-language pathologists, occupational and physical therapists, school psychologists or counselors, board-certified behavior analysts and behavior technicians for behavior programs, and nurses. California defines “qualified” as meeting “federal and

state certification, licensing, registration, or other comparable requirements". This clinical staffing is why special-education schools carry the highest per-student cost.

FUNDING & PLACEMENT

How the money arrives

Students arrive through district IEP placement, not open enrollment. When a district and parents agree the right program is at your school, the district (often with a state share) pays tuition. In Pennsylvania, state-funded "slots" are limited and filled first-come, first-served, and costs are shared between the district of residence and the Commonwealth. Expect to run first as a licensed private school serving contracted or privately paying students, then earn program approval, then receive state-funded placements, typically **2 to 4 years** to reach full publicly funded status.

ONGOING

Monitoring and recertification

This path carries the heaviest ongoing load: annual recertification (California), district and state monitoring visits (California's SB 373 now requires LEAs to report monitoring findings to the state), and periodic on-site evaluations (Pennsylvania). Residential or therapeutic programs often need additional licensing from the state's human-services or health agency.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What makes a special-education school different to start? It needs a second, program-level state approval on top of private-school licensing before districts can place and fund students, and it must employ licensed clinicians (SLPs, OTs, BCBAs and more).

How are special-education schools funded? Mainly through district IEP placements: when a district and parents agree a student needs the program, the district (often with a state share) pays tuition. Open enrollment is not the model.

How long before a new special-education school can receive public placements? Typically 2–4 years. Pennsylvania, for example, requires a program to operate for at least a year before it can even apply for approval, then adds a state evaluation.

Can a religious school be a state-approved special-education school? Often no. Some states, such as California, certify only nonpublic, nonsectarian schools for special-education placements.

What staff must a special-education school employ? Special-education-certified teachers plus the licensed related-service providers each IEP requires, such as speech-language pathologists, occupational and physical therapists, school psychologists and behavior analysts.

READ THIS SECTION ONLINE
tools.k12academics.com/start-a-school/special-education-schools/

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PART 7 OF 7

What It Costs and How Long It Takes to Start a School

A side-by-side look at the money and the calendar for each path, plus how school choice (ESAs and vouchers) is reshaping the funding picture. Figures are ranges; verify current numbers at the source.

AT A GLANCE

Covers	**All five paths**
Compares	**Cost + timeline + funding**
Fastest	**Microschool (3–12 mo)**
Best-funded startup	**Charter (CSP grants)**
Choice programs	**21 ESAs in 18 states**
Rule	**Link out for live figures**

THE IDEA

Money and calendar, side by side

The five paths differ most in two practical ways: how long they take and where the startup money comes from. This page lines them up. One honest caveat first: there is no national dataset of school startup costs, so the ranges below are informed estimates anchored to the few hard numbers that exist (federal grant ceilings, published accreditor fees, association tuition benchmarks). Treat them as planning ranges, not quotes, and confirm current fees at each source.

TIMELINES

Idea to opening

Path	Typical timeline	Note
Charter	18–36 months	Authorizer review + up to an 18-month funded planning year
Private / independent	12–24 months	Plus 1–3 years after opening to reach accreditation
Faith-based	18–36 months	Denominational feasibility/approval adds time
Microschool	3–12 months	Fastest; gated by zoning and licensing, not approval
Special-education	2–4 years	To reach full publicly funded placement status

COSTS

Startup ranges and fixed fees

Path	Realistic startup cost	Key fixed fees
Charter	~$0.3M–$2M+	Authorizer/application fees vary; CSP subgrants ~$315K–$1.9M; Developer max $2M (FY2025)
Private / independent	Low six figures to $1M+ (facility-driven)	IRS Form 1023 $600; Cognia ~$1,200/yr + review fees (illustrative)
Faith-based	Similar to private; church space can cut costs	ACSI dues $425–$12,743 + $299 admin; accreditation ~$585/yr (2023)
Microschool	~$10K–$150K (estimate)	Often only entity + insurance; state-dependent
Special-education	Highest per student (clinical staff, specialized space)	CA NPS fee tiered by capacity; PA on-site evaluation

> The biggest cost driver across every path is **facilities**, and the second is **personnel**. A church, library or community space (now easier in states like Florida) can change a project's whole budget.

FUNDING MECHANICS

Where the money comes from

Each path has its own engine:

- **Charter:** public per-pupil funding, plus federal CSP startup grants and facilities aid where the state offers it. No tuition.
- **Private / independent:** tuition net of aid, plus annual-fund and capital philanthropy, endowment, and ESA/voucher dollars where allowed.
- **Faith-based:** the private model plus parish or denominational subsidy and often free or below-market church facilities.
- **Microschool:** tuition and ESA funds (about half of microschools report choice-program money).
- **Special-education:** district-paid tuition under IEP placements, plus state shares.

THE SHIFT

School choice is changing the math

Education savings accounts and vouchers are reshaping private-school funding. EdChoice counts 21 ESA programs across 18 states, and analysts count about 18 states with universal or near-universal programs. Roughly 700,000 students use ESAs, and the ten states running universal programs in 2024–25 spent about $5.75 billion on them; Texas's new program offers up to $10,500 per student. Because these programs change every legislative session, and can bring testing or registration strings, treat them as a live, state-specific factor and confirm current terms at EdChoice or Ballotpedia.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Which path is cheapest and fastest to start? A microschool, typically 3–12 months and a low-five- to low-six-figure budget. But its real hurdles are zoning, child-care licensing and insurance rather than money.

Which path has the best startup funding? Charter schools, thanks to the federal Charter Schools Program, which provides startup subgrants of roughly $315,000 to $1.9 million per school, plus public per-pupil funding once open.

What is the single biggest startup cost? Facilities, in almost every case, followed by personnel. Using existing community or church space can dramatically change a project's budget.

What are ESAs and vouchers, and do they help founders? They are state programs that let families use public funds for private-school tuition. They can expand your pool of paying families, but eligibility and strings vary by state and change often.

Why are these cost figures given as ranges? Because no authoritative national dataset of school startup costs exists. The ranges are anchored to hard numbers (federal grant ceilings, accreditor fees, tuition benchmarks); verify current figures at the source.

READ THIS SECTION ONLINE

tools.k12academics.com/start-a-school/costs-timelines-funding/

REFERENCE

Sources & Authorities

Primary government, nonprofit and accreditor sources. Verify current fees, deadlines and state rules at these links before relying on them.

U.S. Dept. of Education — State Regulation of Private Schools
https://oese.ed.gov/state-regulation-private-schools/

IRS — Form 1023 FAQ
https://www.irs.gov/charities-non-profits/frequently-asked-questions-about-form-1023

Education Commission of the States — Charter Policies
https://www.ecs.org/50-state-comparison-charter-school-policies-2026/

U.S. Dept. of Education — Charter Schools Program
https://www.ed.gov/grants-and-programs/grants-birth-grade-12/charter-school-programs

NAIS — About Independent Schools
https://www.nais.org/about/parents/learn-about-independent-schools

Cognia — Accreditation
https://www.cognia.org/accreditation/

National Microschooling Center — 2026 Sector Analysis
https://microschoolingcenter.org/news-blog/sa2026

EdChoice — Education Savings Accounts
https://www.edchoice.org/school-choice/education-savings-account/

A note on accuracy. Cost and timeline figures are informed estimates; no authoritative national dataset exists. State rules change often, confirm at the source.