

The Complete Guide to School Types

35 kinds of schools — public, private, charter, faith-based, Montessori, STEM, special-needs & more — explained to help you choose.

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Public & Choice

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Public Schools

WHAT IS A PUBLIC SCHOOLS?

Public schools are free, tax-funded schools open to all children, run by local school districts under state authority. They educate the large majority of American students and are the default option in every community, with enrollment generally based on where a family lives.

HISTORY & ORIGINS

The US built a system of free "common schools" in the 19th century, and public education expanded through the 20th century into today's network of roughly 13,000+ local school districts overseen by the 50 states — with no national curriculum, a hallmark of the American system.

PHILOSOPHY & APPROACH

Public education rests on the principle of a free, universal education for every child, funded by the public and accountable to it through elected school boards. Standards and much policy are set at the state and local level, so public schools vary considerably across (and within) states.

CURRICULUM & ACADEMICS

Public schools follow state academic standards (many use the Common Core in English and math) and offer a broad curriculum, plus options such as honors, Advanced Placement (AP), IB, dual enrollment, and career-technical (CTE) pathways at the high school level.



AT A GLANCE

Type	Public
Grades	K-12
Funding	Tax-funded
Admission	By residence
Oversight	District & state
Cost	Free

THE CLASSROOM & SCHOOL DAY

Experience varies widely by district and funding, which comes largely from state and local (often property) taxes . This creates real differences in resources, class sizes, and programs between wealthier and lower-income communities.

GRADE LEVELS & STRUCTURE

Public schools typically run elementary (K-5) , middle/junior high (6-8) , and high school (9-12) , though grade spans vary by district. Public pre-K is available in many areas.

ADMISSIONS & ENROLLMENT

Enrollment is generally by residence — your address determines your assigned ("zoned") schools. Many areas also offer public school choice : charters, magnets, inter-district transfers, and open enrollment. There is no tuition and no entrance exam for zoned schools (selective magnets and exam schools are exceptions).

COSTS & FINANCIAL AID

Public schools are free. Families may pay for extras (supplies, activities, meals for those who don't qualify for free/reduced programs), but tuition is not charged.

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Charter Schools

WHAT IS A CHARTER SCHOOLS?

A charter school is a tuition-free public school that operates independently of the local school district under a "charter" — a performance contract with a public authorizer. Charters have more freedom over curriculum, schedule, staffing, and approach than traditional district schools, in exchange for being held accountable for results....

HISTORY & ORIGINS

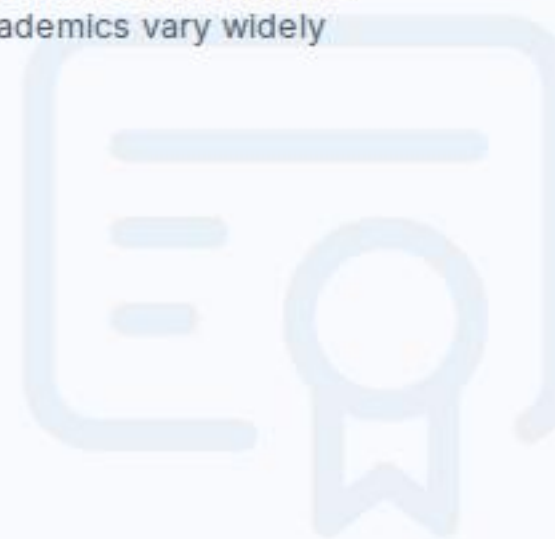
The charter concept was pioneered in the US in 1991, when Minnesota passed the first charter school law , with the first charter opening in 1992. The idea spread rapidly; today the great majority of states (plus D.C.) have charter laws, and charters educate several million students nationwide.

PHILOSOPHY & APPROACH

Charters are built on a bargain of autonomy for accountability : freed from many district rules, they can innovate — longer school days, distinctive curricula, specialized missions (college prep, STEM, arts, dual-language, "no-excuses," project-based) — but must deliver on the academic and operational promises in their charter to stay...

CURRICULUM & ACADEMICS

There is no single charter curriculum . Each school sets its own academic program within state standards and testing requirements. Many charters organize around a specific model or theme, so academics vary widely from one charter to the next.



AT A GLANCE

Type	Public (tuition-free)
Grades	K-12
Origin	1991, Minnesota
Admission	Open / lottery
Oversight	State authorizer + charter
Cost	Free

THE CLASSROOM & SCHOOL DAY

Because charters control their own schedules and culture, day-to-day experience varies: some run longer days and years , adopt uniforms and structured behavior systems, or center a particular pedagogy. Class sizes and facilities differ by school and funding.

GRADE LEVELS & STRUCTURE

Charters span elementary through high school ; many start with a few grades and "grow" a grade each year. Some are single-level (elementary-only), others are full K-12 or part of multi-school networks.

ADMISSIONS & ENROLLMENT

Charters are open to all students in their area and cannot charge tuition or select by ability . When more students apply than there are seats, admission is by random lottery (sometimes with weighted preferences, e.g., siblings or neighborhood). There is no entrance exam.

COSTS & FINANCIAL AID

Charter schools are free — they are public schools funded with public per-pupil dollars. Funding levels and facilities support vary by state, which affects programs and resources.

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Magnet Schools

WHAT IS A MAGNET SCHOOLS?

A magnet school is a tuition-free public school with a special theme or focus — such as STEM, the arts, International Baccalaureate, world languages, or career pathways — designed to "attract" (like a magnet) students from across a district, beyond a single neighborhood zone. Magnets are run by the school district, not independently.

HISTORY & ORIGINS

Magnet schools emerged in the US in the 1970s , largely as a tool for voluntary school desegregation — offering distinctive, high-quality programs to draw a diverse student body across neighborhood lines without forced busing. They remain popular for their specialized programs.

PHILOSOPHY & APPROACH

The magnet model pairs a rigorous or specialized theme with district-wide access : rather than being limited to a zoned school, families can opt into a program built around a particular focus, often with extra resources and partnerships tied to that theme.

CURRICULUM & ACADEMICS

Academics center on the school's theme — for example, an engineering magnet emphasizes math, science, and design; an arts magnet builds around performance and studio work; an IB magnet delivers the International Baccalaureate — all while meeting state standards.



AT A GLANCE

Type	Public (tuition-free)
Grades	K-12
Origin	1970s
Focus	Themed (STEM, arts, IB...)
Admission	Application / lottery
Cost	Free

THE CLASSROOM & SCHOOL DAY

The specialized focus shapes daily life: dedicated labs, studios, or facilities; partnerships with universities, employers, or cultural institutions; and cohorts of students drawn to the same interest.

GRADE LEVELS & STRUCTURE

Magnets exist at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. Some whole schools are magnets; in other cases a magnet "program" operates within a larger school.

ADMISSIONS & ENROLLMENT

Because magnets draw from across a district, they use an application process . Depending on the program, admission may be by lottery , by criteria (grades, test scores, audition, or portfolio for selective/arts magnets), or a mix. They are free and do not charge tuition.

COSTS & FINANCIAL AID

Magnet schools are free public schools, funded by the district and often supplemented by grants tied to their theme.

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Community Schools

WHAT IS A COMMUNITY SCHOOLS?

A community school is a public school that partners with community organizations to provide wraparound services — such as health and mental-health care, family support, expanded and enrichment learning, and social services — alongside academics. The idea is to remove barriers to learning and support the whole child and the whole...

HISTORY & ORIGINS

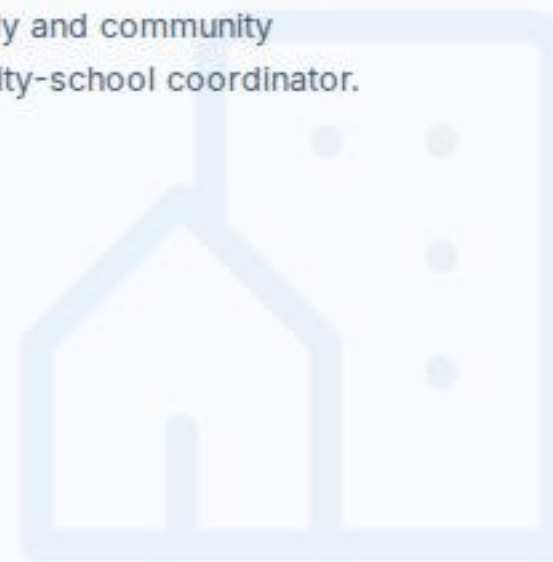
The community-schools approach has grown for decades and gained major momentum with state and federal support, as districts sought to address students' non-academic needs and strengthen family and community engagement.

PHILOSOPHY & APPROACH

Community schools rest on the belief that students learn best when their broader needs are met — so schools coordinate services and partnerships to support health, family, and community, not just instruction. They're often organized around a few core pillars.

CURRICULUM & ACADEMICS

Academics follow the public curriculum, strengthened by wraparound supports : integrated student services (health, mental health, social services), expanded and enrichment learning , active family and community engagement , and collaborative leadership with partners. Many use a full-time community-school coordinator.



AT A GLANCE

Type	Public
Grades	K-12
Model	School + wraparound services
Pillars	Health, family, learning, part...
Goal	Whole-child, whole-community
Cost	Free

THE CLASSROOM & SCHOOL DAY

The school functions as a community hub — often with on-site or connected services, before/after-school and summer programs, and strong family engagement — while classrooms run the regular academic program.

GRADE LEVELS & STRUCTURE

Community schools span K-12 ; the model can apply to any public school.

ADMISSIONS & ENROLLMENT

Community schools are public and free , enrolling like other public schools (attendance zone or, for charters, lottery). "Community school" describes the model layered onto a public school.

COSTS & FINANCIAL AID

Community schools are free (public), with services provided through partnerships and funding. They aim to reduce barriers for students and families.

ACCREDITATION & GOVERNANCE

Community schools meet state public-school standards; the model adds services and partnerships. Look at the depth of services, family engagement, and coordination at a specific school.

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Private & Independent

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Private Schools

WHAT IS A PRIVATE SCHOOLS?

Private schools are schools that operate independently of the public system and are funded primarily by tuition (plus donations and endowments) rather than taxes. They set their own curriculum, admissions, and policies, and include religious schools, secular independent schools, boarding schools, and specialized programs.

HISTORY & ORIGINS

Private education in America predates public schooling and has long included religious academies and elite preparatory schools. Today private schools educate roughly one in ten US students across a wide spectrum of missions, sizes, and price points.

PHILOSOPHY & APPROACH

Private schools exist to offer a distinctive alternative to public schooling — whether a particular faith, pedagogy, academic rigor, small classes, or specialized support. Freed from many public-system rules, they can shape their own culture, curriculum, and community.

CURRICULUM & ACADEMICS

Academics vary by school and mission, but private schools often emphasize smaller classes, college preparation, and enrichment (arts, languages, athletics). Many offer AP or IB, and college-prep private schools track strong college placement.



AT A GLANCE

Type	Private
Grades	PreK–12
Funding	Tuition
Admission	Application
Oversight	Self / accreditors
Cost	Tuition

THE CLASSROOM & SCHOOL DAY

Common draws include smaller class sizes, more individual attention, strong extracurriculars, and a defined community or values . Facilities and resources depend heavily on tuition and endowment.

GRADE LEVELS & STRUCTURE

Private schools span preschool through grade 12 . Some are single-level (e.g., a private elementary), others are full PreK–12; many are religious, others secular/independent.

ADMISSIONS & ENROLLMENT

Private schools select their students through an application process that may include records, essays, interviews, and admissions tests (such as the ISEE or SSAT for many independent schools). Competitiveness ranges from open-enrollment to highly selective.

COSTS & FINANCIAL AID

Private schools charge tuition , ranging from modest parish-school fees to premium day- and boarding-school prices. Many offer financial aid, scholarships, and sliding scales , and in some states, vouchers or education savings accounts (ESAs) can help cover costs.

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Independent Schools

WHAT IS AN INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS?

Independent schools are a category of private school that are nonprofit and governed by their own board of trustees, funded through tuition, endowment, and donations. They are "independent" of both the public system and (usually) any church or larger organization, setting their own mission, curriculum, and policies.

HISTORY & ORIGINS

Many of America's oldest and most prestigious schools are independent, with roots stretching back centuries. The sector is represented by the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) and regional associations that set standards for governance and quality.

PHILOSOPHY & APPROACH

Independent schools emphasize self-governance, a distinctive educational mission, and accountability to families and their board rather than to a district or denomination. This independence lets them pursue particular academic, values-based, or pedagogical visions.

CURRICULUM & ACADEMICS

Independent schools are often known for academic rigor, small classes, and strong college preparation, with rich offerings in the arts, athletics, and extracurriculars. Many are day schools; some are boarding or both.



AT A GLANCE

Type	Private (nonreligious)
Grades	PreK–12
Governance	Board of trustees
Funding	Tuition + endowment
Admission	Selective
Cost	Tuition

THE CLASSROOM & SCHOOL DAY

Hallmarks include low student-teacher ratios, well-resourced facilities, and a strong sense of community and tradition . Culture and rigor vary by school and mission.

GRADE LEVELS & STRUCTURE

Independent schools span preschool through grade 12 ; some are elementary or secondary only, others full PreK–12.

ADMISSIONS & ENROLLMENT

Admission is selective and application-based , commonly involving records, teacher recommendations, interviews, a student visit, and admissions testing (ISEE or SSAT). Selectivity ranges from accessible to highly competitive.

COSTS & FINANCIAL AID

Independent schools charge tuition , often among the higher private-school prices, but most offer substantial financial aid funded by endowment — so families should not rule them out on sticker price alone.

FINDING INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

Ready to explore specific schools? K12 Academics lists thousands of schools of every type across the country.

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Boarding Schools

WHAT IS A BOARDING SCHOOLS?

A boarding school is a private school where students live on campus during the school term, immersed in academics, activities, and community around the clock. Most are college-preparatory secondary schools, and many also enroll day students alongside boarders.

HISTORY & ORIGINS

Boarding schools have a long history in the US and UK, including many historic New England "prep schools." Today they range from traditional college-prep academies to specialized (arts, military, therapeutic) and international boarding programs.

PHILOSOPHY & APPROACH

The boarding model builds on immersion and independence : living on campus means academics, athletics, arts, clubs, and community are woven together, with structured support, mentorship from resident faculty, and a high degree of student responsibility.

CURRICULUM & ACADEMICS

Boarding schools are typically academically rigorous and college-focused , with small classes, extensive AP/IB or advanced offerings, and strong college counseling. Evening study hours and on-campus faculty support learning outside class.

FINDING BOARDING SCHOOLS

Ready to explore specific schools? K12 Academics lists thousands of schools of every type across the country.

AT A GLANCE

Type	Private (residential)
Grades	Mostly 9–12
Setting	Students live on campus
Admission	Selective
Options	Boarding & day
Cost	Tuition (high)

THE CLASSROOM & SCHOOL DAY

Life extends beyond the classroom: dormitories, dining halls, athletic facilities, arts spaces, and a packed schedule of activities. Resident faculty (dorm parents, advisors, coaches) mentor students, and campuses often feel like tight-knit communities.

GRADE LEVELS & STRUCTURE

Most boarding schools serve high school (grades 9–12) , sometimes with a postgraduate (PG) year ; some junior boarding schools serve middle-school grades. Many offer both boarding and day enrollment.

ADMISSIONS & ENROLLMENT

Admission is selective and application-based , involving records, recommendations, interviews (on-campus or virtual), essays, and admissions testing (SSAT or ISEE , sometimes TOEFL for international applicants). Popular schools can be highly competitive.

COSTS & FINANCIAL AID

Boarding tuition (covering room and board) is among the highest in K–12 education . However, many boarding schools have large endowments and substantial financial aid , so families should investigate aid rather than assume a school is out of reach.

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Country Day Schools

WHAT IS A COUNTRY DAY SCHOOLS?

A country day school is a private day school that offers the rich, all-around experience of a boarding school — academics, arts, athletics, and a full day of activities — without students living on campus . The name arose when such schools were built on spacious, often suburban or "country" campuses as a day-school alternative to...

HISTORY & ORIGINS

The country day school movement began in the early 20th century, giving families a private, college-preparatory day option with the facilities and breadth associated with boarding schools. Many are long-established independent schools.

PHILOSOPHY & APPROACH

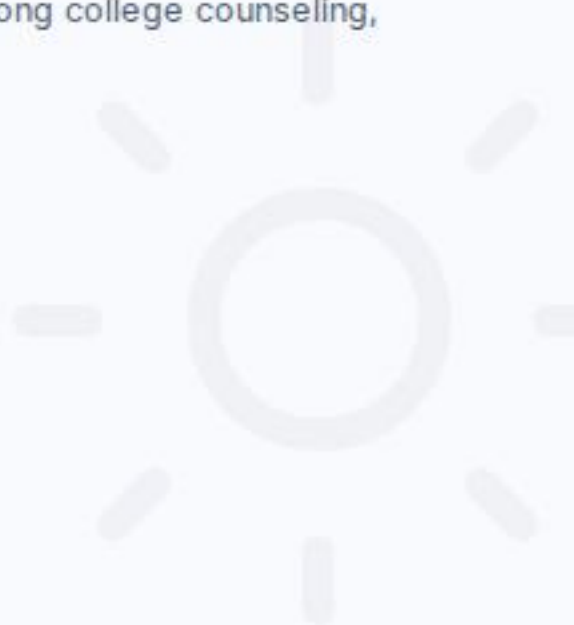
Country day schools aim to deliver a comprehensive, well-rounded day-school education — strong academics plus extensive arts, athletics, and extracurriculars on a full-day schedule — while students return home each evening.

CURRICULUM & ACADEMICS

Academics are typically rigorous and college-preparatory , with small classes and strong college counseling, complemented by robust arts and athletics programs.

GRADE LEVELS & STRUCTURE

Country day schools commonly span preschool or kindergarten through grade 12 .



AT A GLANCE

Type	Private (day)
Grades	PreK–12
Model	Full-day, no boarding
Setting	Often spacious campuses
Admission	Selective
Cost	Tuition

THE CLASSROOM & SCHOOL DAY

These schools often feature spacious campuses and strong facilities , a full-day schedule rich with activities, and a close community — the boarding-school experience on a day basis.

ADMISSIONS & ENROLLMENT

Admission is selective and application-based (records, interview, often ISEE/SSAT), like other independent day schools.

COSTS & FINANCIAL AID

Country day schools charge tuition (day-school rates, lower than boarding), often with financial aid.

ACCREDITATION & GOVERNANCE

They are private, often independent schools, typically accredited and frequently NAIS members.

IS A COUNTRY DAY SCHOOLS RIGHT FOR YOUR CHILD?

A country day school suits families who want a comprehensive, boarding-style private education — with the facilities, breadth, and community — while keeping their child at home. It offers many benefits of a top independent school on a day basis.

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College-Prep Schools

WHAT IS A COLLEGE PREPARATORY SCHOOLS?

A college preparatory school ("prep school") is focused on preparing students for admission to and success in college . Prep schools emphasize rigorous academics, strong college counseling, and a full range of activities . The term is most associated with private and boarding schools , but selective public schools and many others are...

HISTORY & ORIGINS

College-preparatory schools have a long tradition, particularly among private and boarding schools founded to ready students for elite colleges. Over time, "college prep" has become a broad label for schools centered on college readiness.

PHILOSOPHY & APPROACH

Prep schools are built around getting students ready for college — through challenging academics, close guidance, strong writing and study skills, and a well-rounded experience of arts, athletics, leadership, and service that colleges value.

CURRICULUM & ACADEMICS

Academics are rigorous and college-focused , typically with honors, AP, IB, or advanced coursework , small classes, strong college counseling , and an emphasis on writing, critical thinking, and preparation for admissions. A rich program of activities rounds out the experience.



AT A GLANCE

Type	Mostly private
Grades	Often 9–12 (some K–12)
Focus	College preparation
Hallmarks	Rigor, advising, activities
Setting	Day or boarding
Cost	Tuition (public prep free)

THE CLASSROOM & SCHOOL DAY

The culture is academically serious and college-oriented , often with small classes, dedicated counselors, and extensive extracurriculars; many are day schools, some are boarding.

GRADE LEVELS & STRUCTURE

Prep schools most often serve grades 9–12 , though some are K–12.

ADMISSIONS & ENROLLMENT

Private prep schools admit by application (records, testing, interviews) and charge tuition, often with aid; public college-prep or selective schools are free (sometimes by admission or lottery).

COSTS & FINANCIAL AID

Private prep schools charge tuition (boarding is higher), with financial aid at many; public college-prep schools are free .

ACCREDITATION & GOVERNANCE

Prep schools are typically accredited and members of independent-school associations. Look at rigor, college counseling, outcomes (where graduates go), and fit — "college prep" is a broad label, so specifics matter.

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All-Boys Schools

WHAT IS A ALL-BOYS SCHOOLS?

An all-boys school is a single-sex school that enrolls only male students . Most are private (many with religious or independent traditions, some boarding); a small number of public single-sex schools and programs exist. Proponents cite a tailored environment and fewer distractions; the research on single-sex outcomes is mixed and...

HISTORY & ORIGINS

Single-sex education has deep historical roots, and many long-established prep and religious schools are all-boys. Interest continues among families who believe a single-sex setting can benefit their son.

PHILOSOPHY & APPROACH

Advocates argue an all-boys environment can be tailored to how boys often learn and develop , encourage participation across subjects (including the arts and humanities), reduce social distractions, and foster a strong brotherhood and mentorship. Critics note the evidence on academic benefit is inconclusive.

CURRICULUM & ACADEMICS

Academics are typically college-preparatory , with programs and teaching sometimes designed around engaging boys. Offerings, rigor, and culture vary widely by school.



AT A GLANCE

Type	Mostly private
Grades	Varies (often 6–12)
Model	Single-sex (boys)
Setting	Day or boarding
Admission	Application
Cost	Tuition (some public)

THE CLASSROOM & SCHOOL DAY

Culture often emphasizes brotherhood, mentorship, athletics, leadership, and character. Boys may feel freer to pursue arts, music, or academics without gender stereotyping in a single-sex setting.

GRADE LEVELS & STRUCTURE

All-boys schools exist at various levels but are most common at the middle and high school stages; some are PreK–12 and some boarding.

ADMISSIONS & ENROLLMENT

Private all-boys schools admit by application (records, interview, sometimes ISEE/SSAT) and charge tuition; the few public single-sex options are free with their own enrollment rules.

COSTS & FINANCIAL AID

Most all-boys schools are private and charge tuition (with financial aid at many); public single-sex programs are free. Costs vary widely.

ACCREDITATION & GOVERNANCE

Private all-boys schools seek accreditation like other private schools; some are religious or independent. Evaluate each school on its academics, culture, and outcomes.

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All-Girls Schools

WHAT IS A ALL-GIRLS SCHOOLS?

An all-girls school is a single-sex school that enrolls only female students . Most are private (independent or religious, some boarding); a few public single-sex schools and programs exist. Advocates highlight leadership, confidence, and strong participation in STEM and all subjects; as with all single-sex schooling, the research on...

HISTORY & ORIGINS

All-girls schools have a long history and remain popular with families who believe a single-sex setting supports girls' confidence and leadership. Many are well-established independent or religious schools.

PHILOSOPHY & APPROACH

Proponents argue all-girls schools build confidence and leadership , encourage girls to take on every role and subject (including STEM and athletics) without gender stereotyping, and foster strong community. Critics note the evidence on academic benefit is inconclusive.

CURRICULUM & ACADEMICS

Academics are typically college-preparatory , often with intentional emphasis on leadership, voice, and STEM participation. Rigor, offerings, and culture vary by school.

GRADE LEVELS & STRUCTURE

All-girls schools are most common at the middle and high school levels; some are PreK-12 and some boarding.



AT A GLANCE

Type	Mostly private
Grades	Varies (often 6–12)
Model	Single-sex (girls)
Setting	Day or boarding
Admission	Application
Cost	Tuition (some public)

THE CLASSROOM & SCHOOL DAY

Culture often emphasizes leadership, sisterhood, mentorship, and encouraging girls in every field . Students may feel freer to lead and to pursue interests without gender dynamics.

ADMISSIONS & ENROLLMENT

Private all-girls schools admit by application (records, interview, sometimes ISEE/SSAT) and charge tuition; the few public single-sex options are free with their own enrollment rules.

COSTS & FINANCIAL AID

Most all-girls schools are private and charge tuition (with financial aid at many); public single-sex programs are free. Costs vary widely.

ACCREDITATION & GOVERNANCE

Private all-girls schools seek accreditation ; some are religious or independent. Evaluate each on academics, culture, and outcomes.

HOW IT COMPARES TO OTHER SCHOOLS

All-girls schools are defined by their single-sex model ; they can be religious, independent, day, or boarding. They contrast with co-educational schools and parallel all-boys schools.

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Arts Schools

WHAT IS A ARTS SCHOOLS?

An arts school focuses on the visual and performing arts — music, dance, theater, visual art, creative writing, film — alongside a full academic program. Arts schools include public arts magnets and charters and private/independent arts academies, and typically admit students by audition or portfolio .

HISTORY & ORIGINS

Dedicated arts schools grew alongside the magnet movement, offering intensive pre-professional training within K-12 education. Many well-known performers and artists are alumni of arts high schools.

PHILOSOPHY & APPROACH

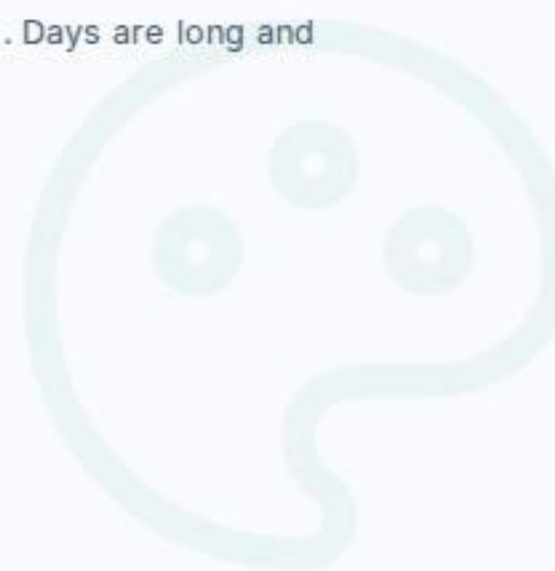
Arts schools give serious, pre-professional training in one or more art forms while maintaining academics — nurturing talent, discipline, and creative growth in a community of like-minded artists.

CURRICULUM & ACADEMICS

Students split their day between arts conservatory-style training (studio, rehearsal, performance) and core academics . Strong programs balance rigorous arts with solid college-preparatory coursework.

THE CLASSROOM & SCHOOL DAY

Facilities include studios, theaters, practice rooms, galleries, and performance spaces . Days are long and intensive, with performances, exhibitions, and showcases central to the culture.



AT A GLANCE

Type	Public or private
Grades	Mostly 6–12
Focus	Visual & performing arts
Admission	Audition / portfolio
Format	Magnet, charter, private
Cost	Free or tuition

GRADE LEVELS & STRUCTURE

Most arts schools serve middle and high school (grades 6–12) , where specialized training makes sense; some offer elementary arts-integrated programs.

ADMISSIONS & ENROLLMENT

Admission is typically by audition (performing arts) or portfolio review (visual arts) , plus academic records. Public arts magnets/charters are free; private arts schools charge tuition. Competitive programs can be selective.

COSTS & FINANCIAL AID

Public arts schools are free ; private arts academies charge tuition (sometimes with scholarships). Families may also budget for instruments, supplies, and performance costs.

ACCREDITATION & GOVERNANCE

Public arts schools follow state standards; private ones seek accreditation. Look for quality faculty, facilities, and outcomes (performances, college/conservatory placement).

FINDING ARTS SCHOOLS

Ready to explore specific schools? K12 Academics lists visual- and performing-arts schools across the country.

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STEM Schools

WHAT IS A STEM SCHOOLS?

A STEM school builds its curriculum around Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics — often with hands-on, project-based, real-world learning. STEAM schools add the Arts . STEM schools appear as public magnets and charters, private schools, and specialized high schools, all sharing an emphasis on inquiry, problem-solving, and...

HISTORY & ORIGINS

STEM education gained major momentum in the US over the past two decades amid concern about competitiveness and workforce needs, spawning dedicated STEM schools, magnets, and programs nationwide.

PHILOSOPHY & APPROACH

STEM schools emphasize hands-on, integrated, inquiry-based learning — connecting the STEM disciplines through projects, labs, coding, robotics, and engineering-design challenges rather than teaching subjects in isolation.

CURRICULUM & ACADEMICS

Expect strong math and science sequences , computer science, engineering and design courses, robotics, and often partnerships with universities and industry. Many STEM high schools offer advanced coursework (AP, IB, dual enrollment) and capstone or research projects.

AT A GLANCE

Type	Public or private
Grades	K-12
Focus	Science, tech, engineering, ma...
Format	Magnet, charter, private
Admission	Varies
Cost	Free or tuition

THE CLASSROOM & SCHOOL DAY

Classrooms feature labs, makerspaces, technology, and collaborative project work . Learning is often team-based and applied, with competitions (robotics, science fairs, hackathons) a common feature.

GRADE LEVELS & STRUCTURE

STEM schools and programs span elementary through high school , from early exposure to specialized STEM high schools and academies.

ADMISSIONS & ENROLLMENT

Admission depends on the school's type: public STEM magnets and charters are free (lottery or, for selective ones, criteria/testing); private STEM schools admit by application and charge tuition. Elite STEM high schools can be highly competitive.

COSTS & FINANCIAL AID

Public STEM schools are free ; private ones charge tuition . Costs and resources (labs, technology) vary widely.

ACCREDITATION & GOVERNANCE

Public STEM schools follow state standards and accountability; private ones seek voluntary accreditation. Some schools pursue STEM-specific certifications or partnerships as quality markers.

READ THE FULL GUIDE
tools.k12academics.com



Career Academies (CTE)

WHAT IS A CAREER ACADEMIES?

A career academy is a small learning community within a high school , organized around a career theme (such as health, business and finance, information technology, engineering, or the arts). Academies combine college-prep academics with career-technical courses and employer partnerships , giving students a focused, connected, real-world...

HISTORY & ORIGINS

Career academies have a long, well-studied history as a high-school reform, using small, themed communities and industry partnerships to boost engagement, relevance, and readiness. Many large high schools now house several academies.

PHILOSOPHY & APPROACH

Career academies rest on relevance and connection — grouping students and teachers into a themed community, tying academics to a career field, and linking learning to the workplace through partners, so school feels purposeful and prepares students for what's next.

CURRICULUM & ACADEMICS

Students take college-prep core academics integrated with a career theme , plus career-technical courses and often work-based learning (internships, mentors, projects with employers). A cohort of students and teachers stays connected as a small community within the larger school.



AT A GLANCE

Type	Mostly public
Grades	Mostly 9–12
What	Career-themed academy in a HS
Blend	Academics + CTE + employers
Goal	College & career readiness
Cost	Usually free

THE CLASSROOM & SCHOOL DAY

Academies create a smaller, more personal community inside a bigger high school, with themed courses, a consistent teacher team, and real-world connections to industry.

GRADE LEVELS & STRUCTURE

Career academies most often serve grades 9–12 (some 10–12), within comprehensive high schools.

ADMISSIONS & ENROLLMENT

Most are public and free ; students choose or apply into an academy within their high school (some are more selective than others). Availability depends on the school and district.

COSTS & FINANCIAL AID

Public career academies are generally free . They aim to improve engagement and readiness for both college and careers.

ACCREDITATION & GOVERNANCE

Academies operate within accredited public high schools, often following CTE and career-academy standards and industry partnerships. Look at the theme, partnerships, work-based learning, and outcomes.

READ THE FULL GUIDE
tools.k12academics.com



IB Schools

WHAT IS A INTERNATIONAL BACCALAUREATE (IB) SCHOOLS?

An IB school is authorized to offer one or more International Baccalaureate programmes — a globally recognized, rigorous, inquiry-based framework. The best-known is the IB Diploma Programme (DP) for grades 11–12, a demanding, college-preparatory course of study respected by universities worldwide. IB schools include both public and...

HISTORY & ORIGINS

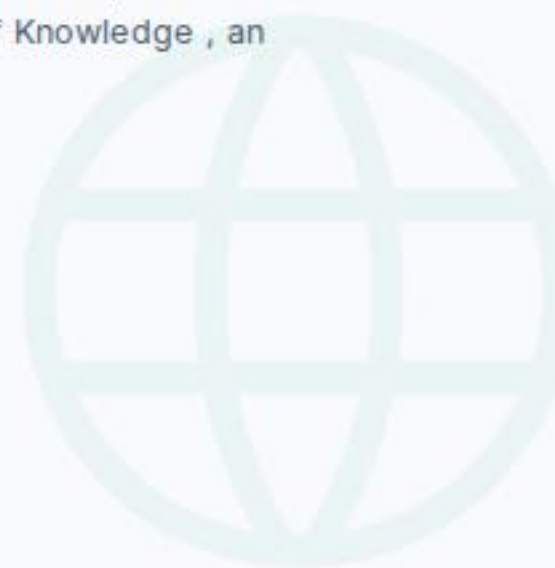
The IB was founded in 1968 in Geneva, Switzerland , originally for internationally mobile families, and has grown into a global standard offered by thousands of "IB World Schools" in over 150 countries, including many US public and private schools.

PHILOSOPHY & APPROACH

IB emphasizes inquiry, critical thinking, international-mindedness, and the whole learner . Its "learner profile" cultivates traits like open-mindedness and reflection, and programmes stress connecting knowledge across disciplines and to the real world.

CURRICULUM & ACADEMICS

The IB offers four programmes: the Primary Years (PYP) , Middle Years (MYP) , Diploma (DP) , and Career-related (CP) . The rigorous DP requires study across six subject groups plus Theory of Knowledge , an Extended Essay , and Creativity, Activity, Service (CAS) — and can earn college credit.



AT A GLANCE

Type	Public or private
Grades	PreK–12
Programme	PYP · MYP · DP · CP
Origin	1968, Geneva
Recognition	Global
Cost	Free or tuition

THE CLASSROOM & SCHOOL DAY

IB classrooms emphasize discussion, research, writing, and independent inquiry . The DP is known for its heavy workload and its breadth — students continue math, science, languages, and humanities rather than narrowly specializing.

GRADE LEVELS & STRUCTURE

Through its four programmes, IB spans preschool through grade 12 . A school may offer just the DP (grades 11–12) or the full PYP–MYP–DP continuum.

ADMISSIONS & ENROLLMENT

Access depends on the school: public IB schools/magnets are free (lottery or criteria); private IB schools admit by application and charge tuition. Entering the DP may require meeting academic prerequisites.

COSTS & FINANCIAL AID

Public IB schools are free ; private ones charge tuition . There are exam fees for IB assessments, sometimes covered by public schools.

ACCREDITATION & GOVERNANCE

Schools must be authorized by the IB Organization as "IB World Schools," a rigorous process ensuring fidelity to the programme. Public IB schools also meet state requirements.

READ THE FULL GUIDE
tools.k12academics.com



Cambridge / AICE Schools

WHAT IS A CAMBRIDGE (AICE) SCHOOLS?

Cambridge (AICE) schools offer the Cambridge International curriculum , an internationally recognized, rigorous pre-university program run by Cambridge University's international education arm. Students can earn the AICE Diploma (Advanced International Certificate of Education) through Cambridge courses and exams (IGCSE, AS, and A...

HISTORY & ORIGINS

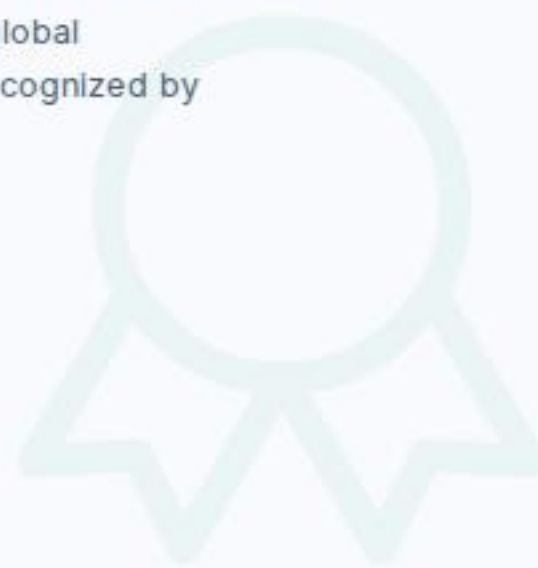
The Cambridge International program grew into one of the world's most widely offered international curricula, taught in over a thousand schools across many countries. In the US it expanded significantly, especially in states like Florida, as a rigorous, flexible pathway.

PHILOSOPHY & APPROACH

Cambridge emphasizes deep subject knowledge, independent thinking, research, and academic rigor — developing confident, reflective learners prepared for university and a globally connected world, with flexibility in course choice.

CURRICULUM & ACADEMICS

Students take Cambridge courses and external exams — building from IGCSE/Pre-AICE to AS and A Levels — and can earn the AICE Diploma by combining subjects across curriculum groups plus a global perspectives/research element. The program is rigorous, flexible, and internationally recognized by universities.



AT A GLANCE

Type	Public or private
Grades	Often 6–12
Program	Cambridge International
Credential	AICE Diploma
Recognized	Internationally
Cost	Free (public) or tuition

THE CLASSROOM & SCHOOL DAY

The culture is academically serious and internationally minded , with subject depth, independent research, and exam-based assessment. Cambridge can be a whole-school program or offered within a larger school.

GRADE LEVELS & STRUCTURE

Cambridge programs often span middle and high school (Pre-AICE in earlier grades, AICE in the upper grades), leading to the AICE Diploma.

ADMISSIONS & ENROLLMENT

Public Cambridge/AICE programs are free (sometimes with eligibility criteria or by application within a district); private ones charge tuition. Availability depends on the school.

COSTS & FINANCIAL AID

Public Cambridge programs are free ; private ones charge tuition. In some states (e.g., Florida), the AICE Diploma can qualify students for state scholarships.

FINDING CAMBRIDGE (AICE) SCHOOLS

Ready to explore specific schools? K12 Academics lists Cambridge, IB, and other schools across the country.

READ THE FULL GUIDE
tools.k12academics.com



Gifted & Talented Schools

WHAT IS A GIFTED SCHOOLS?

A gifted school (or gifted and talented program) serves academically advanced or high-ability students with an accelerated, enriched curriculum designed to match their pace and depth. Gifted education appears as dedicated public gifted magnets and schools, private schools for the gifted, and gifted programs within larger schools.

HISTORY & ORIGINS

Gifted education developed to meet the needs of students who master material faster or more deeply than typical grade-level instruction allows. Approaches and funding vary widely by state and district.

PHILOSOPHY & APPROACH

Gifted schools are built on the idea that advanced learners need appropriate challenge — through acceleration (moving faster/ahead) and enrichment (greater depth and complexity) — to stay engaged and reach their potential, alongside peers of similar ability.

CURRICULUM & ACADEMICS

Expect faster pacing, deeper and more complex content, and independent or project-based work , often with subject acceleration, advanced coursework, and opportunities like competitions and research.

GRADE LEVELS & STRUCTURE

Gifted programs and schools span elementary through high school , from pull-out enrichment to full gifted schools and selective exam high schools.

AT A GLANCE

Type	Public or private
Grades	K-12
Serves	Gifted / advanced learners
Admission	Testing / Identification
Format	Magnet, private, program
Cost	Free or tuition

THE CLASSROOM & SCHOOL DAY

Classrooms group like-ability peers and emphasize higher-order thinking, discussion, and challenge. Programs also attend to the social-emotional needs of gifted learners, including perfectionism and asynchronous development.

ADMISSIONS & ENROLLMENT

Admission usually involves identification — ability/achievement testing (e.g., IQ or cognitive assessments), grades, and sometimes teacher input or portfolios. Public gifted schools are free (often selective); private gifted schools admit by application and charge tuition.

COSTS & FINANCIAL AID

Public gifted schools/programs are free ; private schools for the gifted charge tuition . Availability of public gifted services varies significantly by district.

ACCREDITATION & GOVERNANCE

Public gifted programs follow state gifted policies (which differ widely); private ones seek accreditation. Look for appropriate identification, trained teachers, and genuine acceleration/enrichment .

READ THE FULL GUIDE
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Learning Philosophy

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Montessori Schools

WHAT IS A MONTESSORI SCHOOLS?

A Montessori school follows the educational method developed by Italian physician Dr. Maria Montessori , built on child-led, hands-on learning in carefully prepared classrooms. Children choose their own work from specially designed materials, learn at their own pace, and are grouped in mixed-age classrooms . Montessori spans private and...

HISTORY & ORIGINS

Maria Montessori opened her first "Casa dei Bambini" (Children's House) in Rome in 1907 , and the method spread worldwide. Today there are Montessori schools in most countries; in the US they range from small independent preschools to public Montessori magnets and charters.

PHILOSOPHY & APPROACH

The Montessori philosophy holds that children learn best through self-directed activity, hands-on materials, and freedom within limits . Teachers act as guides who observe and support rather than lead from the front, fostering independence, concentration, and a love of learning.

CURRICULUM & ACADEMICS

Learning uses distinctive Montessori materials — from sandpaper letters to the golden beads for math — that make abstract concepts concrete. Children progress through practical life, sensorial, language, math, and cultural subjects, moving at their own readiness rather than in lockstep.

AT A GLANCE

Type	Public or private
Grades	Infant–12
Origin	1907, Maria Montessori
Approach	Child-led, hands-on
Classrooms	Mixed-age
Cost	Varies

THE CLASSROOM & SCHOOL DAY

A Montessori classroom features mixed-age groupings (typically 3-year spans), long uninterrupted "work periods," child-sized furniture, and open shelves of materials children choose freely. The environment is calm, orderly, and designed for independence.

GRADE LEVELS & STRUCTURE

Montessori programs run from infant/toddler and primary (ages 3–6) through elementary and, at some schools, middle and high school . Many families use Montessori for the early years, though full Montessori K–12 schools exist.

ADMISSIONS & ENROLLMENT

Private Montessori schools admit by application (often with a visit or observation). Public Montessori magnets and charters are free and admit by lottery or district process. Authentic programs value continuity, so mid-year or older-grade entry may depend on prior Montessori experience.

FINDING MONTESSORI SCHOOLS

Ready to explore specific schools? K12 Academics lists thousands of schools of every type across the country.

READ THE FULL GUIDE
tools.k12academics.com



Waldorf Schools

WHAT IS A WALDORF SCHOOLS?

A Waldorf school (also called a Steiner school) follows an educational approach founded by Rudolf Steiner that emphasizes creativity, imagination, and hands-on, arts-integrated learning matched to a child's developmental stage. Waldorf education is known for its rich arts and crafts, storytelling, connection to nature, and a...

HISTORY & ORIGINS

The first Waldorf school opened in 1919 in Stuttgart, Germany , for the children of workers at the Waldorf-Astoria cigarette factory — hence the name. It grew into one of the world's largest independent school movements, with hundreds of schools in the US and around the globe.

PHILOSOPHY & APPROACH

Waldorf education is organized around developmental stages : imaginative play and practical activity in early childhood, arts-integrated academics in the elementary years, and more abstract, analytical thinking in high school. The goal is to educate the "head, heart, and hands" — intellect, emotion, and practical skill together.

THE CLASSROOM & SCHOOL DAY

Waldorf classrooms feature natural materials , handwork (knitting, woodwork), music and eurythmy (a movement art), seasonal rhythms, and often a teacher who stays with the same class for several years . Early grades are screen-free by design.



AT A GLANCE

Type	Private (some public)
Grades	PreK–12
Origin	1919, Rudolf Steiner
Approach	Developmental, arts-rich
Media	Screen-light
Cost	Tuition

CURRICULUM & ACADEMICS

Academics are taught in in-depth "main lesson" blocks and woven through art, music, movement, and craft . Formal reading is often introduced later than in mainstream schools, on the belief that earlier years are better spent on play, language, and hands-on experience. Media and technology are typically limited, especially early on.

GRADE LEVELS & STRUCTURE

Waldorf schools typically run from early childhood (parent-child and kindergarten) through grade 8 , with a growing number offering a full high school . Many families choose Waldorf especially for the early and elementary years.

ADMISSIONS & ENROLLMENT

Most Waldorf schools are private and admit by application and family interview , valuing fit with the school's philosophy (including its views on media use). A small but growing number of public Waldorf-inspired charters are free and admit by lottery.

FINDING WALDORF SCHOOLS

Ready to explore specific schools? K12 Academics lists thousands of schools of every type across the country.

READ THE FULL GUIDE
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Reggio Emilia Schools

WHAT IS A REGGIO EMILIA SCHOOLS?

A Reggio Emilia school follows an acclaimed early-childhood approach that originated in the town of Reggio Emilia, Italy , after World War II. It views children as capable, curious, and full of potential , learning through exploration, relationships, creativity, and project work in a rich, beautiful environment.

HISTORY & ORIGINS

Developed by educator Loris Malaguzzi and the community of Reggio Emilia, Italy, the approach became internationally influential in early-childhood education and inspired many US preschools and primary programs.

PHILOSOPHY & APPROACH

Reggio-inspired education rests on ideas like the "hundred languages of children" (many ways of expressing and learning), the environment as the "third teacher," child-led emergent projects, documentation of learning, and strong family and community involvement.

CURRICULUM & ACADEMICS

Learning is emergent and project-based , following children's interests and questions rather than a fixed curriculum, with rich use of art, materials, nature, and expression. Teachers observe, document, and co-construct learning with children.



AT A GLANCE

Type	Mostly private
Grades	Mostly PreK–K
Origin	Reggio Emilia, Italy
Approach	Child-led, project-based
Focus	Early childhood
Cost	Tuition

THE CLASSROOM & SCHOOL DAY

Classrooms are intentionally beautiful and inviting , with natural light, natural materials, an "atelier" (art studio), and thoughtful documentation of children's work displayed throughout.

GRADE LEVELS & STRUCTURE

Reggio is primarily an early-childhood (infant, toddler, preschool, kindergarten) approach; its principles sometimes extend into the early elementary years.

ADMISSIONS & ENROLLMENT

Most Reggio-inspired programs are private preschools , admitting by application and charging tuition. Because "Reggio Emilia" is not a franchise or trademark, programs describe themselves as "Reggio-inspired," and authenticity varies.

COSTS & FINANCIAL AID

Reggio-inspired programs are typically private and charge tuition , varying by region and program.

FINDING REGGIO EMILIA SCHOOLS

Ready to explore specific schools? K12 Academics lists Reggio-inspired and other early-childhood programs across the country.

READ THE FULL GUIDE
tools.k12academics.com



Classical Schools

WHAT IS A CLASSICAL SCHOOLS?

A classical school follows the classical model of education — the "trivium" of grammar, logic (dialectic), and rhetoric — emphasizing great books, Latin, logic, history, and the pursuit of truth, goodness, and beauty. Classical schools include classical Christian schools, secular classical charters, and classical academies.

HISTORY & ORIGINS

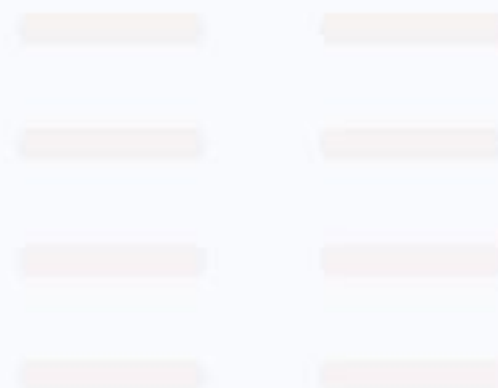
The classical model revives the education of the Western tradition and saw a strong resurgence in recent decades through the classical Christian school movement and a growing number of classical charter schools.

PHILOSOPHY & APPROACH

Classical education is organized around the trivium , matched to developmental stages: grammar (foundational knowledge, early grades), logic (reasoning, middle grades), and rhetoric (articulate expression, high school). It emphasizes great texts, virtue, and cultivating wisdom over test-driven learning.

CURRICULUM & ACADEMICS

Expect great books, Latin (and sometimes Greek), formal logic and rhetoric, history-rich humanities, and traditional math and science . Discussion (Socratic method), writing, and memorization feature prominently. Classical Christian schools add a biblical worldview.



AT A GLANCE

Type	Private & charter
Grades	K-12
Model	Classical (trivium)
Focus	Great books, logic, rhetoric
Admission	Varies
Cost	Free or tuition

THE CLASSROOM & SCHOOL DAY

Classrooms emphasize discussion, close reading, recitation, and rigorous writing , in an orderly, tradition-minded environment focused on forming thoughtful, articulate students of good character.

GRADE LEVELS & STRUCTURE

Classical schools typically span kindergarten through grade 12 , following the trivium stages across the grades.

ADMISSIONS & ENROLLMENT

Access depends on type: classical charter schools are free (lottery); private/classical Christian schools admit by application and charge tuition. Some require alignment with the school's mission (especially Christian ones).

COSTS & FINANCIAL AID

Classical charters are free ; private classical (including classical Christian) schools charge tuition , with aid at many.

ACCREDITATION & GOVERNANCE

Many are affiliated with associations such as the Association of Classical Christian Schools (ACCS) or classical-charter networks, and seek accreditation. Public classical charters meet state standards.

READ THE FULL GUIDE
tools.k12academics.com



Democratic Schools

WHAT IS A DEMOCRATIC SCHOOLS?

A democratic school gives students a direct voice in their own education and the running of the school — combining self-directed learning (students choose what and how to learn) with democratic governance (students and staff share decisions, often one-person-one-vote). Sometimes called "free schools," they trust children as capable...

HISTORY & ORIGINS

Democratic education has roots in schools like Summerhill (England) and the broader free-school movement, emphasizing freedom, responsibility, and student agency.

PHILOSOPHY & APPROACH

Democratic schools rest on the belief that children learn best when free to pursue their own interests and when they hold real responsibility for their learning and community — developing self-direction, judgment, and citizenship through genuine choice and shared governance.

CURRICULUM & ACADEMICS

There is usually no fixed curriculum or mandatory classes ; students learn through self-chosen activities, projects, play, conversation, and offerings they opt into. Learning is interest-driven and often mixed-age, with staff as facilitators and resources.



AT A GLANCE

Type	Private (some public)
Grades	K-12
Model	Self-directed + democratic
Governance	Students & staff share
Admission	Application
Cost	Tuition (often modest)

THE CLASSROOM & SCHOOL DAY

The environment is flexible and community-run , governed through a school meeting where students and staff make rules and decisions together. Age-mixing and freedom of movement are common.

GRADE LEVELS & STRUCTURE

Democratic schools typically serve a wide age range together (roughly K-12) rather than strict grade levels.

ADMISSIONS & ENROLLMENT

Most are private , admitting by application and family fit with the philosophy; a few public options exist. Tuition is often modest relative to other private schools.

COSTS & FINANCIAL AID

Private democratic schools charge tuition (frequently on the lower end, sometimes sliding-scale); public options are free.

ACCREDITATION & GOVERNANCE

These schools are usually independently run ; formal accreditation varies. Families should understand the model deeply and observe the school in action.

READ THE FULL GUIDE
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Core Knowledge Schools

WHAT IS A CORE KNOWLEDGE SCHOOLS?

A Core Knowledge school uses the Core Knowledge Sequence — a specific, content-rich, grade-by-grade curriculum developed from the work of E.D. Hirsch Jr. It emphasizes building broad background knowledge in history, science, literature, geography, and the arts, on the premise that shared knowledge builds strong readers and learners....

HISTORY & ORIGINS

E.D. Hirsch's idea of "cultural literacy" led to the Core Knowledge Sequence and Foundation. Many schools — especially charters — adopted it to give students a coherent, knowledge-rich education.

PHILOSOPHY & APPROACH

Core Knowledge rests on the research-based idea that broad background knowledge powers reading comprehension and learning , and that a coherent, shared, sequenced body of knowledge promotes both excellence and equity.

CURRICULUM & ACADEMICS

Students follow the Core Knowledge Sequence — a rich, specific progression across history, geography, science, literature, art, and music — designed to be cumulative and coherent from grade to grade, alongside strong reading and math.



AT A GLANCE

Type	Public or private
Grades	Mostly K–8
Model	Core Knowledge Sequence
Hallmark	Content-rich, shared curriculum
Basis	E.D. Hirsch
Cost	Free or tuition

THE CLASSROOM & SCHOOL DAY

Classrooms are content-rich and structured , with a shared curriculum across classrooms and grades, emphasizing knowledge-building, vocabulary, and coherent sequencing.

GRADE LEVELS & STRUCTURE

Core Knowledge is most common in elementary and middle grades (K–8) , where the Sequence is most developed.

ADMISSIONS & ENROLLMENT

Public/charter Core Knowledge schools are free (often by lottery); private ones charge tuition. Families choose the model for its knowledge-rich curriculum.

COSTS & FINANCIAL AID

Public Core Knowledge schools are free ; private ones charge tuition . The curriculum is widely available through public charters.

ACCREDITATION & GOVERNANCE

Public schools meet state standards while following the Core Knowledge Sequence ; some are officially Core Knowledge-recognized. Look at fidelity to the model and outcomes.

READ THE FULL GUIDE
tools.k12academics.com



Faith-Based

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Catholic Schools

WHAT IS A CATHOLIC SCHOOLS?

Catholic schools are private, faith-based schools operated within the Roman Catholic tradition — by dioceses, parishes, or religious orders — that combine a full academic program with Catholic faith formation. They form the largest group of religious private schools in the US and welcome students of many backgrounds, not only Catholics.

HISTORY & ORIGINS

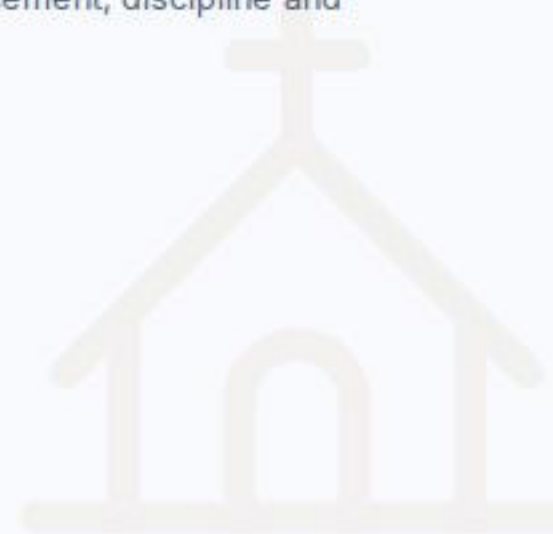
Catholic education in America grew rapidly in the 19th and 20th centuries into a vast national network of parish, diocesan, and order-run schools. Many are staffed and led by lay educators today, continuing a long tradition of accessible, values-based schooling.

PHILOSOPHY & APPROACH

Catholic schools aim to educate the whole person — academically, spiritually, morally, and socially — rooted in Catholic teaching, service, and community. Faith is integrated across school life, alongside a rigorous academic mission.

CURRICULUM & ACADEMICS

Academics are typically traditional and college-preparatory , with religion classes and Mass alongside the core curriculum. Many high schools offer AP or honors tracks and report strong college placement; discipline and structure are common hallmarks.



AT A GLANCE

Type	Private (religious)
Grades	PreK–12
Affiliation	Catholic Church
Run by	Diocese / parish / order
Admission	Application
Cost	Tuition

THE CLASSROOM & SCHOOL DAY

Catholic schools are known for structure, community, service, and shared values , often with uniforms, smaller classes, and a strong parent community. Prayer, liturgy, and service learning are woven into the school year.

GRADE LEVELS & STRUCTURE

Catholic schools span preschool through grade 12 — parish elementary schools, diocesan or order-run high schools, and PreK–12 academies. Some high schools are single-sex.

ADMISSIONS & ENROLLMENT

Admission is by application , often prioritizing parish or Catholic families but generally open to students of all faiths . High schools may use placement tests; competitiveness varies from open-enrollment parish schools to selective academies.

COSTS & FINANCIAL AID

Catholic schools charge tuition , generally lower than many independent schools , with parish subsidies, financial aid, and (in some states) vouchers, tax-credit scholarships, or ESAs helping families afford them. Programs like Cristo Rey serve lower-income students through work-study models.

READ THE FULL GUIDE
tools.k12academics.com



Christian Schools

WHAT IS A CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS?

Christian schools are private, faith-based schools that integrate a Bible-centered Christian worldview across academics and school life. The term spans Protestant and nondenominational evangelical schools (distinct from Catholic schools), from small church schools to large PreK–12 academies.

HISTORY & ORIGINS

The modern Christian-school movement grew substantially in the US in the late 20th century, producing a large network of nondenominational and denominational Christian schools, many affiliated with associations such as ACSI or Christian Schools International.

PHILOSOPHY & APPROACH

Christian schools aim to educate students within a biblical worldview — integrating faith with learning, character, and service — while providing a solid academic program. Approaches range from traditional to classical Christian models.

CURRICULUM & ACADEMICS

Academics are typically college-preparatory , combining the core curriculum with religious studies and worship in the Christian tradition. Rigor and offerings (including honors, AP, or IB at some schools) vary by school.



AT A GLANCE

Type	Private (religious)
Grades	PreK–12
Affiliation	Christian
Faith	Bible-centered
Admission	Application
Cost	Tuition

THE CLASSROOM & SCHOOL DAY

These schools are generally known for structure, community, shared values, and character formation , often with smaller classes and an engaged parent community. Faith practice is woven through school life.

GRADE LEVELS & STRUCTURE

They span preschool through grade 12 — some elementary or secondary only, others full PreK–12; some high schools are single-sex.

ADMISSIONS & ENROLLMENT

Admission is by application , often welcoming families of the Christian faith first but generally open to students of other backgrounds who respect the school's mission. High schools may use placement testing; selectivity varies.

COSTS & FINANCIAL AID

These schools charge tuition (often more moderate than elite independent schools), with financial aid, congregational support, and — in some states — vouchers, tax-credit scholarships, or ESAs helping families afford them.

READ THE FULL GUIDE
tools.k12academics.com



Jewish Schools

WHAT IS A JEWISH SCHOOLS?

Jewish schools (Jewish day schools) combine a full secular curriculum with Jewish studies — Hebrew, Torah, Jewish history, and tradition. They span the religious spectrum from Orthodox (including yeshivas) to Conservative, Reform, and community (pluralistic) schools, reflecting the diversity of Jewish life.

HISTORY & ORIGINS

Jewish education has ancient roots, and American Jewish day schools grew into a broad network across denominations, offering families a dual curriculum and a strong Jewish community.

PHILOSOPHY & APPROACH

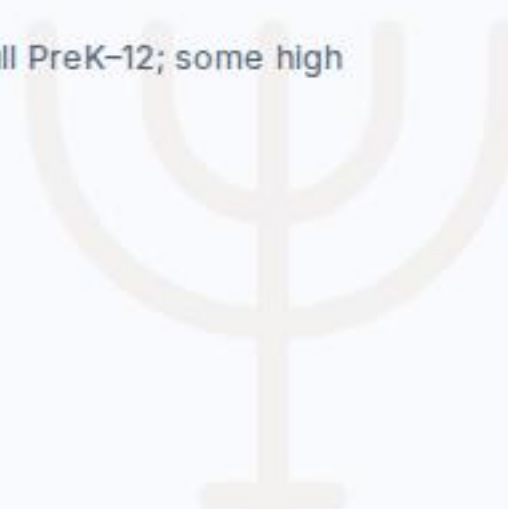
Jewish schools aim to provide academic excellence alongside Jewish knowledge, identity, values, and community, integrating secular and Judaic learning — with emphasis and observance varying by the school's denomination.

CURRICULUM & ACADEMICS

Academics are typically college-preparatory, combining the core curriculum with religious studies and worship in the Jewish tradition. Rigor and offerings (including honors, AP, or IB at some schools) vary by school.

GRADE LEVELS & STRUCTURE

They span preschool through grade 12 — some elementary or secondary only, others full PreK–12; some high schools are single-sex.



AT A GLANCE

Type	Private (religious)
Grades	PreK–12
Affiliation	Jewish
Dual	Secular + Judaic
Admission	Application
Cost	Tuition

THE CLASSROOM & SCHOOL DAY

These schools are generally known for structure, community, shared values, and character formation, often with smaller classes and an engaged parent community. Faith practice is woven through school life.

ADMISSIONS & ENROLLMENT

Admission is by application, often welcoming families of the Jewish faith first but generally open to students of other backgrounds who respect the school's mission. High schools may use placement testing; selectivity varies.

COSTS & FINANCIAL AID

These schools charge tuition (often more moderate than elite independent schools), with financial aid, congregational support, and — in some states — vouchers, tax-credit scholarships, or ESAs helping families afford them.

ACCREDITATION & GOVERNANCE

They are overseen by their sponsoring church, denomination, or organization and typically accredited by a regional or faith-based accreditor while meeting state requirements for private schools.

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Islamic Schools

WHAT IS A ISLAMIC SCHOOLS?

Islamic schools combine a full academic curriculum with Islamic studies — Quran, Arabic, and Islamic values — within a Muslim community environment. A growing sector in the US, they range from small weekend and full-time schools to established PreK-12 academies.

HISTORY & ORIGINS

As American Muslim communities grew, so did full-time Islamic schools, offering families academics alongside faith, Arabic, and Quranic study in a supportive community.

PHILOSOPHY & APPROACH

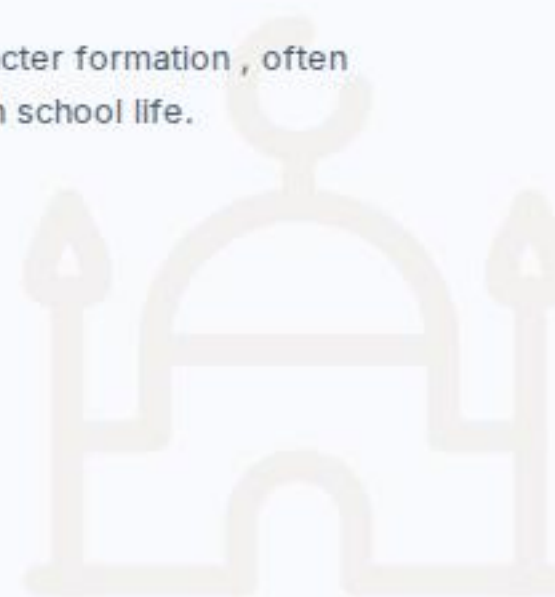
Islamic schools aim to provide strong academics together with Islamic identity, character, and values , integrating faith and learning while preparing students for college and life.

CURRICULUM & ACADEMICS

Academics are typically college-preparatory , combining the core curriculum with religious studies and worship in the Islamic tradition. Rigor and offerings (including honors, AP, or IB at some schools) vary by school.

THE CLASSROOM & SCHOOL DAY

These schools are generally known for structure, community, shared values, and character formation , often with smaller classes and an engaged parent community. Faith practice is woven through school life.



AT A GLANCE

Type	Private (religious)
Grades	PreK–12
Affiliation	Islamic
Includes	Quran & Arabic
Admission	Application
Cost	Tuition

GRADE LEVELS & STRUCTURE

They span preschool through grade 12 — some elementary or secondary only, others full PreK–12; some high schools are single-sex.

ADMISSIONS & ENROLLMENT

Admission is by application, often welcoming families of the Islamic faith first but generally open to students of other backgrounds who respect the school's mission. High schools may use placement testing; selectivity varies.

COSTS & FINANCIAL AID

These schools charge tuition (often more moderate than elite independent schools), with financial aid, congregational support, and — in some states — vouchers, tax-credit scholarships, or ESAs helping families afford them.

ACCREDITATION & GOVERNANCE

They are overseen by their sponsoring church, denomination, or organization and typically accredited by a regional or faith-based accreditor while meeting state requirements for private schools.

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Special Needs & Support

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Autism Schools

WHAT IS A AUTISM SCHOOLS?

An autism school specializes in educating autistic students (students on the autism spectrum), with programs, staff, and environments designed around their learning, communication, sensory, and social needs. These include specialized public programs and private schools, some serving a range of profiles and others focused on specific...

HISTORY & ORIGINS

As understanding of autism grew, so did specialized schools and programs. Under IDEA , public schools must provide eligible autistic students a free appropriate education, with specialized public and private schools available for those needing more intensive, tailored support.

PHILOSOPHY & APPROACH

Autism schools emphasize individualized, structured, and supportive education — often incorporating evidence-based approaches, communication supports, sensory-friendly environments, and social-skills instruction alongside academics.

CURRICULUM & ACADEMICS

Instruction is highly individualized (guided by an IEP in public settings) and frequently integrates speech, occupational, and behavioral therapies , communication supports (including AAC), and social-skills and life-skills instruction. Structure, visual supports, and predictability are common.



AT A GLANCE

Type	Public or private
Grades	PreK–12+
Serves	Autistic students
Support	Specialized + therapies
Funding	IDEA / placement / tuition
Cost	Varies

THE CLASSROOM & SCHOOL DAY

Classrooms feature small groups, high staff ratios, sensory-aware design, and specialized, trained staff , with routines and supports tailored to autistic learners.

GRADE LEVELS & STRUCTURE

Autism schools serve early childhood through high school and transition (often to age 21–22) , supporting academics, independence, and vocational/life skills.

ADMISSIONS & ENROLLMENT

Public placement flows from the IEP process ; private autism schools admit by application and may be tuition-funded or district-placed when a public program can't meet the need. State scholarships/ESAs help in some states.

COSTS & FINANCIAL AID

Public services are free under IDEA; private autism schools charge tuition , with placement funding, aid, or state scholarships in some cases. Costs reflect the level of support.

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Dyslexia Schools

WHAT IS A DYSLEXIA SCHOOLS?

A dyslexia school specializes in teaching students with dyslexia and language-based learning differences , using structured, evidence-based reading instruction. These schools are typically private and focus on building literacy and confidence in bright students who struggle with reading, spelling, and writing in traditional settings.

HISTORY & ORIGINS

Dedicated dyslexia schools grew from advances in reading science. Many use approaches based on Orton-Gillingham and the broader body of structured-literacy research shown to help dyslexic learners.

PHILOSOPHY & APPROACH

These schools are built on structured literacy — explicit, systematic, multisensory instruction in phonics, decoding, spelling, and language — paired with a supportive, strengths-based environment that rebuilds confidence.

CURRICULUM & ACADEMICS

Core instruction uses Orton-Gillingham-based, multisensory, structured-literacy methods, with small groups, individualized pacing, and accommodations (assistive tech, extended time), while maintaining a full academic program that plays to students' strengths.

Ad

AT A GLANCE

Type	Mostly private
Grades	K-12
Serves	Dyslexia / language-based LD
Method	Structured literacy (O-G)
Funding	Tuition / placement
Cost	Varies

THE CLASSROOM & SCHOOL DAY

Classrooms are small, structured, and multisensory , staffed by teachers trained in structured-literacy methods, with an emphasis on both remediation and self-confidence.

GRADE LEVELS & STRUCTURE

Dyslexia schools most often serve elementary and middle grades (when intensive remediation matters most), with some through high school; many aim to transition students back to mainstream settings once skills are strong.

ADMISSIONS & ENROLLMENT

Admission is by application , often including educational or psychoeducational evaluations confirming a language-based learning difference. Most are tuition-funded ; some students attend via district placement or state scholarships/ESAs.

COSTS & FINANCIAL AID

Most dyslexia schools are private and charge tuition , though placement funding, financial aid, or state scholarships may apply. Costs reflect specialized staffing.

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ADHD Schools

WHAT IS A ADHD SCHOOLS?

An ADHD school (or ADHD-focused program) supports students with ADHD and executive-function challenges — attention, organization, impulse control, and time management — with structure, movement, and skills coaching. Some are dedicated schools; many supports also occur within general and special-education settings.

HISTORY & ORIGINS

As recognition of ADHD grew, schools developed environments and strategies suited to students who struggle with focus and executive function in conventional classrooms, spanning specialized programs and accommodations within mainstream schools.

PHILOSOPHY & APPROACH

ADHD-supportive education emphasizes structure, clear routines, movement, engagement, and explicit executive-function and self-regulation skills — working with students' energy and strengths rather than against them.

CURRICULUM & ACADEMICS

Programs feature small classes, hands-on and active learning, frequent breaks, organizational and study-skills coaching, and accommodations (extended time, chunked work). Many students are bright and thrive with the right structure and support.



AT A GLANCE

Type	Public or private
Grades	K-12
Serves	ADHD / executive function
Support	Structure & coaching
Funding	IEP/504 / tuition
Cost	Varies

THE CLASSROOM & SCHOOL DAY

Classrooms are structured, engaging, and flexible , with movement, clear expectations, and staff skilled in supporting attention and executive function.

GRADE LEVELS & STRUCTURE

ADHD-supportive schools and programs span elementary through high school , with executive-function demands often peaking in the middle and high school years.

ADMISSIONS & ENROLLMENT

In public schools, support comes through an IEP or 504 plan ; specialized private programs admit by application and charge tuition. Evaluations documenting ADHD are often part of the process.

COSTS & FINANCIAL AID

Public supports are free (via IEP/504); specialized private schools charge tuition , with aid or state scholarships in some cases.

ACCREDITATION & GOVERNANCE

Look for staff skilled in ADHD and executive function, appropriate structure, and evidence-based strategies . Public schools must provide eligible students accommodations/support under IDEA or Section 504.

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Therapeutic Schools

WHAT IS A THERAPEUTIC SCHOOLS?

A therapeutic school combines academics with clinical and emotional support for students facing emotional, behavioral, or mental-health challenges (such as anxiety, depression, trauma, or behavioral difficulties). Blending education with therapy and counseling, they may be day or residential, and are staffed by clinicians alongside...

HISTORY & ORIGINS

Therapeutic schools developed to serve students whose needs go beyond what typical schools — or even standard special education — can provide, integrating mental-health treatment with schooling in one setting.

PHILOSOPHY & APPROACH

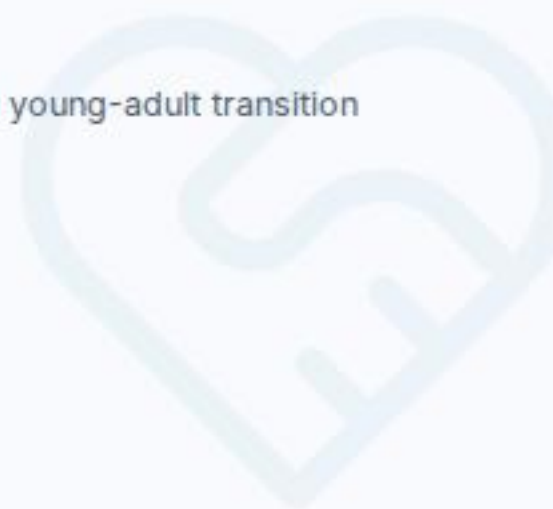
The model is built on integrating therapy and education : addressing emotional and behavioral needs so that students can re-engage with learning, in a structured, supportive, and small environment.

CURRICULUM & ACADEMICS

Academics continue alongside individual and group therapy, counseling, and behavioral support . Class sizes are small, pacing is flexible, and the emphasis is on stability, coping skills, and gradual academic re-engagement.

GRADE LEVELS & STRUCTURE

Most therapeutic schools serve middle and high school (grades 7–12) , sometimes with young-adult transition support.



AT A GLANCE

Type	Private (some public)
Grades	Mostly 7–12
Serves	Emotional / behavioral needs
Support	Clinical + academic
Setting	Day or residential
Cost	Tuition (some placement)

THE CLASSROOM & SCHOOL DAY

Settings are small, structured, and clinically supported , with mental-health professionals on staff. Residential (or "therapeutic boarding") programs provide 24-hour support; day programs serve students living at home.

ADMISSIONS & ENROLLMENT

Placement often follows a clinical assessment and may involve educational consultants, therapists, or the school district. Private therapeutic schools charge tuition; in some cases a district-funded placement applies when a student's needs require it.

COSTS & FINANCIAL AID

Therapeutic schools (especially residential) are costly , charging tuition that reflects clinical staffing; some placements are district- or insurance-funded , and financial aid may be available. Families should clarify funding carefully.

FINDING THERAPEUTIC SCHOOLS

Ready to explore specific schools? K12 Academics lists therapeutic and other schools across the country.

READ THE FULL GUIDE
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Settings & Structures

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Online & Virtual Schools

WHAT IS AN ONLINE SCHOOLS?

An online school (or virtual school) delivers K–12 education over the internet , so students learn from home or anywhere with a connection. Online schools include tuition-free public options (virtual charters and state-run programs) and private online schools , and range from fully independent study to live, scheduled virtual classes.

HISTORY & ORIGINS

Online K–12 schooling grew through the 2000s and 2010s and expanded dramatically after 2020. Today most states offer some form of public virtual schooling, alongside established private and district online programs.

PHILOSOPHY & APPROACH

Online schools offer flexibility and accessibility — reaching students who need a different pace, location, or schedule than a brick-and-mortar school, from athletes and performers to medically fragile students, rural families, and those seeking a customized path.

CURRICULUM & ACADEMICS

Curriculum is delivered through a learning management system with lessons, assignments, and assessments. Models vary: synchronous (live virtual classes on a schedule), asynchronous (self-paced), or blended. Public online schools follow state standards and testing.



AT A GLANCE

Type	Public or private
Grades	K-12
Setting	Fully online
Pace	Set or self-paced
Admission	Enrollment / application
Cost	Free (public) / tuition

THE CLASSROOM & SCHOOL DAY

The "classroom" is a computer: students work through online lessons, join video sessions, and communicate with teachers digitally. Success depends on self-discipline, time management, reliable internet, and family support — especially for younger students, who often need a parent "learning coach."

GRADE LEVELS & STRUCTURE

Online schools serve kindergarten through grade 12 . Some specialize in certain grade bands; many offer full K-12. Course-only virtual options also exist to supplement a traditional school.

ADMISSIONS & ENROLLMENT

Public online schools (virtual charters, state programs) are free and enroll residents , sometimes with a lottery. Private online schools admit by application and charge tuition. Requirements and enrollment windows vary by program and state.

COSTS & FINANCIAL AID

Public online schools are free (often providing a computer and materials); private online schools charge tuition . Families should confirm what technology, materials, and support are included.

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Microschools

WHAT IS A MICRO-SCHOOLS?

A micro-school is a very small school or learning community — often just a handful to a couple dozen students, frequently mixed-age — offering highly personalized, flexible education . A modern reimagining of the one-room schoolhouse, micro-schools grew rapidly in recent years and vary widely in philosophy and structure.

HISTORY & ORIGINS

Micro-schools expanded significantly in the late 2010s and especially after 2020, as families sought smaller, more personalized, and more flexible alternatives, sometimes blending homeschooling and private-school elements.

PHILOSOPHY & APPROACH

Micro-schools emphasize small size, close relationships, personalization, and flexibility — enabling tailored pacing, strong community, and often innovative or blended approaches (project-based, self-directed, or online-supported).

CURRICULUM & ACADEMICS

Approaches vary widely: some are project-based or self-directed , some use online curricula with in-person guidance , others follow a chosen program. The through-line is individualized learning in a small group , often mixed-age.



AT A GLANCE

Type	Mostly private
Grades	K-12
Size	Very small (often under ~15)
Model	Personalized, mixed-age
Admission	Application
Cost	Tuition (varies)

THE CLASSROOM & SCHOOL DAY

Settings are small and intimate — a home, storefront, or small facility — with a low student-to-adult ratio, flexible scheduling, and a tight-knit community.

GRADE LEVELS & STRUCTURE

Micro-schools serve elementary through high school , often combining ages in one small community.

ADMISSIONS & ENROLLMENT

Most are private , admitting by application and fit; some operate under homeschool or private-school laws that vary by state. Tuition ranges widely.

COSTS & FINANCIAL AID

Tuition varies widely — some micro-schools are relatively affordable, others premium. In some states, ESAs or scholarships can help; models and legal status differ by state.

ACCREDITATION & GOVERNANCE

Because micro-schools are new and varied, accreditation and legal status differ . Families should verify how a micro-school operates (private school vs. homeschool co-op), its curriculum, and its staff.

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Military Schools

WHAT IS A MILITARY SCHOOLS?

A military school provides education within a structured, military-style environment — emphasizing discipline, leadership, physical fitness, and character alongside academics. Most are private (often boarding) college-preparatory schools; a smaller number are public military academies. Attending a military school does not require joining...

HISTORY & ORIGINS

Military schools have a long tradition in the US, historically preparing young people for leadership and service. Today they focus on structure, character, and college preparation , and many enroll students seeking discipline and routine rather than a military career.

PHILOSOPHY & APPROACH

The model uses military structure — rank, uniforms, routine, and accountability — to build discipline, responsibility, time management, and leadership . The aim is character and self-discipline that carry into college and life.

CURRICULUM & ACADEMICS

Academics are typically college-preparatory and structured , with mandatory study hours and a strong emphasis on responsibility. Many schools offer JROTC (Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps) as part of the program.



AT A GLANCE

Type	Mostly private
Grades	Mostly 7–12
Structure	Military-style
Setting	Often boarding
Admission	Application
Cost	Tuition (some public)

THE CLASSROOM & SCHOOL DAY

Daily life is highly structured : uniforms, a chain of command, physical training, inspections, scheduled study, and clear expectations. Boarding military schools extend this structure around the clock.

GRADE LEVELS & STRUCTURE

Most military schools serve middle and high school (grades 7–12) , with boarding common at the high-school level.

ADMISSIONS & ENROLLMENT

Admission is by application , including records and interviews; some schools work with families seeking structure for a student who needs it. Private military schools charge tuition; a few public military academies are free.

COSTS & FINANCIAL AID

Private (often boarding) military schools charge tuition (with some financial aid); public military academies are free . Uniforms and gear are additional.

FINDING MILITARY SCHOOLS

Ready to explore specific schools? K12 Academics lists military and other schools across the country.

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Alternative Schools

WHAT IS AN ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS?

Alternative schools are nontraditional schools and programs that differ from the conventional model — in structure, philosophy, pacing, or the students they serve. The term is broad: it includes progressive and democratic schools, credit-recovery and continuation programs for students who struggled in traditional settings, and other...

HISTORY & ORIGINS

Alternative education grew from both progressive-education movements (offering different philosophies) and the need to re-engage students for whom traditional schools weren't working, producing a wide and varied field.

PHILOSOPHY & APPROACH

What unites alternative schools is a departure from the conventional model — whether through a distinctive philosophy (student-directed, project-based, democratic) or a more flexible, supportive setting for students who need a different path.

CURRICULUM & ACADEMICS

Approaches vary enormously — from self-directed and interest-driven learning to flexible, credit-recovery, and competency-based models. Many emphasize smaller settings, relationships, and meeting students where they are.

AT A GLANCE

Type	Public or private
Grades	K-12
Model	Nontraditional
Serves	Diverse student needs
Admission	Varies
Cost	Free or tuition

THE CLASSROOM & SCHOOL DAY

Alternative settings are often small, flexible, and relationship-focused , with nontraditional schedules, mixed-age or individualized structures, and an emphasis on engagement and support.

GRADE LEVELS & STRUCTURE

Alternative schools and programs span elementary through high school , though many public alternative programs focus on the secondary level (including re-engagement and credit recovery).

ADMISSIONS & ENROLLMENT

Public alternative schools are free (some by referral or application, some open); private alternative schools admit by application and charge tuition. Entry processes vary widely by program and purpose.

COSTS & FINANCIAL AID

Public alternative schools are free ; private ones charge tuition . Costs depend on the model and setting.

FINDING ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS

Ready to explore specific schools? K12 Academics lists alternative and other schools across the country.

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