

K12 ACADEMICS — STATE EDUCATION SERIES



Colorado Education Guide

A complete profile — schools, testing, graduation, accountability, school choice, teacher certification & financial aid, each in depth.



Find Your Community
2026 EDITION

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

Everything about school in Colorado.

This guide profiles **Colorado's** education system in seven parts, each a two-page deep dive with the key facts, plain-English explanations, and a link to the full, regularly-updated guide online. From K12 Academics, the world's largest education resource, online since 2004.

WHAT'S INSIDE

Education Overview · State Testing · Graduation Requirements · Accountability & Report Cards · School Choice · Teacher Certification · Financial Aid

SEARCH 200+ DIRECTORIES

K-12 Schools · Colleges & Universities · Vendors · Summer Programs · International Programs · Performers

Education Overview

EDUCATION IN COLORADO

Colorado educates roughly 880,000 public K–12 students across about 178 school districts , in a strong local-control tradition — the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) and State Board set the framework, while districts make many decisions, including specific graduation requirements. Colorado stands out for its approach to choice and...

WHO MUST ATTEND SCHOOL

- ✓ **Start age** — 6 (by August 1)
- ✓ **End of compulsory age** — 17
- ✓ **Districts** — ~178 local school districts
- ✓ **Satisfying it** — Public, charter, private, or home-based education

UNIVERSAL PRESCHOOL (UPK)

Colorado launched a Universal Preschool Program (UPK) in 2023 that offers up to 15 hours per week of free, high-quality preschool to every child in the year before kindergarten (generally 4-year-olds), regardless of income. Additional hours may be available for children who are low-income or have a qualifying factor (such as being a...

AT A GLANCE

Compulsory	Ages 6–17
Districts	~178
Testing	CMAS · SAT
Diploma	Local + menu
Choice	Open enrollment

DISTRICTS & CHARTERS

Colorado's roughly 178 school districts include large suburban systems and small rural ones. The largest include Denver Public Schools , Jeffco (Jefferson County) , Douglas County , Cherry Creek , and Aurora . Colorado has a substantial charter-school sector , with charters authorized either by local districts or by the statewide Charter...

PRIVATE & INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS IN COLORADO

- ✓ **Independent schools** — Nonprofit, board-governed schools such as Colorado Academy , Kent Denver School , Graland Country Day, and St. Mary's Academy — plus the boarding...
- ✓ **Catholic & parochial schools** — Archdiocese of Denver schools (such as Regis Jesuit and Mullen)
- ✓ **Other religious & Christian schools** — A range of Christian and faith-based options
- ✓ **Specialty schools** — Montessori, Waldorf, and schools for specific learning needs

READ COLORADO'S FULL EDUCATION OVERVIEW GUIDE
tools.k12academics.com



State Testing

WHAT YOUR STATE TESTS

Colorado uses the CMAS (Colorado Measures of Academic Success) for grades 3–8, plus a college-entrance suite in high school: the PSAT in grades 9 and 10 and the SAT in grade 11. All are run by the Colorado Department of Education and aligned to the Colorado Academic Standards.

WHICH TESTS, WHICH GRADES

- ✓ **CMAS ELA & Math** — English language arts and mathematics in grades 3–8
- ✓ **CMAS Science** — Science in grades 5, 8, and 11
- ✓ **CMAS Social Studies** — Sampled at grades 4 and 7
- ✓ **PSAT 9 & 10 / SAT 11** — The college-entrance suite in high school
- ✓ **CoAlt** — Alternate assessment for eligible students

FORMAT & SUBJECTS

CMAS is online with varied item types. The high-school PSAT/SAT follows the national College Board format and gives students a college-usable score.

IS PASSING REQUIRED TO GRADUATE?

No exit-exam gate. Colorado does not require passing a state test to graduate. Districts set graduation requirements, guided by the state's graduation guidelines and each student's ICAP (Individual Career and Academic Plan); the grade-11 SAT is one menu option for demonstrating readiness.

AT A GLANCE

Grades 3–8	CMAS (ELA & Math)
Science	CMAS Science gr 5, 8, 11
Social Studies	Sampled (gr 4 & 7)
High school	PSAT (9,10) & SAT (11)
Grad requirement?	No exit-exam gate
Format	Online

HOW IT'S SCORED

CMAS reports performance levels indicating whether students met grade-level expectations. The grade-11 SAT is scored 400–1600.

TESTING WINDOWS

CMAS and the PSAT/SAT are given in a spring window (roughly March–April) set by each district.

HOW TO PREPARE

- ✓ **SAT/PSAT prep** — Our SAT guide and free Khan Academy Official SAT Practice apply to the grade-9–11 tests
- ✓ **CMAS practice** — CDE provides online practice resources matching the real format

PARTICIPATION & OPTING OUT

Colorado law gives parents strong opt-out rights — a parent may excuse their child from state assessments without penalty to the student. Ask your district about its process.

READ COLORADO'S FULL STATE TESTING GUIDE
tools.k12academics.com



Graduation Requirements

AT A GLANCE

Colorado is a strong local-control state — districts set the credit requirements . What the state defines is a menu of college- and career-ready demonstrations : students choose one or more options to show they're ready to graduate. There's no single exit exam .

CREDIT & COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Colorado does not set a statewide credit total — your district establishes the credits and courses (English, math, science, social studies, and electives). Confirm your district's specific requirements.

TESTING TO GRADUATE

No single exit exam. The state sets Graduation Guidelines with a menu of ways to demonstrate readiness in English and math — including SAT/ACT scores, AP or IB exams, ASVAB, concurrent enrollment, an industry certificate, a capstone project, or an approved district measure . Students (with their district) pick from the menu.

DIPLOMA TYPES & HONORS

Colorado issues a standard diploma, with the Seal of Biliteracy available; districts may add honors and endorsements.

ALTERNATIVE PATHWAYS

The menu of demonstrations (test scores, dual enrollment, capstone, certificate, ASVAB, and more) is Colorado's flexible, student-centered design.

AT A GLANCE

Credits	Set by districts
State role	Menu of readiness demonstrations
Exit exam?	No single exit exam
Choose from	SAT/ACT, AP, IB, ASVAB, capstone...
Confirm with	Your district

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

- ✓ **How many credits does Colorado require?** — The state sets a minimum, but your district may require more — confirm locally.
- ✓ **Does Colorado require a test to graduate?** — No single exit exam — students choose from a state menu of college/career-ready demonstrations.
- ✓ **Are there different diploma types?** — Yes — plus honors designations and seals; see the diplomas section.
- ✓ **What if my student is behind on credits?** — Talk to the counselor about credit recovery and alternative pathways.
- ✓ **Where do I confirm the exact requirements?** — Your school counselor, district, and the state department of education.

READ COLORADO'S FULL GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS GUIDE
tools.k12academics.com



Accountability & Report Cards

AT A GLANCE

Colorado rates schools with School Performance Frameworks (SPF) , which assign a plan type based on performance — rather than a letter grade or star rating.

HOW THIS STATE RATES SCHOOLS

The SPF awards points on academic achievement, growth , and (for high schools) postsecondary/workforce readiness (graduation, dropout, matriculation), then assigns one of four plan-type ratings : Performance (highest), Improvement , Priority Improvement , or Turnaround (lowest). Growth is heavily weighted — a plus for reading a school's...

WHAT GETS MEASURED

- ✓ **Academic achievement** — How students score on state tests (proficiency in reading/ELA and math)
- ✓ **Academic growth / progress** — How much students improve year to year — not just where they land
- ✓ **Graduation rate** — For high schools (the 4-year cohort rate)
- ✓ **English-learner progress** — How English learners are progressing toward proficiency
- ✓ **School quality / student success** — An extra indicator — often attendance/chronic absenteeism, college/career readiness, or similar

AT A GLANCE

Format	School Performance Frameworks (p...
Ratings	Performance, Improvement, Priorl...
Tool	SchoolView / SPF
Look up at	cde.state.co.us

FINDING & READING THE REPORT CARD

Look up any school's framework and plan type on the Colorado Department of Education (SchoolView / SPF). Review the growth results and the trend alongside the plan type.

HOW FAMILIES SHOULD USE RATINGS

- ✓ **Read it in context** — A school's score reflects its students' circumstances too, not only its quality
- ✓ **Look at growth, not just scores** — Growth shows how much a school moves students — often more telling than raw proficiency
- ✓ **Check the trend** — Is the school improving over time?
- ✓ **Look past the summary** — Dig into the underlying data (subgroups, attendance, readiness)
- ✓ **Then visit** — Data raises questions; a visit answers them (see our guide on evaluating a school)

READ COLORADO'S FULL ACCOUNTABILITY & REPORT CARDS GUIDE
tools.k12academics.com



School Choice

AT A GLANCE

Colorado does not have a statewide private -school-choice program (a local Douglas County voucher was struck down years ago). But Colorado has some of the strongest public school choice in the country — robust open enrollment and a large charter sector.

THIS STATE'S CHOICE PROGRAMS

There is no statewide ESA, voucher, or tax-credit scholarship for private school in Colorado. Families seeking a private school pay tuition (with financial aid often available). Colorado's strength is public choice.

PUBLIC SCHOOL CHOICE, TOO

- ✓ **Open enrollment / transfers** — Attend a public school outside your zone, where allowed (see our finding-your-school guide)
- ✓ **Charter schools** — Tuition-free public schools of choice (where available)
- ✓ **Magnet schools** — Tuition-free public schools with a specialized focus
- ✓ **Homeschooling** — Legal in all 50 states (rules vary)

LEGAL & LEGISLATIVE STATUS

A local voucher program was struck down, and no statewide private-choice program has been enacted. Confirm the current status if you've heard of a new proposal.

AT A GLANCE

Private choice?	No statewide program
Public choice	Very strong open enrollment + ch...
Open enrollment	One of the most robust in the U....
Homeschool	Legal (with notice)
Confirm with	Your district

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

- ✓ **Does Colorado have a private-school-choice program?** — No — Colorado has no statewide private program, but exceptionally strong public open enrollment and charters.
- ✓ **What's the difference between an ESA and a voucher?** — A voucher pays a private school directly; an ESA is a flexible parent-managed account for many approved expenses.
- ✓ **What is a tax-credit scholarship?** — Donors get a tax credit for giving to organizations that fund private-school scholarships.
- ✓ **Is there public school choice too?** — Yes — open enrollment, charters, and magnets (plus homeschooling).
- ✓ **Where do I confirm the details?** — On the official state program site (see below).

READ COLORADO'S FULL SCHOOL CHOICE GUIDE
tools.k12academics.com



Teacher Certification

HOW LICENSURE WORKS HERE

Colorado licenses teachers through the Colorado Department of Education . You complete an approved program, pass the required Praxis content exam(s), and earn an Initial License , later a Professional License .

WHICH TESTS THIS STATE USES

- ✓ **Praxis Subject Assessments** — Content test(s) for your endorsement area — the primary testing requirement
- ✓ **Elementary** — Includes a reading/literacy component reflecting Colorado's READ Act emphasis
- ✓ **Note** — Colorado generally does not require a separate stand-alone basic-skills test — confirm current requirements

WHAT YOU NEED TO GET LICENSED

- ✓ **A bachelor's degree** — From an accredited college or university
- ✓ **A state-approved teacher-preparation program** — Completed at a college or through an approved alternative route
- ✓ **Student teaching / clinical practice** — Supervised classroom experience
- ✓ **Pass the required exams** — See the exams section above
- ✓ **A background check** — Fingerprint-based criminal background check
- ✓ **Apply to the state** — Submit your application and documents to the licensing agency

AT A GLANCE

Agency	Colorado Department of Education
Content	Praxis Subject Assessments
License	Initial — then Professional
Note	No separate basic-skills test ty...

OTHER PATHS INTO TEACHING

Most states offer alternative routes for career-changers and those with a degree in another field. In Colorado, these typically let you start teaching while completing licensure requirements — through district or university alternative-certification programs, residencies, or emergency/provisional permits. Requirements (and the exams) are...

RECIPROCITY & OUT-OF-STATE LICENSES

- ✓ **Interstate agreements** — Most states participate in the NASDTEC Interstate Agreement, which eases (but doesn't guarantee) recognition of an out-of-state license
- ✓ **You may still owe exams** — States often require you to meet their own testing (or coursework) requirements, sometimes within a grace period
- ✓ **Check both states** — Confirm the specific steps with Colorados agency and your current state

READ COLORADO'S FULL TEACHER CERTIFICATION GUIDE
tools.k12academics.com



Financial Aid

THE STATE AID PICTURE

Colorado's state aid is coordinated by the Colorado Department of Higher Education (CDHE), which distributes need-based grant funds to public colleges. Students not eligible for federal aid apply via the Colorado Application for State Financial Aid (CASFA).

NEED-BASED STATE GRANTS

- ✓ **Colorado Student Grant** — Need-based aid distributed by the state to eligible in-state public colleges, which award it to their students.
- ✓ **Colorado Opportunity Scholarship Initiative (COSI)** — Provides scholarships plus student-support services (advising, wraparound help) to boost completion.

COLLEGE SAVINGS (529 PLAN)

Colorado's CollegeInvest 529 plans offer a generous state tax deduction for Colorado taxpayers.

APPLYING & THE STATE AGENCY

- ✓ **File the FAFSA early** — It's the trigger for state grants and many scholarships
- ✓ **Register with Colorado Department of Higher Education** — Create the state agency's student account to track and claim awards
- ✓ **Confirm your details** — Verify residency, GPA, and enrollment as required
- ✓ **Meet any extra requirements** — Some programs need a separate form, GPA, or service commitment
- ✓ **Reapply every year** — State aid is awarded annually

AT A GLANCE

Need-based	Colorado Student Grant
Scholarship + support	COSI
529 plan	Collegelvest
Agency	CDHE
Apply by	FAFSA or CASFA

DEADLINES & TIMING

State deadlines are typically much earlier than the federal FAFSA deadline , and some aid is first-come, first-served until funds run out. File the FAFSA as soon as it opens (in the fall) and confirm the state's specific priority date.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

- ✓ **How do I get Colorado state aid?** — File the FAFSA (and any state form) by the deadline; Colorado Department of Higher Education administers the programs.
- ✓ **Is it need-based or merit?** — Both — Colorado offers need-based grants and merit scholarships.
- ✓ **Are the deadlines earlier than federal?** — Usually yes — file early, as some aid is first-come.
- ✓ **Can I use it out of state?** — Most Colorado aid is for in-state schools; check each program.
- ✓ **Does this list private scholarships?** — No — this guide covers official state programs only.

READ COLORADO'S FULL FINANCIAL AID GUIDE
tools.k12academics.com



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