

K12 ACADEMICS — STATE EDUCATION SERIES



Wisconsin 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 Wisconsin.

This guide profiles **Wisconsin'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 WISCONSIN

Wisconsin educates roughly 810,000 public K–12 students across about 421 school districts , overseen by the elected State Superintendent and the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) . Wisconsin holds a landmark place in American education: its Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (1990) was the nation's first modern school...

WHO MUST ATTEND SCHOOL

- ✓ **Start age** — 6 (by September 1)
- ✓ **End of compulsory age** — 18
- ✓ **Districts** — ~421 school districts
- ✓ **Satisfying it** — Public, private, or home-based instruction

4K & EARLY LEARNING

Wisconsin is a national leader in early public education through 4K (Four-Year-Old Kindergarten) . Nearly all Wisconsin school districts offer free, voluntary 4K for 4-year-olds, giving Wisconsin one of the highest 4K participation rates in the country (many districts partner with community child-care and Head Start providers). Wisconsin...



AT A GLANCE

Compulsory	Ages 6–18
Districts	~421
Testing	Forward · ACT
Diploma	Credits + civics
Choice	Vouchers (first in US)

DISTRICTS & CHARTERS

Wisconsin's largest districts include Milwaukee Public Schools (by far the largest), Madison , Kenosha , Green Bay , Racine , and Appleton . Wisconsin has a robust charter-school sector under a motto of "autonomy for accountability" — including independent charters authorized by entities such as the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee and...

PRIVATE & INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS IN WISCONSIN

- ✓ **Catholic & parochial schools** — The Archdiocese of Milwaukee and the dioceses of Madison, Green Bay, La Crosse, and Superior operate schools statewide
- ✓ **Lutheran schools** — A distinctive Wisconsin strength — the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) , headquartered in Wisconsin, runs the largest Lutheran school...
- ✓ **Independent schools** — Nonprofit, board-governed schools such as the University School of Milwaukee and Brookfield Academy
- ✓ **Other options** — Christian, Montessori, and specialty schools

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



State Testing

WHAT YOUR STATE TESTS

Wisconsin uses the Wisconsin Forward Exam in grades 3–8 and the ACT suite in high school — PreACT (grades 9 and 10) and the ACT (grade 11) , plus ACT WorkKeys. Run by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI). Wisconsin also has a civics test graduation requirement.

WHICH TESTS, WHICH GRADES

- ✓ **Forward Exam (grades 3–8)** — English language arts and mathematics; science and social studies at grades 4 and 8
- ✓ **PreACT (grades 9 & 10)** — College-readiness practice testing
- ✓ **ACT (grade 11)** — The statewide high-school test — a real, college-usable score
- ✓ **DLM** — Alternate assessment for eligible students

FORMAT & SUBJECTS

The Forward Exam is online ; the grade-11 ACT follows the national ACT format.

IS PASSING REQUIRED TO GRADUATE?

No exit-exam gate on the Forward Exam or ACT. Wisconsin requires passing a civics test (based on the U.S. citizenship questions) to graduate, plus completing course and credit requirements set by the district.

HOW IT'S SCORED

The Forward Exam reports four levels (Below Basic, Basic, Proficient, Advanced); the grade-11 ACT is scored 1–36.



AT A GLANCE

Grades 3–8	Forward Exam
Subjects	ELA, Math; Sci/SS gr 4 & 8
High school	PreACT (9,10) & ACT (11)
Grad requirement?	No exit-exam gate
Civics	Civics test required
Format	Online

TESTING WINDOWS

The Forward Exam and the ACT suite are given in a spring window set by each district.

HOW TO PREPARE

- ✓ **ACT prep for grade 11** — Our ACT guide and free official ACT practice apply to the grade-11 test
- ✓ **Forward Exam practice** — DPI provides sample items matching the online format

PARTICIPATION & OPTING OUT

Students in tested grades participate; Wisconsin allows parents to opt their child out of the Forward Exam (and the college-entrance tests in some cases). Ask your district.

ACCOMMODATIONS & MULTILINGUAL LEARNERS

Accommodations follow a student's IEP or 504 plan ; eligible students take the state's alternate assessment. Multilingual learners take an English proficiency test (WIDA ACCESS or the state equivalent) and may receive designated supports.

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



Graduation Requirements

AT A GLANCE

Wisconsin requires a state minimum of 22 credits with no exit exam — but students must pass a civics test to graduate. Districts often require more.

CREDIT & COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Wisconsin's 22-credit minimum includes 4 English, 3 math, 3 science, 3 social studies, 1.5 PE, 0.5 health, and electives. Districts set the total and may require more.

TESTING TO GRADUATE

No academic exit exam. Wisconsin students take the ACT (given statewide) and state assessments, but a passing academic score is not required to graduate. Students must, however, pass the civics test.

DIPLOMA TYPES & HONORS

Wisconsin issues a standard diploma, with the Seal of Biliteracy available. Districts may add honors.

OTHER REQUIREMENTS

Wisconsin requires students to correctly answer at least 60 of 100 questions on the civics test (based on the U.S. citizenship civics test) to graduate.



AT A GLANCE

Credits	22 (state minimum)
Exit exam?	No
Required	Civics test (60/100)
Also	ACT taken statewide
Confirm with	Your district

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

- ✓ **How many credits does Wisconsin require?** — The state sets a minimum, but your district may require more — confirm locally.
- ✓ **Does Wisconsin require a test to graduate?** — No academic exit exam — but students must pass the civics test to graduate.
- ✓ **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 WISCONSIN'S FULL GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS GUIDE
tools.k12academics.com



Accountability & Report Cards

AT A GLANCE

Wisconsin publishes a School Report Card for every school with an overall accountability score (0–100) and a corresponding rating (shown with stars).

HOW THIS STATE RATES SCHOOLS

The overall score maps to one of five rating levels : Significantly Exceeds Expectations (5 stars), Exceeds, Meets, Meets Few, and Fails to Meet Expectations . The score reflects achievement, growth, target-group outcomes, and on-track/postsecondary readiness (attendance, graduation). Growth is weighted more for higher-poverty schools.

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	0–100 score + star rating
Ratings	Significantly Exceeds – Falls to...
Tool	Wisconsin School Report Cards
Look up at	apps2.dpi.wi.gov/reportcards

FINDING & READING THE REPORT CARD

Look up any school on the Wisconsin School Report Cards . Review the priority-area scores (especially growth) and the trend alongside the overall rating.

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



School Choice

AT A GLANCE

Wisconsin is the birthplace of the modern school voucher — the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (1990) was the first in the nation. Wisconsin now runs several income-limited voucher programs , plus a Special Needs Scholarship and public charters.

THIS STATE'S CHOICE PROGRAMS

Wisconsin's Parental Choice Programs include the Milwaukee and Racine programs and the statewide Wisconsin Parental Choice Program (WPCP) — all providing vouchers for income-eligible students to attend participating private schools. The Special Needs Scholarship Program serves students with disabilities.

ELIGIBILITY

The parental-choice vouchers are income-limited (with income thresholds that have risen over time; the statewide program uses a set percentage of the federal poverty level). Confirm current income limits.

APPLYING

Apply through the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction's choice programs (via participating private schools). Watch the application window and confirm requirements.



AT A GLANCE

Programs	Milwaukee, Racine & statewide vo...
Type	Vouchers (income-limited)
Oldest	Milwaukee Parental Choice (1990)
Also	Special Needs Scholarship
Plus	Public charters
Confirm with	The state program

PUBLIC SCHOOL CHOICE, TOO

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

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

- ✓ **Does Wisconsin have a private-school-choice program?** — Yes — Wisconsin has the nation's oldest vouchers (Milwaukee, Racine, statewide), income-limited, plus a special-needs program.
- ✓ **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 WISCONSIN'S FULL SCHOOL CHOICE GUIDE
tools.k12academics.com



Teacher Certification

HOW LICENSURE WORKS HERE

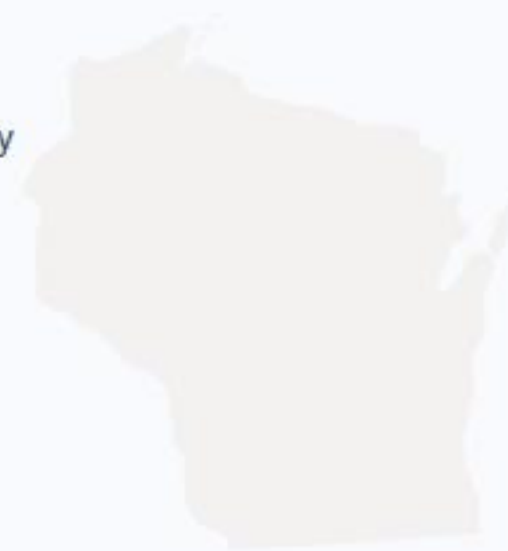
Wisconsin licenses teachers through the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) . You complete an approved program, pass the required tests, and earn a license (advancing through the state's tiered license structure). Wisconsin uses Praxis plus the Foundations of Reading Test .

WHICH TESTS THIS STATE USES

- ✓ **Praxis Subject Assessments** — Content test(s) for your license area
- ✓ **Foundations of Reading Test (FoRT)** — Required for elementary, special-education, and reading candidates — reflecting the science of reading
- ✓ **Note** — Basic-skills requirements may be met via qualifying scores/coursework — confirm current options

WHAT YOU NEED TO GET LICENSED

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



AT A GLANCE

Agency	Wisconsin Dept. of Public Instru...
Content	Praxis Subject Assessments
Reading	Foundations of Reading Test (FoR...
License	Provisional — then Lifetime/Prof...

OTHER PATHS INTO TEACHING

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

RECIPROCITY & OUT-OF-STATE LICENSES

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

READ WISCONSIN'S FULL TEACHER CERTIFICATION GUIDE
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Financial Aid

THE STATE AID PICTURE

Wisconsin's state aid is administered by the Higher Educational Aids Board (HEAB), with need-based grants tailored to each sector of higher education (public universities, technical colleges, and private/tribal colleges).

NEED-BASED STATE GRANTS

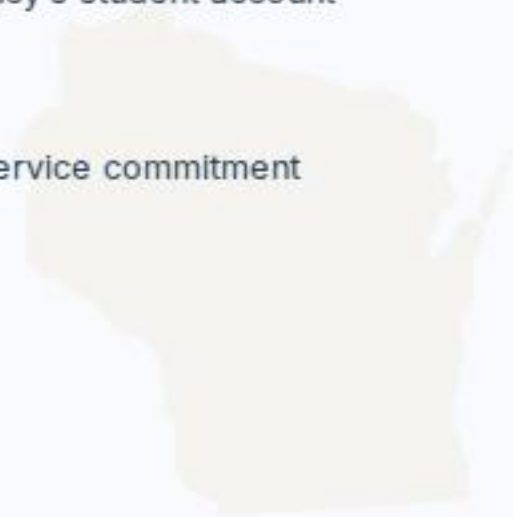
- ✓ **Wisconsin Grant** — The main need-based grant, with separate versions for the UW System, Wisconsin Technical College System, and private/tribal colleges.
- ✓ **Talent Incentive Program (TIP)** — Grants for the most financially needy and educationally disadvantaged (often first-generation) students.
- ✓ **Wisconsin Tuition Grant** — Need-based aid for students at private, nonprofit Wisconsin colleges.

COLLEGE SAVINGS (529 PLAN)

Wisconsin's Edvest 529 is the state's tax-advantaged college-savings plan (with a state tax deduction).

APPLYING & THE STATE AGENCY

- ✓ **File the FAFSA early** — It's the trigger for state grants and many scholarships
- ✓ **Register with Wisconsin Higher Educational Aids Board** — 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	Wisconsin Grant
Need + first-gen	Talent Incentive Program
Private colleges	Wisconsin Tuition Grant
529 plan	Edvest
Agency	HEAB

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 Wisconsin state aid?** — File the FAFSA (and any state form) by the deadline; Wisconsin Higher Educational Aids Board administers the programs.
- ✓ **Is it need-based or merit?** — Both — Wisconsin 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 Wisconsin aid is for in-state schools; check each program.
- ✓ **Does this list private scholarships?** — No — this guide covers official state programs only.

READ WISCONSIN'S FULL FINANCIAL AID GUIDE
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