

2021 Teacher Certification Guide

Every state sets its own requirements for acquiring and renewing professional teaching licenses/certifications. Here are the most important things to know.

Getting a Teaching Certification or License

You must earn a professional license in order to teach, just as you would to practice law or medicine. Each state sets its own teacher training and licensure requirements, so the rules can vary depending on where you live. We'll walk you through the basics.

What is teacher certification?

Teacher certification or licensure—different regional names for the same thing—refer to the qualification program you need to go through in order to teach. To earn your teaching certificate, you'll complete coursework and testing and then apply to the state education agency in the state where you want to teach.

Bachelor's degree programs

If you do not already have a bachelor's degree, you may be able to earn your degree and your teaching certificate at the same time. Earning a certificate through a degree program is sometimes called the "traditional" route.

"Traditional" certification or licensure (the terms vary by region, but they both mean you've been qualified to teach) programs usually refer to someone who graduated from college with a degree and coursework centered around education. This is the most common path, with 80% of teachers taking the traditional pathway, according to the [National Council on Teacher Quality](#).

Many colleges and universities offer a teacher prep program that goes along with a degree in education or a teaching subject, like math, history or art. So you might major in English or biology, minor in education and earn your teaching certificate all at the same time.

Master's degree programs

If you already have a bachelor's degree, one great option is a teacher prep program that offers a master's degree. As part of the "traditional" certification or licensure route, you complete this program alongside earning your advanced degree in education or instruction.

This means you'll get additional coursework in your teaching subject and additional classroom practice. This can be a really great option if you have less experience working with students, as

traditional degree programs can offer extra time and practice. A degree program may also offer additional test prep resources and career fairs. Finally, in many school districts, teacher who have an advanced degree can earn additional pay.

A master's degree program typically takes around two years.

Certificate-only programs

As the name suggests, a certificate-only program will give you teaching certification or licensure if you already have a bachelor's or master's degree. This type of program can usually be completed in as little as one year.

- You can take additional college coursework in your teaching subject if you need to brush up.
- If you are a college senior or recent graduate, you may be able to add on a semester or year of coursework, so you can earn your certificate in less time than attending a master's program.
- You may be able to earn credits towards a master's degree if you decide to return later for an advanced degree.

How to get your teacher certification

To help you get started, here's a crash course on the steps you'll need to take to earn your professional license.

1 Decide what subject area you want to teach and where

Because certification requirements vary by state, subject and grade level, the first step is to figure out where you want to teach, as well as the grade level, subjects or specialty areas (like special education or bilingual education) you'd like to teach.

2 Use our teacher certification directory to find the program that best fits you

No matter where or what you choose to teach, you'll need a bachelor's degree and preparatory coursework from an accredited educator preparation program (EPP). In many programs, you can earn your bachelor's and certification at the same time. If you already have a bachelor's degree, you can choose between EPPs that offer master's degrees or certification-only EPPs.

To find an EPP that meets your needs, dive in and explore individual programs through TEACH's [National EPP Directory](#).

3 Your teacher certification requires these tests and a background check

At some point in your teacher prep, you'll likely need to take one or more tests in order to apply to your prep program or earn your license. These are the most common:

A basic skills test of reading, writing, and math

Most EPPs across the country, no matter what grade or subject you want to teach, require a basic skills test. Each state chooses the test that you need to take, but one that many use is the Praxis I, while others may accept scores on the ACT or SAT.

A subject knowledge test, based on the specific subject area you want to teach

This test is usually given during your EPP. Check if your program requires this test as part of its application, because if it does, you'll need to allocate significant time to study for it.

Fingerprint and/or background check

This may or may not be a requirement in your state, but when the state requires it for certification, some TPPs within that state will just make it a mandatory part of their application.

4 Take the necessary coursework to get certified in your state

Some states have specific coursework requirements and a few have unique requirements. For example, Alaska requires teachers to take two courses on Alaskan history and multicultural studies during the first two years of teaching. California requires coursework and passing a test on the U.S. Constitution. Be sure to know the requirements of your credential. Your EPP can help you determine what courses you may still need to take.

5 Reach out to a program advisor to submit documentation for your teacher certification

The last step of the process is to submit documentation to the state certifying agency—that's usually the [state's department of education or instruction](#). When you get to this stage, reach out to a staff member of your teacher prep program to get all the details.

6 After you've taught for at least three years, think about getting your National Board Certification

[The National Board Certification](#) is considered the most advanced certification that a teacher can receive. It's purely optional, but completing the rigorous and challenging certification process is a prestigious accomplishment and could lead to a higher salary, more professional opportunities and easier transfer between states.

7 Transferring teacher certification to another state

Reciprocity is the term used to describe what each state requires in order to transfer your certification from one state to another.

In some cases, when there is a reciprocity agreement between states, the process is relatively easy and straightforward; in other cases, it can be more difficult. If you are planning a move

from one state to another, research the specific requirements that out-of-state certified teachers need to meet to get certified in the new state.

Teaching Certification Requirements Vary by State

Certification varies from state to state. Check out our TEACH partner regions to learn more.

- [Colorado](#)
- [Connecticut](#)
- [Houston](#)
- [Kansas City](#)
- [North Carolina](#)