CAREER KIT

Elementary School Teacher Career Kit: 90-Day Action Plan

How to Become an Elementary School Teacher

2026-10 edition

Inside: at-a-glance summary · step-by-step path · costs & requirements · 90-day action plan · documents checklist · exams · interview questions · resume bullets · common mistakes · 13-week tracker · resources

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SECTION 1

At a glance

To become an elementary school teacher in a public school, you need a bachelor's degree, a state-approved teacher preparation program with student teaching, passing scores on your state's licensing exams, and a background check. The traditional route takes about four years; if you already have a bachelor's degree, every state offers an alternative certification route that can put you in a classroom within a year. Private schools often do not require a state license.

Timeline	4 years (traditional) or 1–2 years with an existing bachelor's degree
Typical cost	$5,000–$120,000+ (most of it is the degree; alternative routes cost far less)
Education	Bachelor's degree plus a state-approved teacher preparation program
License	State teaching license or certificate for elementary grades (varies by state)
Median pay	$63,970 per year
Job outlook	0% (2025–35), little or no change; about 99,400 openings a year (kindergarten and elementary combined)

SECTION 2

Step-by-step path

1. Check your state's licensing rules first

Time: 1–2 weeks

Teaching licenses are issued by each state's department of education or teacher standards board, and the rules differ. Look up which grade band your state licenses (for example K–6, PreK–3, or 1–6), which exams it requires, and which preparation programs it approves. Do this before you pick a college or program so you do not pay for coursework that will not count.

2. Earn a bachelor's degree

Time: 4 years · Cost: $5,000–$120,000+ total tuition depending on school

Most future elementary teachers major in elementary education, which builds in the teacher preparation coursework and student teaching. Others major in a subject such as English, math, or child development and complete a teacher preparation program separately. Keep your GPA up: many states and programs set a minimum, often around 2.75–3.0.

3. Complete a state-approved teacher preparation program

Time: 1–2 years (often built into the degree)

This is the part that qualifies you for a license. Coursework covers child development, teaching reading and math, classroom management, assessment, and supporting English learners and students with disabilities. If you already have a degree, you can do this as a post-baccalaureate certificate, a master's in teaching (MAT), or an alternative certification program.

4. Do your student teaching or residency

Time: 12–16 weeks (some residencies run a full school year)

Nearly every traditional program requires a full semester or more of supervised student teaching in a real elementary classroom. You plan and teach lessons under a mentor teacher and are observed by a university supervisor. Treat it as a long job interview: many first jobs come from the school or district where you student teach.

5. Pass your state's licensing exams

Time: 1–3 months of study · Cost: $130–$400 in exam fees

Many states use ETS Praxis tests, such as Elementary Education: Multiple Subjects (5001), which has separate reading/language arts, math, social studies, and science subtests. Other states use their own exams, such as Texas (TExES), California (CSET), and Florida (FTCE). Some states also require a basic skills test or a reading instruction test. Check your state's exact list and passing scores.

6. Apply for your teaching license

Time: 2–8 weeks for processing · Cost: $50–$250 including fingerprinting

Submit your application to the state with transcripts, program completion verification, exam scores, and fingerprints for a criminal background check. Many states issue an initial or provisional license first, then a professional license after a few years of teaching, mentoring, or additional coursework. Some states require a master's degree within a set number of years.

7. Apply for teaching jobs

Time: 1–4 months

Public school districts post most openings in spring for the following school year, often through their own websites or state job boards. Prepare a resume, a short teaching philosophy, letters of recommendation, and a sample lesson plan. Substitute teaching in districts you like is a common way to get noticed while you search.

8. Keep your license current

Time: Ongoing

Most states require professional development hours or continuing education to renew your license every few years. Some teachers add endorsements such as reading specialist, English as a second language, or special education, which can widen job options and raise pay on district salary schedules.

SECTION 3

Costs & requirements

Estimated costs (USD)

Item	Low	High	Note
Bachelor's degree (total tuition)	$5,000	$120,000	Typical range, varies by school/state; in-state public universities and community college transfer routes are at the low end
Alternative certification program	$3,000	$10,000	Typical range, varies by program/state; for people who already hold a bachelor's degree
Master of Arts in Teaching (optional route)	$10,000	$50,000	Typical range, varies by school; leads to initial licensure for career changers
Praxis Elementary Education: Multiple Subjects (5001)	$180	$180	ETS fee for all four subtests; retakes of single subtests cost extra
Basic skills test (Praxis Core, if your state requires it)	$0	$150	$150 for Praxis Core combined; many states no longer require it
License application and fingerprinting	$50	$250	Typical range, varies by state
Study guides and practice tests	$0	$150	ETS offers free test overviews and paid practice tests
Total	**$18,230**	**$180,730**	

Requirements

Education	A bachelor's degree is required to teach in public schools in every state. Most elementary teachers major in elementary education or complete a separate state-approved teacher preparation program.
License	Public school teachers need a state-issued license or certificate for the grade level they teach. Requirements vary by state. Private schools typically do not require a license, though many prefer one.
Student teaching	Traditional programs require supervised student teaching, usually at least one semester. Some alternative routes let you teach on an intern license while you finish training.
Exams	Most states require a test of content knowledge for elementary subjects and sometimes a basic skills, pedagogy, or reading instruction test. Many use Praxis; others, such as Texas, California, and Florida, use their own tests.
Background check	Fingerprint-based criminal background checks are standard for anyone working in schools. Certain convictions disqualify you from licensure.
Minimum GPA	Many states and preparation programs set a minimum GPA for admission or licensure, commonly in the 2.5–3.0 range. Check your state and program.
Skills	Patience, clear communication, organization, classroom management, and the ability to teach reading and math to children who learn at very different speeds.

SECTION 4

90-Day Action Plan

Tick each box as you finish the task. Do the phases in order; it is fine if a phase takes a little longer.

Phase 1: Map your route to a license

Days 1–30

Goal: Know exactly which program, exams, and license your state requires.

- ☐ Find your state department of education's licensure page and note the elementary grade band it licenses
- ☐ Decide on your route: traditional degree, alternative certification, or MAT
- ☐ Compare three state-approved programs on cost, length, format, and job placement
- ☐ List the exams your state requires and their passing scores
- ☐ Request official transcripts from every college you attended
- ☐ Volunteer or observe in an elementary classroom for at least a few hours

Phase 2: Start training and test prep

Days 31–60

Goal: Begin coursework and get your first exam behind you.

- ☐ Enroll in your program and set a weekly study schedule
- ☐ Take a full-length practice test for your content exam to find weak subjects
- ☐ Register for your first licensing exam date
- ☐ Complete fingerprinting and background check if your program requires it now
- ☐ Apply to substitute teach or work as a paraprofessional or after-school aide
- ☐ Start a folder of lesson plans and student work samples (no student names)

Phase 3: Build your hiring package

Days 61–90

Goal: Be ready to apply the moment district hiring opens.

- [ ] Write a one-page resume and a short teaching philosophy statement
- [ ] Prepare one polished sample lesson you can teach in a demo interview
- [ ] Ask a mentor teacher and a professor for letters of recommendation
- [ ] Create profiles on your state's education job board and target districts' sites
- [ ] Practice the interview questions in this kit out loud
- [ ] Attend a district job fair or teacher recruitment event
- [ ] Track every application and follow up within a week

SECTION 5

Documents checklist

Gather these early. Keep originals in one folder and scans in the cloud.

- [ ] Official transcripts from every college attended
- [ ] Bachelor's degree diploma or proof of expected completion
- [ ] Teacher preparation program enrollment or completion letter
- [ ] Licensing exam score reports
- [ ] Fingerprint and background check clearance
- [ ] State license application and fee receipt
- [ ] Resume and teaching philosophy statement
- [ ] Two or three letters of recommendation
- [ ] Sample lesson plan and classroom management plan
- [ ] Government-issued photo ID
- [ ] TB test or health clearance if your district requires it

SECTION 6

Exams & how to prepare

Praxis Elementary Education: Multiple Subjects (5001)

What it is: ETS content test with four separately timed subtests: Reading and Language Arts (5002), Mathematics (5003), Social Studies (5004), and Science (5005). Total testing time is about 4 hours 35 minutes. Used by many states; passing scores are set by each state.

How to prepare: 6–10 weeks. Take a timed practice test for each subtest and spend most of your time on your weakest subject; you can retake single subtests if needed.

Praxis Core Academic Skills for Educators (5752 combined)

What it is: Reading, writing, and math basic skills test. Some states and programs require it for admission or licensure; many have dropped it or accept SAT/ACT scores instead.

How to prepare: 3–6 weeks, mostly on math and essay writing.

State-specific exams (TExES, CSET, FTCE, and others)

What it is: States that do not use Praxis have their own content, pedagogy, and reading instruction tests. For example, Texas uses TExES exams, California uses CSET, and Florida uses FTCE.

How to prepare: Use the official preparation manual from your state's testing site; 1–3 months.

SECTION 7

Interview questions

1. Why do you want to teach elementary school?

Tip: Give a specific moment with kids that convinced you, not a general love of children.

2. How do you teach reading to students at different levels?

Tip: Mention small-group instruction, phonics, assessment data, and how you move students between groups.

3. Describe your classroom management approach.

Tip: Talk about routines, clear expectations taught on day one, and positive reinforcement before consequences.

4. How would you handle a student who keeps disrupting the class?

Tip: Show steps: quiet redirection, a private conversation, contacting family, and looking for the cause of the behavior.

5. How do you differentiate a math lesson?

Tip: Give a concrete example with manipulatives, extension tasks, and reteaching groups.

6. How do you use assessment data?

Tip: Explain how a quick check or benchmark result changes what you teach the next day.

7. How would you communicate with a frustrated parent?

Tip: Listen first, share specific observations, agree on next steps, and follow up in writing.

8. How do you support students with IEPs or 504 plans?

Tip: Say you read the plan, implement accommodations, and coordinate with the special education teacher.

9. How do you support English learners?

Tip: Mention visuals, sentence frames, vocabulary preview, and partner talk.

10. Tell us about a lesson that did not go well.

Tip: Name what went wrong, what you changed, and how the next lesson went.

11. How do you build relationships with students?

Tip: Give small, daily practices like greeting at the door and morning meetings.

12. How do you collaborate with your grade-level team?

Tip: Show you share plans, look at data together, and pull your weight.

13. What would we see if we walked into your classroom?

Tip: Describe students talking and working, clear routines, and student work on the walls.

SECTION 8

Resume bullet examples

Adapt these to what you actually did. Use numbers wherever you can.

- Completed 16 weeks of student teaching in a 2nd-grade classroom of 24 students under a licensed mentor teacher
- Planned and taught daily small-group reading lessons for students across four reading levels
- Raised the share of my reading group meeting benchmark from 40% to 70% over one semester
- Designed a hands-on fractions unit with manipulatives that the grade-level team adopted
- Implemented IEP accommodations for three students in coordination with the special education teacher
- Communicated weekly with families through newsletters and conferences, including Spanish-speaking parents
- Substitute taught K–5 classes in two districts, following lesson plans and classroom routines
- Passed Praxis Elementary Education: Multiple Subjects on the first attempt

SECTION 9

Common mistakes to avoid

1. Enrolling in a program that is not approved for licensure in the state where you want to teach
2. Waiting until after graduation to look at exam requirements and then losing a hiring season
3. Underestimating the math subtest of the elementary content exam
4. Treating student teaching as a class instead of a months-long job interview
5. Applying only in late summer, after most districts finished spring hiring
6. Bringing no sample lesson or portfolio to interviews
7. Ignoring alternative certification when you already have a bachelor's degree

SECTION 10

13-week progress tracker

Fill this in by hand each week.

Week	Focus	Done?	Notes
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			
7			
8			
9			
10			
11			
12			
13			

SECTION 11

Resources, salary & disclaimer

Resources

- **BLS: Kindergarten and Elementary School Teachers**

https://www.bls.gov/ooh/education-training-and-library/kindergarten-and-elementary-school-teachers.htm

- **ETS Praxis: Elementary Education: Multiple Subjects (5001)**

https://praxis.ets.org/test/5001.html

- **ETS Praxis: Core Academic Skills for Educators (5752)**

https://praxis.ets.org/test/5752.html

- **CareerOneStop: Licensed occupations by state**

https://www.careeronestop.org/Toolkit/Training/find-licenses.aspx

Salary

Bottom 10%	Median	Top 10%
Less than $47,960	**$63,970 per year**	More than $104,340

Outlook: BLS projects little or no change (0%) in employment of kindergarten and elementary school teachers from 2025 to 2035, but about 99,400 openings each year, mostly to replace teachers who retire or change careers. There were about 1,530,500 kindergarten and elementary teacher jobs in 2025. Public school pay follows district salary schedules, so it rises with years of experience and graduate credits.

Source: BLS Occupational Outlook Handbook, May 2025 wage data (elementary school teachers, except special education); projections 2025–35 — https://www.bls.gov/ooh/education-training-and-library/kindergarten-and-elementary-school-teachers.htm

Disclaimer. Requirements vary by state and change over time. Verify with the official sources listed. This guide is not legal or career advice.