

## Your Question:

You were interested in learning more about guaranteed admissions policies, sometimes referred to as direct or automatic admissions. Specifically, you were looking for background on various aspects of guaranteed admissions policies and an understanding of the policy landscape.

## Our Response:

Guaranteed admission policies ensure admission to a postsecondary institution (typically a four-year college or university) for high school students who meet certain criteria. These criteria can vary, but typically include factors such as high school grades, standardized test scores and completion of certain coursework. Guaranteed admission policies are intended to make the college admissions process more transparent and to give students a better chance of being accepted into the institution of their choice. States also see these policies as a way to help increase student enrollment in postsecondary institutions or incentivize students to stay in their current state.

These policies are becoming increasingly common in states as a way to attract and retain students with records of high academic achievement. Education Commission of the States released our [50-State Comparison: Statewide Admissions Policies](#) in 2022, which includes a data point detailing [state guaranteed admissions policies](#). Our research shows at least **12 states** employ guaranteed admissions policies applicable to a postsecondary institution or system: **Arizona, California, Florida, Idaho, Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, South Dakota, Texas and Wyoming**. This is an increase from our previous research in 2017, which found that nine states used guaranteed admissions.

This information request first details the policy design related to the various components of guaranteed admissions policies. Next, we offer some policy considerations for states looking to employ guaranteed admissions. Finally, we provide some additional resources related to the topic.

## Policy Design

Common criteria for students to meet under guaranteed admissions include the following:

- High School grade point average (GPA).
- Class rank.
- Score on college readiness exams.
- High school assessments and coursework.
- Score determined by an index.

It should be noted that states may utilize one, or more, of these components in their requirements for guaranteed admission. This section details various ways states use the components to determine which students are guaranteed admission.

## High School GPA

States may use a student's unweighted cumulative GPA as one criterion in their guaranteed admissions policies. Below is a table of all states that include a GPA requirement as well as the specific threshold students must achieve.

State	Minimum GPA Requirement	Applicable Institution(s)
Arizona	3.0	All institutions a part of the Arizona University System
Kansas	A) 2.25 B) 3.25	A) Emporia State University, Fort Hays State University, Pittsburg State University and Wichita State University B) Kansas State University
Montana	2.5	All four-year institutions governed by the Montana Board of Regents
Nebraska	3.0	All institutions a part of the University of Nebraska System
Wyoming	3.0	University of Wyoming

## Class Rank

To incentivize the enrollment of high-performing high school students, states may also include a class rank requirement as a part of their guaranteed admissions policies. Here are examples of states, or systems within states, that currently utilize class rank:

- The University of **California** system [provides](#) guaranteed admission to the top 9% of California high school graduates.
- The [Talented Twenty](#) program [guarantees admission](#) to the **Florida** state university system to high school students who ranks in the top 20% of their graduating class.
- Students who graduate in the upper half of their graduating class will be [admitted](#) to a four-year university governed by the **Montana** Board of Regents
- Students who graduate in the upper half of their class will be [admitted](#) to the University of **Nebraska** system.
- All **Texas** public institutions (except UT-Austin — explained below) are [required](#) to automatically admit a student who graduated in the top 10% of their high school class.

## College Readiness Exams

Another common criterion for guaranteed admissions policies are requirements for students to achieve a specified score on a college readiness exam — typically the ACT or SAT. Often, states may differentiate the scores students must achieve according to the institution they want to attend through guaranteed admissions. Once admitted to an institution, however, a student may have to score higher on exams to qualify for certain degree programs or majors. Below is a table of the various ACT and SAT requirements outlined in state policies.

State	Minimum Exam Score	Applicable Institution(s)
Kansas	21 on ACT	Emporia State University, Fort Hays State University, Pittsburg State University, Wichita State University and Kansas State University
Montana	A) 20 on ACT or 1050 on SAT B) 22 on ACT or 1120 on SAT	Montana State University - Northern, Montana State University - Billings, Montana Technological University, Montana State University - Bozeman,

		University of Montana - Missoula and University of Montana - Western
<b>Nebraska</b>	20 on ACT or SAT equivalent	<i>All institutions which comprise the University of Nebraska System</i>
<b>South Dakota</b>	18 on ACT ACT score of 18 on English, 20 on Math*	<i>All public colleges and universities</i> *applies only to the South Dakota School of Mines & Technology
<b>Wyoming</b>	21 on ACT or 1060 on SAT	University of Wyoming

### High School Assessments and Coursework

Performance on high school assessments and completion of specified coursework are components of state guaranteed admissions policies that vary significantly. Students may be required to demonstrate proficiency on different state-based assessments like English Language Arts assessments or college-level examination. In addition, states may require students take certain courses to demonstrate proficiency requirements for admission. In most cases, state policy allows students to use high school coursework and/or performance on assessments by giving them multiple ways to meet admission requirements.

For instance, [Montana](#) requires students demonstrate proficiency in math and writing, allowing students to meet that in a variety of ways. To demonstrate proficiency in math, students can score a three or above on Advance Placement Calculus, four on the IB calculus test or a score of 50 or above on a relevant college-level examination in a selected math topic. However, the state also allows students to substitute completion of rigorous high school coursework: four years of math courses (Algebra I, Algebra II, geometry, a course beyond Algebra II and three years of laboratory science) instead of assessment scores. The same dynamic is true for students to demonstrate their writing proficiency. Overall, state requirements related to high school courses or performance on state-based assessments are highly contingent on state context.

### Index

One state, [Missouri](#), offers guaranteed admission based on an [index score](#). The state ranks institutions based on selectivity and assigns a requisite score students must achieve to be guaranteed admission to the particular institution. The index score combines a student’s high school percentile rank and the percentile rank attained on the ACT or SAT. Institutional selectivity levels include highly selective (>140 pts), selective (>120 pts) moderately selective (>100pts) and open enrollment.

## Policy Considerations

### Evidence from States

#### Idaho

Since 2015, [Idaho](#) has proactively admitted all graduating high school seniors into college without the student applying. Through the [Direct Admission Initiative](#), policymakers hope to reduce barriers to entry and encourage enrollment by informing students that they have already been accepted.

Accepted seniors will receive one of two acceptance letters based on the student meeting or exceeding a predetermined SAT/ACT score and GPA benchmark set by the state board of education:

- The *Group of 6* letter accepts them into all six of Idaho's public colleges (College of Southern Idaho, College of Western Idaho, Eastern Idaho Technical College, Idaho State University – College of Technology, Lewis-Clark State College and North Idaho College).
- The *Group of 8* letter accepts them into all eight of Idaho's public colleges and universities (the colleges mentioned above as well as Boise State University and the University of Idaho).

Next, students will then have the option of using a free common application valid at all public institutions in Idaho: [Apply Idaho](#). This simple application only requires students to have the following information: their legal full name, permanent address, [EDUID number](#) and a personal email. Unlike traditional college applications, Apply Idaho is how students commit to enroll in a chosen institution rather requesting acceptance. Also, any application fee students pay when completing their application is counted toward their first tuition bill in their first semester.

Initial research into Idaho's direct admission initiative indicates a positive impact on admission and enrollment. One analysis found that direct admission spurred an [11 % increase](#) in Idaho's college and university enrollment, as well as an 88% increase in completed applications since the introduction of Apply Idaho. Also, [75 % of the Class of 2019 stayed in the state](#) compared with 72 % of the Class of 2015.

## Texas

While the research base for guaranteed admission policies is sparse, this [2016 NBER white paper](#) provides some compelling evidence regarding student selection of universities. This study looks at Texas' Top 10% admissions policy, which grants students who achieve the top 10% in class rank automatic admission to all public universities. Students then choose which of the public universities they want to attend. Note: UT-Austin has recently changed their guaranteed admission threshold from accepting the top 10% to accepting the [top 6% as of 2021](#).

Using administrative data from the Texas Education Research Center at UT-Austin, researchers found that guaranteed admission encourages college-ready, students from low-income backgrounds to seek more rigorous universities. In effect, this policy seems to decrease college mismatch, whereby some students with records of high academic achievement do not enroll in selective colleges while students without the same records of high academic achievement do enroll in these colleges. This provides evidence as to how guaranteed admission could help reverse a trend shown in previous studies: that students from low-income backgrounds with records of high academic achievement are more likely to academically undermatch — choose a college with lower academic quality than their academic achievements suggest. In fact, the research finds these students are more likely to overmatch with more selective institutions, affording them better college outcomes and labor market gains in the long term.

## Tradeoffs

One of the main advantages of guaranteed admission policies is that they give students a clear path to follow to be admitted to a particular institution. This can help students plan their high school coursework and extracurricular activities in a way that maximizes their chances of being accepted to the school of their choice. Additionally, these policies can help to reduce the uncertainty and stress many students experience during the college admissions process. As previously mentioned, there is some evidence to suggest that guaranteed admissions policies may bolster enrollment in participating institutions.

Guaranteed admission policies are not without their critics, however. Some people argue that these policies can create a one-size-fits-all approach to college admissions, and do not consider the individual strengths and abilities of each student. Others argue that guaranteed admission policies can create a situation where schools are able to admit students who may not be prepared for the rigors of college-level coursework. Additionally, many advocates may caution focusing on “traditional” students without consideration of “non-traditional” or adult postsecondary students.

## Additional Resources

- [Surprise! You are Accepted to College: An Analysis of Idaho’s Direct Admissions Initiative](#) — Boise State University
- [Direct Admissions: Investigating a Promising, Low-Cost Policy Innovation to Increase College Access & Equity](#) — The University of Illinois
- [Congratulations! You Got Into College Without Even Applying](#) — The Washington Post
- [Match or Mismatch? Automatic Admissions and College Preferences of Low- and High-Income Students](#) — NBER Working Paper