

YOUR **SUCCESSFUL** **ROADMAP** TO COLLEGE

**What to
Focus on
at Each
Grade Level**



C2education

The road to college is longer than many think! It starts as early as middle school, when students lay the foundation for high school success. Keep reading to learn about the goals students need to achieve from middle school through senior year in order to compete for a spot at a top college or university.

WHAT DO COLLEGES LOOK FOR?

There are many factors that go into admissions decisions. After all, colleges aren't just admitting students—they're building a community of individuals. According to [annual surveys of admissions officers](#), these are the top factors in admissions decisions:

- **High school grades**
- **Course rigor**
- **Positive character attributes**
- **Essays**
- **Recommendations**
- **Extracurricular activities**
- **Standardized test scores**

By keeping these factors in mind, you can help your child work towards admission to their dream college.

MIDDLE SCHOOL: ESTABLISHING THE FOUNDATION FOR COLLEGE SUCCESS

Middle school is the time to lay the foundation so that your child is ready to excel on day one of high school. These are the college admissions goals to focus on throughout middle school:

- **Get on track for accelerated high school courses.** Many schools offer opportunities for middle school students to be placed on accelerated course tracks in high school. For example, it is common for schools to place students into either a pre-algebra or algebra course by 8th grade. Students who take algebra are then placed on an accelerated math course track in high school, allowing them access to the rigorous Advanced Placement (AP) or International Baccalaureate (IB) courses they need to complete for admission at selective colleges.

ACTION ITEM: *Familiarize yourself with the course offerings and placement options available at your child's school.*

- **Establish strong study habits.** Many students who are able to excel in middle school with minimal effort at home find themselves struggling with the transition to high school as freshmen because they lack the study skills and habits necessary for high school success. Students who develop great study habits in middle school are far more likely to earn top grades as high school freshmen.

ACTION ITEM: Help your child to develop good study habits—even if it seems like they’re already doing fine. Pay close attention to project deadlines and test dates so that you can help your child plan ahead and stay on track. [Download our 10 Study Tips for Success for extra guidance.](#)

- **Consider summer gifted and talented programs.** There are many excellent gifted and talented programs hosted by colleges during the summer, such as [Duke’s Pre-College programs](#) and [Northwestern’s Center for Talent Development](#). Students who participate in these programs not only get the experience of studying at a college campus but also have unique opportunities to explore their passions and interests, allowing them to make better decisions about high school courses, extracurricular activities, and their college goals.

ACTION ITEM: Research summer gifted and talented programs for middle school students. Many programs require standardized test scores, such as SAT or ACT scores, for admission. Consider enrolling your child in a test prep program to boost their chances for admission to competitive summer programs.

- **Lay the foundation for standardized testing success.** In recent years, selective colleges have begun returning to test required admission policies, a trend that is likely to continue. As of 2025, 9 of the top 20 ranked colleges require test scores for admission, and 75% of the top-ranked test optional schools identify test scores as important in their admissions processes.*

ACTION ITEM: Register for and take the PSAT 8/9. This test provides valuable practice for students who will eventually take the SAT and establishes a baseline for future test preparation.

FRESHMAN YEAR: START HIGH SCHOOL STRONG

Starting on day one of freshman year, everything counts! Every course selection, grade, and extracurricular activity will have a spot on your child’s college application. Focus on these college admissions goals this year:

- **Start building a great GPA.** Freshman year grades will influence your child’s overall high school GPA, so help them to start strong with top grades. Continue to support

your child as they develop and maintain those strong study habits—this will serve them for years to come!

ACTION ITEM: Monitor your child's grades closely so that you can take action before any warning signs develop into problems. [Never hesitate to seek extra support from teachers or tutors to ensure your child doesn't fall behind.](#)

- **Explore extracurricular opportunities.** Freshman year is the time for your child to see what's out there. It's okay if your child tries and discards several extracurricular activities this year—the goal is for them to find the handful of activities that they're really interested in so that they can dive deeper next year.

ACTION ITEM: Freshman often find time management to be a struggle as their extracurricular involvement grows. Help your child to find a balance that allows ample time for studying, extracurriculars, and (most importantly) sleep!

SOPHOMORE YEAR: SOLIDIFY GOALS AND INTERESTS

By sophomore year, your child has adjusted to high school and is ready to start solidifying their college goals and exploring their interests in greater depth. This year, it's time to focus on these goals:

- **Continue to get top grades in tough classes.** Good grades in rigorous classes remain the most important factor in admissions. This year, your child may be able to start taking Advanced Placement courses, which will enhance their college application and help them to be more successful in college.

ACTION ITEM: Continue to monitor your child's academic performance closely—students who start taking AP classes may need extra help to manage the workload.

- **Get more deeply involved in extracurricular activities.** If freshman year is the year for exploration, sophomore year is the year to narrow things down. Your child should identify a handful of extracurricular activities that they are truly interested in pursuing. This is a great year for them to get more deeply involved and lay the groundwork for a future leadership role.

ACTION ITEM: Avoid evaluating extracurricular activities based on the idea of “what colleges like.” Colleges want to see that students are genuinely interested in their activities—passion is the key to a great balance of extracurriculars!

- **Start setting college goals.** Students who have goal colleges in mind are more motivated to succeed. Setting college goals early helps keep your child focused on the end goal.

ACTION ITEM: *Try to visit a few college campuses to help your child get a better sense of what they want in a college.*

- **Start the test prep journey.** By the summer after sophomore year, it's time to begin the test prep process. This is especially important for students hoping to compete for the prestigious National Merit Scholarship as juniors!

ACTION ITEM: *Register your child for the PSAT 10 if it's offered at their school. This practice test is identical to the PSAT/NMSQT that they'll take junior year and is a great starting point for test prep.*

JUNIOR YEAR: THE MOST IMPORTANT YEAR FOR COLLEGE ADMISSIONS

Junior year is the most important—and difficult!—year in the college admissions process. Your child will be taking tough classes while trying to begin the college application process. Focus on these goals for junior year:

- **Keep the focus on grades.** Your child is likely taking more AP courses this year, making it all the more difficult to earn top grades. At the same time, junior year grades are generally considered the most important for college admissions because they'll be the most recent grades available when your child applies to college as a senior.

ACTION ITEM: *Intervene at the first sign of an academic struggle this year. If your child is taking multiple AP courses, falling behind even a little can be devastating to their final grades.*

- **Encourage your child to take the lead in extracurriculars.** Colleges want to see that applicants have taken initiative and sought out leadership roles. As a junior, your child should have at least one or two activities in which they take the lead, whether through a formal title (like team captain) or just leading a group on a certain project.

ACTION ITEM: *Encourage your child to keep a journal chronicling their extracurricular activities—especially any quantifiable accomplishments or big experiences. This can be a big help when it's time to write essays and complete applications!*

- **Finalize standardized test scores.** In October, your child will have the opportunity to compete for the National Merit Scholarship by taking the PSAT/NMSQT. ([Learn more](#)

[about the PSAT and the National Merit Scholarship here.](#)) In the spring and summer, your child should prepare for the SAT or ACT and finalize their scores in preparation for fall college application dates.

ACTION ITEM: *Plan for test preparation to take time! Preparing for these tests is a marathon, not a sprint. Consider enrolling your child in a test prep program to make the process easier and produce the best possible scores.*

- **Finalize the college list.** By summer, your child should have a final list of colleges, including a range of safety, target, and reach schools. This will determine how many applications and essays your child will need to complete by the fall. [Learn more about what to consider when making a college list here.](#)

ACTION ITEM: *Visit top choice schools. Campus visits offer great insight into the school, its student body, and the campus lifestyle.*

- **Start college essays.** In the summer, your child should begin planning and writing their college essays. Depending on your child's college list, they may need to write a dozen or more essays. The more that gets done over summer, the easier the application process will be in the fall.

ACTION ITEM: *Seek expert help for college essays. This is a unique writing assignment that requires a careful touch. A college essay coach can help your child craft the strongest possible application essays!*

SENIOR YEAR: TIME TO APPLY

The fall of senior year can be stressful—your child will need to maintain good grades in tough classes, meet any extracurricular obligations, and complete the college application process! These are the college goals to focus on this year:

- **Apply to college.** Apply early where possible. Selective colleges often fill a third or more of their incoming classes during early rounds of admission, and early admission rates are usually significantly higher than regular admission rates.

ACTION ITEM: [Download C2 Education's College Application Checklist to help navigate the application process.](#)

- **Submit financial aid forms.** Complete the FAFSA, CSS Profile, and any other required forms in a timely manner so that you and your child can compare financial aid offers.

ACTION ITEM: *Complete the FAFSA even if you believe your child won't be eligible for federal*

aid. Many colleges use the FAFSA to determine institutional aid as well.

- **Choose a college and submit a deposit by May 1.** Take the time to weigh options and compare offers before deciding which school to attend. Submit the deposit and any required paperwork by May 1 to secure your child's spot.

ACTION ITEM: *If your child is waitlisted at a dream school, submit a deposit at a backup school anyway. Most selective colleges don't admit many students from the waitlist, so it's important to secure a spot elsewhere.*

**Rankings based on US News and World Report. Test policies based on Common Data Set for each of the top 20 schools.*