

A Middle School Parent's College Prep Guide

You and your child need to start planning for college no later than middle school. Here are seven steps your child and family should take.

By Linda Strean, GreatSchools Staff

Most U.S. parents expect their kids to go to college, and most students have the same goal. But they are not necessarily taking the practical steps to get there.

A national survey released this year by Harris Interactive found that while 92% of seventh- and eighth-graders said they were likely to attend college, 68% said they had little or no information about which classes to take to prepare for it.

Counselors, colleges and organizations like the [National Association for College Admission Counseling](#) and [ACT](#) emphasize that parents should start planning for college no later than middle school. Their reasoning is simple:

- Your child needs strong preparation in middle school to take the high school classes that colleges require.
- You need to do your homework to make college affordable for your family. There are lots of options to cut college costs — scholarships, low-interest loans, work-study, spending the first two years at a community college — but it takes time to research them and get the information you need to meet application deadlines.

College planning is important for all families, whether parents attended college or not. Rose Fabiszak, director of the College Board's program called College Ed, notes, "The college process has changed, even from four years ago — the forms have changed, there are Web sites where your child can take a virtual tour of a college."

Building a 'College-Going Culture'

Your child is growing up in a world where peer groups have powerful influence and technology offers powerful distractions. You, your parent group and your school have to work hard to send a message that planning for college is an effort that pays off. Here are some ideas from [The College Ed Create a College-Going Culture Guide](#) by the College Board:

- Invite financial aid officers from nearby colleges to talk about ways to pay for college.
- Invite college students or graduates to talk to students.
- Talk to your school about displaying a college of the week prominently at the school, using college pennants as decorations, asking staff members to wear sweatshirts from their alma maters.
- Arrange a college tour for your parent group and talk to the admissions staff.
- Talk to administrators about sending college information to parents regularly.
- Ask for donations of college brochures and guidebooks.
- Hold a career day, inviting representatives to talk about what they do and how they prepared for their careers.

Visit [College Ed](#) for more information on the program or resources.

Here are seven steps you can take to jumpstart your planning:

Talk About College

As a parent, your expectations have a huge influence on what your child expects of herself, even if she doesn't want you to know it. You can help her envision her future at a time when the social anxieties and opportunities of middle school loom larger than life after high school. This doesn't mean having an "I expect you to go to Harvard" conversation. Talk to your child about her interests, how they might translate into a college major and career.

That's what the [College Ed program](#) does, working in partnership with schools and districts. In a series of lessons, students assess their interests and talents, match them to college majors and develop plans to reach their goals. "This is really an exploration of self," says Fabiszak.

There are resources on the Web to help you start exploring careers together with your child and get the conversation going. Several of them are mentioned in the GreatSchools article [Helping Your Child Connect School to Work](#).

It's not too early for you and your child to visit a college so she can begin to picture herself there. Fabiszak tells the story of her own daughter's early visits to an out-of-state college that sounded like a great match. It wasn't. The visit helped Fabiszak's daughter realize she wanted to stay closer to home, which she did, commuting to a college in her city.

"You have to find a place that's comfortable," Fabiszak said. "She changed her mind. Because we encouraged her early, she had a chance to see what fit."

Make the School Your Partner

Middle school is the time parents tend to be less involved, but it's the very time your child needs encouragement and guidance. Meet your child's teachers, if you haven't already done so, and make it clear that you want to be kept up to date about any changes in your child's work or behavior. Go over your child's standardized test results with the counselor to identify strengths and weaknesses. Talk to the counselor about your child's interests to see if there are electives and extracurricular activities that will help him develop his talents. If your child needs extra help or more challenging assignments in a subject, talk to the counselor about how to arrange it.

"Be vocal about what your school needs," Fabiszak advises. "You should feel comfortable calling up the school to say 'I think my son needs extra help because he's failing math,' or 'Do you have more rigorous coursework for my daughter

who's doing well in English?'"

Get Very Involved in Your Child's Choice of Classes

The research is clear: Kids who take algebra by the eighth grade and geometry by ninth grade are much more likely to go to college than those who don't. These math classes are required to take more advanced math classes in high

school and to take science classes like chemistry and physics. In addition to taking math every year in middle school, your child should take:

- English: Every year
- History (including geography) and science: As many classes as possible
- Foreign language: Many colleges require at least two years of a language, which your child can begin in middle school.

Because college work and many jobs now require computer skills, your child should also try to take advantage of any computer science classes offered in middle and high school. He'll gain new skills and may discover a career path.

Bottom line: Your child will need to satisfy more than the basic high school graduation requirements to be prepared to succeed in college. And he won't be prepared for college prep classes in high school unless he starts now.

Get Savvy About College Costs

Experts emphasize that there are lots of ways to finance a college education, but you have to do your homework. Researching the way the system works, [saving options](#) such as 529 plans, and [creative financing ideas](#) will keep you from the last-minute panic that leads families to take out high-interest loans.

"You can find money for college," says Fabiszak. "It takes work and you need to start early."

There are also other cost-cutting measures you'll uncover: Your child can get college credits by taking Advanced Placement (AP) classes in high school or in summer classes at your local community college. That can save you a year's tuition — but your child must be academically prepared to take advantage of these options.

Encourage Your Child to Read, Read, Read

It's simply the best preparation for the SAT, ACT or college reading assignments that your child can have.

While you're at it, why not make vocabulary building a family game by learning a word a day? There are lots of free subscription services that will email a word of the day, like this one from [Dictionary.com](#). Your child can teach the daily word to the rest of the family at dinner and quiz you at the end of the week.

Look Ahead to High School

High school is the launch pad to college. How does yours measure up? Does the school offer AP or honors courses? These classes put students at an advantage when applying for college. Will your child have access to them? Can anyone take them or do the students have to have a certain grade-point average or be selected by their teachers? Are there electives and extracurricular activities that will motivate and engage your child? If not, do you have other school options? Or do you need to find community resources — music groups, sports clubs, tutors — to supplement what the school offers? Research your child's future high school now, contact the parent group and visit classes to help insure a successful high school experience for your child.

Don't Wait to Get Your Child Help With Study Skills

Your child will need time-management, organizational and study skills to succeed in high school and college. It's easier to address these issues now than it will be when the work gets more challenging. Make sure your child has a quiet place to do homework and the necessary paper, pens and other materials close by. Help him get into a regular routine and monitor the results. If you need to, talk to your child's counselor about how to get extra help — after school, at a community center or in a tutoring program. Take a look at [GreatSchools resources on study skills](#) for more tips.

October 2007