

Five things you need to know about the changing college admissions landscape

As parents, you want what's best for your children, including a top-tier education. Perhaps your child is a good student who participated in extracurricular activities, scored highly on SAT/ACT exams, and has been tutored in various subjects. That should be more than enough to get into a top school, right? Perhaps not. The college admissions landscape has changed.

1 An A average is now just average

The average high school GPA in 1990 was 2.68; in 2019, it had risen to 3.11. Is your child bringing home all As? Taking advanced classes in math and science? So are millions of other kids; in fact, the average number of students taking advanced algebra has increased from 56% in 1990 to 85% in 2019, and precalculus is now taken by 40% of students, up from 14%. Conversely, the number of students taking general mathematics has declined from 51% to 29%.¹



2 The elite schools are tougher to get in to

Many students took gap years during the pandemic, so colleges are currently seeing record numbers of applicants. Schools are also seeing an increase in foreign applicants, a nearly three-fold increase from 2020, with students from China and India leading the way.² More applicants means more competition. Ivy League schools Harvard and Brown both announced their lowest-ever acceptance rates for the class of 2026. Even state schools, such as the University of Virginia, are admitting less than 1 in 5 applicants.³

3 Demonstrated interest is important to a growing number of schools

Admissions representatives at many colleges and universities increasingly want to know why your child wants to attend their school, according to college admissions consultant Nancy Steenson. There are a number of ways for your child to express interest, including visiting the campus, signing up for an in-person information session or Zoom call, applying early decision, or setting up an interview.

4 “Optional” doesn’t mean optional

If your child really wants to attend a particular school, be sure to read through the application carefully. There may be a number of tasks listed as optional, but they shouldn't be considered optional if your child really wants to attend, according to Steenson. Some examples of “optional” requirements: an additional essay, an interview, or an information session or Zoom call. The bottom line, says Steenson: If something is listed as optional, do it.

5 Early decision may be a smart decision, but it comes at a cost

Early decision allows students to apply to their first-choice school by early November, instead of the usual admission deadline of January. If accepted the student must withdraw any regular admissions applications and attend the college. It can pay off: Early decision applicants are typically admitted in higher numbers than regular applicants⁴; however, there could be a big cost involved. Accepting early decision means accepting the college's financial aid offer, which may be less than expected and less than other institutions.

¹ “2019 NAEP High School Transcript Study,” National Assessment of Educational Progress, March 2022. ² “The Applications Keep Coming,” Inside Higher Ed, February 2022. ³ “2022 College Acceptance Rates: The Latest Admissions Trends,” InGenius Prep, April 2022. ⁴ “Class of 2026 Early Decision and Early Action Results,” College Kickstart, February 2022.

Planning for your child's higher education

Whether college is more than a decade or just a few years away, there are a number of things you can do to help your child prepare. Here are some suggestions:

Pre-high school/middle school

At home

- ☑ Introduce your child to the benefits of saving money, including the concept of compounding interest. Encourage your child to put part of his or her allowance and gift money into an education savings plan.
- ☑ Help your child understand the importance of education and foster a passion for learning. Reward your child for good performance at school. Remember, not all rewards need to be monetary.
- ☑ Ask your child what he or she wants to be when an adult. Explain the type of knowledge needed and the work expected in order to achieve that goal, then put together an action plan to help your child reach that goal.

At school

- ☑ Participate in your child's school-related activities. Be available for parent-teacher conferences to discuss your child's performance. If your child is having problems in a subject, look into hiring a tutor to help bridge the gap.
- ☑ While the Preliminary SAT/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test (PSAT/ NMSQT) is primarily taken by high school sophomores and juniors, children in middle school can take the test to see the areas where they excel and the areas where they may need help.
- ☑ When your child is in the last year of middle school, meet with the high school guidance counselor to discuss potential course loads and build an academic plan.

High school

At home

- ☑ Help further your child's understanding of the concepts of earning and saving money by encouraging him or her to get a job during the summer, or checking into internships that may be available. Start searching for schools using our suggested resources. You'll be able to assess the costs, calculate aid by merit versus need, and come up with a payment plan.
- ☑ Plan visits to colleges and universities. Have your child learn about the application process, including the need to write essays.
- ☑ Have your child make a list of preferred schools to apply to, then visit the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) website to learn about the impact of finances, the deadlines for applications, and the types of scholarships and loans available. You can also visit schools' websites and use their net price calculators to estimate the cost of attending their school.

At school

- ☑ Encourage your child to explore various extracurricular activities, including participating in athletics or student government, learning foreign languages, and volunteering.
- ☑ Work with your child on planning out each year's curriculum, including advanced placement classes that may be transferred for college credits. Employ the assistance of a guidance counselor.
- ☑ Look into test prep firms that can help your child improve his or her scores on the SATs and ACTs.

Be sure to meet with your financial representative, who can help you initiate a plan for your child's future, including investing in a 529 education savings plan account.

 Investment Management

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Resources

- collegesavings.org
Clearinghouse for information on existing programs
- savingforcollege.com
Analysis of 529 plans, as well as tools and calculators
- finaid.org
Information on scholarships, loans, and financial aid applications
- studentaid.ed.gov
Guidance on preparing for college and applying for financial aid
- collegeboard.org
Resource for school-specific details and overall college planning