

Onward and Upward

Ways Families
Can Help Students
Succeed in High School





Welcome to an exciting new chapter in your teen’s educational journey! The move up to high school is a significant milestone, filled with opportunities for growth, learning and self-discovery. High school gives students four years to build knowledge and skills and to fine-tune strengths and interests that they can use to shape their futures.

What is your role during this pivotal time? It may be helpful to think of yourself as a coach—supporting and cheering your teen on. In elementary and middle school, you probably suggested solutions to problems or made decisions for your child. Now it’s time to help your student take charge of things like working with teachers, choosing classes to take and extracurricular activities to pursue, and ultimately, deciding what path to follow after high school.

Of course, your teen still needs your support and guidance. Open, two-way communication between you will make that easier. Know what is happening in your student’s life, and make an effort to listen before talking. Help your teen think through options, then encourage your teen to take the lead.

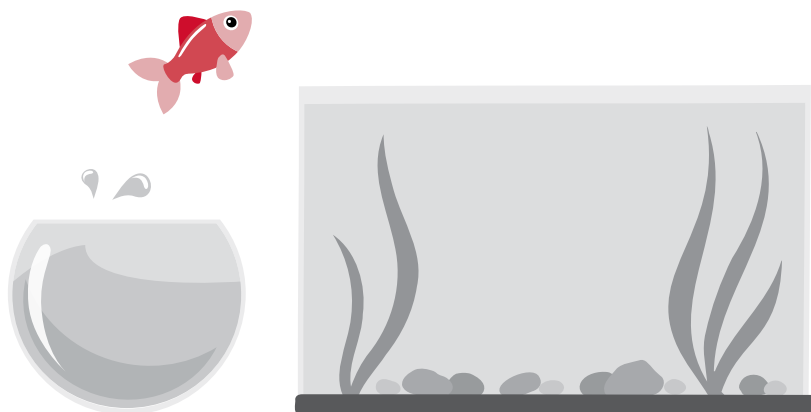
Expect lots of changes along the way. Your incoming freshman will likely bear little resemblance to your high school graduate. But with your help, after four years, your teen will ideally be prepared to manage daily life and higher-education coursework or a career independently.

This booklet is designed to guide you through this adjustment and provide useful insights and practical tips to help you help your teen navigate the high school years.

Understand the changes to expect in high school

You and your student already experienced big changes during middle school. What will be different in high school? As your teen becomes more independent and begins to think seriously about what the future holds, you will encounter:

- **Expectations of increased student responsibility** for schoolwork and life. Think of the high school years as a dress rehearsal for adulthood. Students need to develop work and life habits necessary for success in school and on the job. For example, while it's important for you to develop and maintain relationships with school staff, your teen will now be the primary person to work with teachers to solve problems or get help. Your teen will also be expected to balance more challenging schoolwork with other activities, including extracurriculars, a social life and possibly a part-time job.
- **A focus on the future.** Your teen may wonder: "What will I be when I grow up?" While it's not crucial to answer that question right now, it is important for your teen to discover and explore strengths and interests that may lead to a fulfilling career—by taking different classes, pursuing new activities and developing skills. Encourage your teen to talk to the school counselor about strengths and interests. The counselor can recommend classes and after-school activities that will nurture your student's talents and passions—and lead to new ones.



Ease your teen's concerns about starting high school

A big change like starting high school causes many students some anxiety. Here are some concerns your teen may have—and ways to address them:

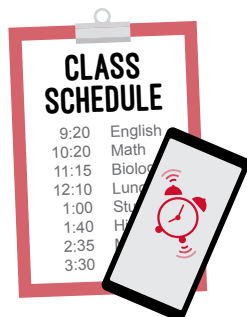
Navigating a new campus

When class schedules become available, have your teen get a map of the school. Suggest highlighting the classrooms your teen will need to go to and drawing a path from each one to the next. You or your teen can also call or email the school to ask about touring the building.



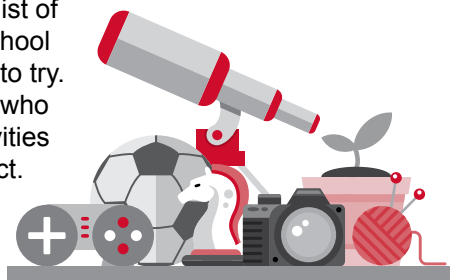
Adjusting to a new schedule

Encourage your teen to look up the bell schedule on the school website. Then, help your student figure out logistics like “What time should I wake up on school mornings?” and “What time will I get home?” Have your teen plan evenings, too—including what time to go to bed to get enough sleep.



Making friends

Getting involved in school activities is one of the best ways to meet like-minded peers and feel connected at school. Encourage your teen to read the list of extracurricular activities on the school website and choose one or more to try. Suggest talking to older students who have participated in different activities to learn more about what to expect.



Handling more challenging classes and an increased workload

Your teen will likely need to spend more time studying and working on assignments than in middle school. Teachers and the school counselor can help your student choose a mix of classes that are challenging—but not overwhelming. Encourage your teen to draw up a schedule that includes enough study time, as well as some time to relax. Review it together to make sure extracurriculars, shifts at work, etc., don't interfere with school responsibilities.



Figuring out life after high school

Going to college, living independently ... thinking about the future is exciting, but it can also cause stress. Encourage your teen to brainstorm a list of people who can answer questions or offer support when your teen feels anxious about what's ahead. These could include family members, older friends, the school counselor, teachers, coaches and activity advisors. Boost your teen's confidence by teaching "adulting" skills like cooking, cleaning, budgeting, making appointments and handling minor repairs.



Form a partnership with the school

What does family engagement look like in high school? The days of reading to your student's class are likely over. But active engagement with school shows your student that education is important to you, even if it looks different now. To stay involved in high school:

- **Introduce yourself to teachers** and the school counselor via email. Although your teen will be the primary communicator with school staff now, you will need to work together if problems arise. Establishing a relationship right away will make problem-solving easier. Your message can be as simple as: "I am [blank]'s parent. I look forward to working together to support [blank]'s education." Include information about the best way to reach you and ask about the best way to receive communications from them.
- **Know school policies.** Families should understand policies regarding grading, assignments, mobile devices, etc. Learn about them by attending back-to-school night, reading the student handbook and visiting the school website. Review them with your teen and discuss the importance of following them.
- **Read all communications from the school.** Put important dates on your calendar, including school holidays, special events, standardized tests, exams, etc.
- **Prioritize and monitor attendance.** Review the attendance policy with your teen. It will likely contain more details than in elementary or middle school. For instance, is your teen allowed to leave campus for lunch? Are college visits considered excused absences? Then, reinforce the importance of attending every class, every day, and have your teen schedule routine appointments and shifts at work outside of school hours.



- **Keep an eye on grades.** Look over the graded tests and assignments your teen brings home. If the school uses an online gradebook, check it regularly or sign up for notifications so you're not surprised by the grades on your student's report card. If you notice missing assignments or dropping grades, talk to your teen sooner rather than later, and contact the teacher if necessary.
- **Show interest in what your teen is learning.** Ask to see the schoolwork your student brings home or submits online. You might ask to read a report or essay, see artwork, or listen to musical pieces or presentations your teen is rehearsing.
- **Attend in-school events.** Just like in elementary and middle school, it's beneficial for high school families to attend back-to-school night, parent-teacher conferences, and competitions or performances their teens take part in. In high school, there will also be college fairs, career nights, etc. You can also get involved by joining family-school organizations and booster clubs. And many families enjoy showing their school spirit by attending football games and other sporting events together.



Encourage your student to build relationships with teachers

Connecting with teachers in high school contributes to students' academic success, personal growth and future prospects. For productive relationships, remind your teen to:

- **Be respectful and courteous.** If your teen sees a teacher at an event or in the community, it's polite to say *hello*.
- **Show interest and engage in class** by arriving on time, actively listening, asking and answering questions, and participating in discussions. During class discussions, your teen should be encouraging to fellow classmates and express opinions respectfully.
- **Ask for help when needed**, rather than risk falling behind.
- **Communicate regularly** by asking about assignments and grades, requesting letters of recommendation, etc.
- **Express appreciation.** Your teen might let a teacher know about a project that was especially meaningful or thank a teacher for providing extra help or writing a letter of recommendation.



Email etiquette for teens

When emailing teachers or other school staff, students should:

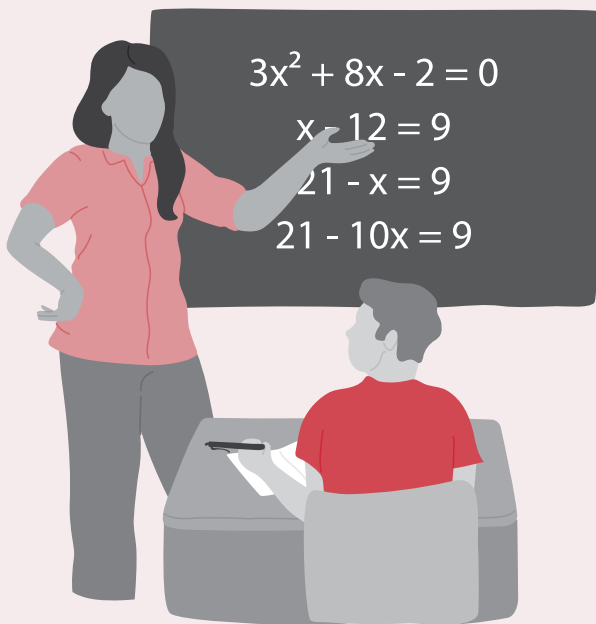
- Write a specific subject line that includes the topic of the email.
- Start with a formal greeting, "Dear Mr. Smith."
- Include an introduction: "This is John Doe from your 3rd period biology class."
- Be clear and concise: "I am writing to ask for clarification on the assignment due next Friday."
- End with a courteous closing, such as "Sincerely," "Best," or "Thank you," before typing your name.



Offer support when your student struggles

Even the most committed students may face academic struggles at some point. How can you help if your high school student is having difficulties in class? Follow these steps:

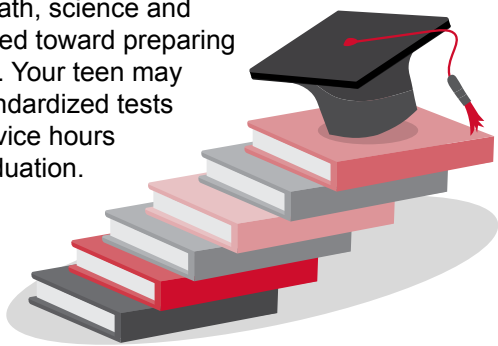
- 1. Emphasize the importance** of getting help right away. Explain that small problems tend to “snowball” into bigger ones if students wait. Demonstrate how to ask for help. For example: “The last math test was hard for me even though I studied a lot. How can I get extra help?” Role-play what your teen could say to the teacher, or suggest drafting an email, and offer to look over it before your teen sends it.
- 2. Follow up.** Ask about the teacher’s response to your teen’s request. If the teacher suggested a study group, or if your teen needs to go to school early or stay late for the teacher’s office hours, arrange transportation. If your teen hasn’t heard back from the teacher, suggest asking again in a few days.
- 3. Intervene if the issue continues.** Arrange a parent-teacher-student conference if your teen continues to struggle.



Understand graduation requirements

Graduation may seem far away, but planning now can ensure that your teen meets all the requirements over the next four years. You and your teen should:

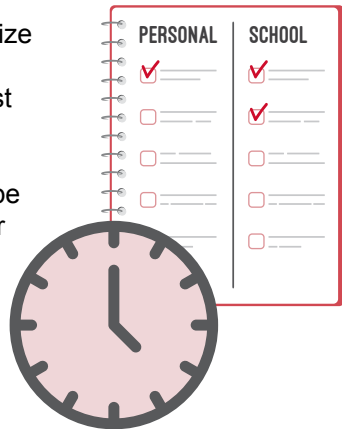
- **Read the requirements** in the student handbook or on the school or district website. Requirements vary by state, but there are usually two diplomas: standard (or general) and advanced (or honors). The advanced diploma generally requires additional courses in specific subjects, including math, science and foreign language, and is geared toward preparing students for higher education. Your teen may also need to pass certain standardized tests and complete community service hours to meet requirements for graduation. Colleges may have additional requirements for admission.
- **Create a four-year plan** to work toward a chosen diploma instead of going year-by-year. The school counselor can help your student with this plan. In general, your teen should aim for a courseload that's challenging yet manageable. It should include electives that allow your student to explore interests and potential careers. The plan may change as your teen develops new interests and strengths, but the framework for completing requirements will be in place.
- **Learn how a grade-point average (GPA) is calculated.** This information will likely be in the student handbook or on the website—read it with your teen. In high school, all classes count toward your teen's final GPA. In general, a grade of A = 4 points, B = 3 points, C = 2 points and D = 1 point. Grades in more challenging courses, like honors, advanced placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) courses, may be *weighted*, or worth additional points. For example, a student might earn 5 points for an A, 4 points for a B, etc., in an AP class.



Encourage student responsibility

In the past, you may have been the one who made sure your student finished schoolwork before playing and remembered to take supplies to school. Now's the time to shift school responsibilities onto your teen. Taking responsibility includes using tools and strategies to make decisions, stay organized and manage time. Encourage your teen to:

- **Start each day with a to-do list.** Suggest experimenting with different ways to organize the list until your teen finds a method that works best. One strategy is to divide the list into columns or tabs labeled "School" and "Personal." Or, your student could use a different pen color or text color for each type of responsibility. At the end of the day, your teen should transfer unfinished items to the next day's list.
- **Establish a specific study time** each day and post the schedule in a visible spot. Getting into the habit of working at the same time will make it easier for your teen to buckle down. To eliminate distractions, have your teen silence digital notifications and close any apps and windows not needed for schoolwork.
- **Make responsible decisions.** Your teen has a paper due tomorrow, then gets invited to hang out with friends. Instead of immediately saying "no" when your teen asks your permission to go out, guide your student to think through the situation. Ask questions that begin with "If": "If you go, when will you finish the paper?" "If you don't finish it, what will happen?" "If you get a low grade, how will that affect your GPA?"



Discuss the value of extracurricular activities

Colleges and employers know that well-rounded teens will enrich the environment on campus and in the workplace. Extracurricular activities allow your teen to explore interests and develop strengths, and your student can list these experiences on college and job applications. When choosing activities, your teen should:

Start with interests and strengths

Is your teen passionate about running? Does your student enjoy working with younger children? Help your teen look for school or community clubs or groups such as a running club or a tutoring program.



Choose quality over quantity

Instead of short stints in a variety of activities, encourage your teen to stick with just one or two to demonstrate sustained commitment. And doing an activity for a longer period of time is likely to result in leadership roles for your teen. Recommend that your student consider the potential for growth and leadership opportunities when considering activities.

Start a resume

Encourage your teen to collect details about activities and save them for when it's time to apply to colleges and jobs. Your student should record dates of participation, skills acquired, accomplishments, and contact information for advisors and supervisors.

Promote health and safety

Your teen's safety and well-being are essential for success in school. To help ensure both:

Set rules for driving and for riding with friends

These should include limits on the number of teens in the car, where your teen can go and when your teen can drive.

Talk about drugs and alcohol

Make it clear that your teen is not allowed to use these substances. If you suspect or know your teen is using, seek help from your pediatrician or a school counselor.



Teach responsible screen use

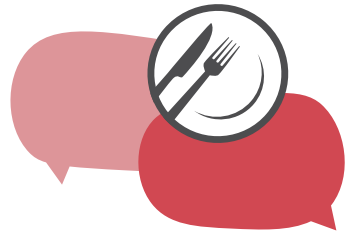
At this age, teens can begin learning strategies to manage their own screen activities. One particularly effective strategy is to silence notifications and instead set specific times to check devices. Designate screen-free times and places including while doing schoolwork, in the car and at the dinner table. Encourage your teen to use digital tools to track usage and set goals for cutting back.

Do regular 'mental health check-ins'

Find times when your teen is receptive to talking, such as when you say goodnight after lights-out or when you're in the car together. Ask about your teen's mood and how things are going in class, with friends, etc. Try specific questions like "What was one awesome moment today?" "What was a not-so-awesome moment?" If your teen seems sad or anxious more often than not, make an appointment with the pediatrician.

Prioritize family meals

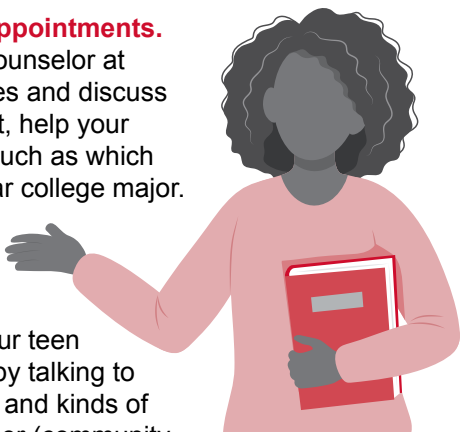
Students who drive or have friends who drive may opt for fast-food or after-school snacks with friends, which can lead to poor nutritional choices. Family meals also promote communication.



Understand the school counselor's role

School counselors support the success and well-being of students at all grade levels. Counselors are trained to help students and their families handle social, behavioral and academic issues. In high school, this role is expanded as teens choose among more class options and begin thinking seriously about higher education and careers. Counselors work with many students, so remind your teen to:

- **Be proactive.** It's up to your teen to ask for help when necessary. Encourage your student to visit or email the counselor with academic questions, social or emotional concerns, or requests for guidance regarding future plans. And have your teen reach out early with requests for letters of recommendation.
- **Make the most of counseling appointments.** Your teen should meet with the counselor at least once a year, to select classes and discuss the future. Before an appointment, help your teen compile a list of questions, such as which electives are useful for a particular college major.
- **Share future aspirations.** The counselor wants to know what post-high school plans your student is considering. At first, your teen may have no idea. You can help by talking to your teen about potential careers and kinds of post-secondary schools to consider (community college, university, trade school, etc.). The counselor will help your teen select courses, create a list of schools and navigate the application process.



School counselors can also help families overcome obstacles to student success and find resources for further assistance.

Check out career planning resources

What education is required to become an MRI technologist? What's the median salary for an orchestra director? Students need information to plan and prepare for the future. Your teen can find answers to questions about almost every career by visiting websites like these:

My Future

<https://myfuture.com/career>

Your teen can research jobs, colleges and military careers. Typing in a civilian or military career field provides descriptions of jobs in that field, median salaries by state, educational requirements and projected job growth. Searching for a college will show your teen information such as the cost of tuition, acceptance rate, size and popular majors.

Occupational Outlook Handbook

<https://www.bls.gov/ooh/home.htm>

This site will allow your student to search for occupations by name, median pay, entry-level education required, projected job growth and other factors. Your teen can also click on a specific field, such as healthcare or sales, to learn about occupations in that group.

CareerOneStop

<https://www.careeronestop.org>

Career options, education resources, and job search planning are just a few of the resources available on this site. It includes a scholarship finder, a list of job-training providers as well as colleges, a resume guide and more.

Summary

As your teen begins high school, you can expect many changes—in your teen as well as in your role as a parent or guardian. In the short-term, your teen will need to adjust to a new school, new expectations, more challenging classes and a heavier workload. In the longer-term, your student will gradually take more responsibility for schoolwork and life in preparation for adulthood. Your teen will also begin to look toward the future and plan for higher education and a career. Your involvement and encouragement will help your teen build a strong foundation for a successful experience in high school and beyond!



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