



Preparing for the *Selective College Admissions Process*

What middle schoolers and their
parents need to know

From the Admittedly Counseling Team
Led by former Ivy+ Admissions Officers

admittedly.co

“At Wharton, I led admissions for one of the most competitive graduate programs in the world. But the *biggest mistakes* I saw students make didn’t begin in high school; *they actually started in middle school.*”

Thomas Caleel

That’s a truth few families understand.

Today, we help students gain admission to the most selective colleges in the country. And when we trace the arc of every successful applicant we work with, we nearly always find the same thing: they had a plan before it “mattered.”

This guide is a tool to help you stop reacting to conflicting advice and start building a narrative that is rooted in authenticity, strengths, and your values.



Why Middle School Strategy *Matters*

Most families assume the real work starts in high school. But if your child is hoping to access advanced academic courses, particularly in english, math, and other languages, and apply to a competitive university, middle school isn't just preparation, it's the foundation of crafting a story for your application and strategic positioning.



Consider this:

- **Math placement** in Grades 7 and 8 determine whether your child can access AP Calculus AB, BC, or AP Statistics later.
- **Study habits and executive functioning** are much easier to build now than under weighted GPA and ranking pressure, where every grade matters.
- **Selective high schools and boarding schools** begin evaluating students as early as sixth grade.
- **Interest development** happens when there's space to explore with limited consequences, which middle school uniquely allows.

A Word to The Parents: *Is This Too Early?*

We hear this concern all the time. And it comes from a loving place:
"I don't want to pressure my kid."

But this isn't about pressure. It's about clarity.

When done *right*, middle school strategy:

- Builds confidence instead of anxiety
- Creates time for exploration before stakes are high
- Helps students learn how to struggle and recover ("fail fast, learn faster")
- Aligns academics and activities around a deeper purpose

We aren't trying to turn your 12-year-old into a prodigy; we're giving them the tools to flourish on their own terms. Every year, we hear from parents who wish they'd had access to this information sooner, and from students who realized too late that those early high school Bs actually carry weight. We're here to help bridge that gap before the pressure mounts.





Who This is For (*And Who It's Not*)

This guide is for families who:

- *Want their child to access honors, AP, or IB-level tracks*
- *Value long-term growth over short-term résumé-building*
- *Believe that confidence comes from clarity and preparation*

This guide is *not* for families who:

- *Prefer a "let's wait and see" approach*
- *Are looking for a quick fix or silver bullet*
- *Expect the complexities of the modern selective admissions landscape to be intuitive or the same as 30 years ago.*

The Strategic Family Framework: 6th–8th Grade Roadmap

Grade/ Year	Academic Focus	Personal Development	Strategic Actions
6th	Core Subject Mastery	Begin exploring interests outside of the classroom	Observe school culture, develop early studying skills by reading and writing daily
7th	Math & English Advancement	Try new activities; leadership emerges	Identify placement goals; seek early mentorship from coaches and teachers
8th	Track toward rigorous high school classes	Begin specialization; deepen passions	Prepare high school applications, if applicable



“Strategic families
don’t micromanage.
They *plan ahead* and
architect.”

Thomas Caleel

Our 3-Part Middle School *Success Strategy*

1. Explore Widely and Often

Middle school should be expansive.

- Try sports, visual art classes, STEM/business clubs (i.e., FIRST Lego League and FBLA), community service, performing arts such as theatre and dance
- Experiment with academic enrichment: debate, coding with Claude Code, contests such as Scholastic
- Visit local museums, attend lectures online, go hiking, volunteer in new environments that you're curious about

Exposure = data. Data = decisions. Give them a wide lens.

2. Establish Identity and Skill

This is the season to strengthen the roots:

- Academics: Target key areas like math, reading difficult texts, and writing (the “3 Rs” still matter and are foundational)
- Character: Reflect on values, grit, and emotional resilience
- Habits: Build strong time management and executive functioning skills

As Wharton research has shown, early executive function outperforms raw IQ in long-term success.



3. Elevate and Focus

By seventh or eighth grade, students begin to show patterns that can help you with the following decisions.

- Encourage depth: commit more fully to what lights them up and let go of what doesn't.
- Align school work with real-world passions (e.g., using sports to explore science, business, or law).
- Begin positioning for high school gifted/accelerated courses, interviews, and applications.

Beyond Academic Performance: *Why Character Still Wins*



Great schools want great humans; not just star students, but empathetic roommates and peers.

Here's what they're *really* evaluating:

- Does this student lift others up?
- Can they reflect on setbacks and fail forward?
- Are they contributors in spaces or consumers?

We encourage:

- **Service-Learning:** Local nonprofits, tutoring, creative service projects
- **Gratitude:** Thank you notes, peer encouragement, journal reflection, kind words to a friend in need
- **Belonging:** Choose environments where they feel seen and valued

What Happens When You *Start Now*

Families who plan in middle school don't just survive high school, *they own it with confidence*. They:

- enter ninth grade on the most rigorous academic track, particularly in math and science
- lead with confidence and purpose in activity selection
- choose colleges that are strong academic, social, and professional fits
- Enjoy the process, rather than panicking due to external pressure

And they do it without sacrificing their kid's childhood. In fact, they often unlock more joy, play, and passion because they aren't constantly reacting to noise.



Admissions Insider: *A Peak Behind The Curtain*

Every year, our team of former AOs and seasoned counselors reflect on the previous application cycle. Here's what they consistently say:

- “We can spot a coached kid a mile away. We want intellectually curious and motivated kids, not curated ones.”
- “A student who has explored broadly, then gone deep in one or two academic areas of interest, that's gold.”
- “An application that demonstrates the student has reflected deeply about their interests, thoughtfully about their own strengths, and then put in the work to prove it with actions.”
- “Parents who model self-awareness, trust, and letting their student take the lead—those students rise to the top.”

This process is ultimately about being real, not perfect. Purposeful, not over-engineered.

Want a Tailored Plan for *Your* Family?

We don't just prepare students for high school. We prepare families for a lifetime of confident, values-aligned decisions.

If your child is bright, curious, and capable of more, and you want a strategy that empowers them without overwhelming them, we'd love to help.

[Book a complimentary planning call with our team.](#) 

Let's build a strategy that reflects your values *and* your child's unique path.