



# College Preparation

Timeline and Resources for School Leaders



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## Introduction

Everyone acknowledges the importance of leadership in good schools, but sometimes a leader's influence extends into unexpected areas. Getting admitted to and succeeding in college is certainly the result of hard work on the part of individual students and their families, but for many kids, particularly those from impoverished backgrounds or from families without a strong commitment to higher education, the school plays a crucial role in helping them realize their educational goals. And the schools that are most successful in doing just that have strong leaders who create and sustain a culture of post-secondary education and provide the support necessary for students to develop the skills, knowledge, attitudes and habits of mind required for college success.

These great schools also help kids start early to prepare for a post-secondary education and make sure they have the information and tools they need to get admitted, find financial support, and go to college equipped with both the confidence and skills they need to succeed.



This timeline, which is distilled from dozens of resources on preparing for college, getting admitted, and paying for college, lays out an agenda for leaders in middle and high schools. The timeline brings together the information principals need to work with students, parents and staff to make sure every child has a good shot at college admission and attendance. It also lays out an annual (and sometimes seasonal) timeline based on the normal cycles of application, admission, financial aid, and final decisions about schools and programs.

Most importantly, it starts at the beginning of the college-preparation timeline — the early grades of middle school where kids develop the academic skills, attitudes, and content mastery that eventually leads to college and career success.

# The 5 R's Plus One

**Oregon GEAR UP provides a comprehensive, easy-to-remember plan for getting students ready for college admission, financial aid, and timely graduation.**

Getting ready for college can be overwhelming, especially for families with no experience who are sending their first child off to school. But the whole process really boils down to five key ideas, plus one that is essential for school leaders. Oregon GEAR UP's five core concepts for successful college preparation are:

**Relationships:** Students who have relationships with people who expect them to go to college are far more likely to attend college. Schools can help build those relationships both with supportive adults and student peers with college aspirations and plans. These powerful social networks are the foundation of a good college preparation strategy.

**Reality of Affordability:** Students who explore financial aid and scholarship options early on are better prepared to pay for college. Despite stories to the contrary in the popular media, college remains a good investment if students make good choices, capitalize on all available sources of support, and work hard to make themselves competitive for non need-based support. But the big numbers associated with college costs can be intimidating, especially for parents with limited means. Schools should start early to educate students and parents about the real costs of higher education.

**Rigor:** Students who take challenging courses in high school are better prepared to succeed in college. These courses also develop the habits of mind necessary for college success.

**Relevance:** Students who know they need a college degree for the jobs that interest them are more likely to go to college. Schools need to help kids explore career options and the kinds of education needed.

**Right Classes:** Students who receive early guidance in class selection are better equipped for admission to college. Taking AP and dual-enrollment courses can also help save money on college costs by reducing the number of credits students must take for their degree.

For principals, especially in lower income communities, there is another key responsibility:

**Raising Awareness** about the reality of college for all students. Sometimes everyone — parents, community members, students, even school staff — may need to raise their aspirations for the school's young people.

The reasons are compelling, the need is great, and the job is tough but do-able. It's time to get started.

# Middle School – All Grades

## Raising Awareness

- Orient yourself to the [vital role principals play](#) in getting students ready for college admission and success, especially [creating a culture](#) of college-going in your school and [leadership tools](#) for promoting college as an option for all students.
- Create a “College Support Team” comprised of teachers, counselors and parents who plan programs, activities and support structures to create a culture of college attendance in the school. Have this team consider supportive activities such as:
  - ✓ A Before-school or After-school Program that’s especially for kids who are thinking about college;
  - ✓ A Mentor Program where kids can meet regularly with a college graduate who can tell them what to expect and plan for;
  - ✓ A tutoring program where middle school kids can help tutor a student in reading or math in elementary school; and
  - ✓ Summer Programs, Internships, and Advanced Courses
- Provide parents and students with age-appropriate information about college attendance, such as *Why You Can’t Stop after High School*, from the South Dakota Board of Regents, [Within My Reach](#) from the Minnesota Department of Higher Education, and the [College Preparation Checklist](#) from the U.S. Department of Education.
- Check out the requirements for the [21<sup>st</sup> Century](#) workplace and the preparation needed by young people.

## Relationships

- Orient parents to their role in helping kids qualify for college admission and success in post secondary education. Send monthly bulletins to parents outlining specific steps they can take to help their child prepare for success in high school and admission to college. Visit websites like this for information to share with parents: [College.gov \(I’m Going\)](#) and click on “Parents and Family.”
- Create activities and opportunities that foster adult mentorships for students based on interests. Use the resources of ASPIRE to train mentors or arrange for electronic mentorships for students. ([www.aspireoregon.org](http://www.aspireoregon.org))
- Create affinity groups for students (e.g., clubs, academic teams) that focus on academic/artistic/intellectual interests and establish peer groups committed to academic success and college attendance.

## Right Courses

- Identify students with skill deficiencies that may keep them from enrolling in the high school courses they need to prepare for college. Provide assistance to those students. Utilize college-bound high school students as tutors, thereby providing both academic support and models for

college attendance. Get help on setting up programs from Math and Reading Help for Kids ([http://math-and-reading-help-for-kids.org/article\\_directory/Middle\\_School.html](http://math-and-reading-help-for-kids.org/article_directory/Middle_School.html));

- Educate students and parents about the courses students must take in high school to qualify for college admission and financial aid. Make sure that all students have the prerequisite skills to succeed in those courses. For information to share with students and parents, use these resources: [Within My Reach](#) (page 8-9) and the [College Board High School Course Planner](#).
- Set a goal of having all students complete Algebra I by the end of 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Provide support and tutoring for students who are struggling with math. Train volunteers and parents to use online resources, such as [Khan Academy](#), to support student learning.

### **Relevance**

- Use age-appropriate interest inventories to begin to identify and explore potential careers and necessary educational preparations with students. Check out [Career Party](#) from the Indiana Department of Education or [Within My Reach](#) (pages 4-6) to begin.
- Establish a college and career orientation program that encourages students to talk with adults (teachers, librarians, relatives, family members, friends, school guests) about their jobs and the kind of education they needed to do them.
- Direct students to online activities and resources, such as the [NASA](#) site, which uses virtual field trips, activities and games to explore different career options. Make this exploration a school-wide, interdisciplinary activity culminating in a career fair.

### **Reality of Affordability**

- Introduce parents and students to information about college costs and financial aid, emphasizing that college is affordable and the pay-off is high. Use age-appropriate materials such as [My Future, My Way](#) or its companion website: [www.federalstudentaid.ed.gov/early](http://www.federalstudentaid.ed.gov/early).
- Teach parents to use FAFSA4Caster ([www.fafsa4caster.edu.gov](http://www.fafsa4caster.edu.gov)) to find out how much federal aid their child might receive.

### **Rigor**

- Engage your faculty in an examination of your school to see how it measures up in terms of creating the “habits of mind” and attitudinal factors that contribute to college success. Use David Conley’s “[What Makes a Student College Ready?](#)” and other work as a springboard for discussion ([Redefining College Readiness](#), [Re-thinking College Readiness](#)).
- Educate yourself about the kinds of leadership that promotes a rigorous curriculum for all students. See [Rigorous Schools and Classrooms: Leading the Way](#) by Ron Williamson and Barbara Blackburn for detailed information.

## 6<sup>th</sup> Grade

- ❑ Consult with elementary teachers on students who need additional help and support to succeed in middle school, especially those with attendance problems, behavior issues, skill deficiencies or other academic performance problems. Prepare to support and intervene early with these students as they enter the school.
- ❑ Orient students to the challenges and opportunities of the middle school, using resources such as [It's My Life](#) from PBSKids.org.
- ❑ Arrange an adult mentoring program that keeps students in contact with a responsible adult who can monitor their school performance and talk about their academic futures. See these resources for designing an effective mentoring program: [Yes, You Can](#), [How to Build A Successful Mentoring Program](#). If distance and timing are major issues, new programs involving electronic, or e-mentoring, programs are growing in popularity. Examples include: [Connecting to Success](#), the [National Mentoring Partnership](#), or the program offered in conjunction with [Western Oregon University](#) and Talmadge Middle School.
- ❑ Make sure parents are on board during their first visits with the school. Don't miss the opportunity to talk about their child's collegiate future. Provide them with resources such as [Getting Ready for College Early](#), [Preparing Your Child for College](#), and the [Helping Your Child](#) series (also in [Spanish](#)).

## 7<sup>th</sup> Grade

- Have each student develop “My College Plan” that describes potential career goals, the kind of educational preparation that is necessary, the courses they will need in middle school and high school to get ready for post-secondary education and a plan for other middle school experiences that will help to prepare them for high school and beyond. Make this plan a record for future counseling and advising sessions. For examples, see [Within My Reach](#), [Know How 2 Go \(middle school section\)](#), [MyPlan.com](#), and [Getting Ready for College Early](#).
- Review your program to be sure that students have the opportunity to develop the study skills and habits of mind that David Conley and his colleagues say are essential for college success. See “[What Makes a Student College Ready?](#)”, [Redefining College Readiness](#), and [Re-thinking College Readiness](#).
- Provide students with a College Preparation Checklist for middle school students from [College Prep 101](#). Make these activities the centerpiece of your advising, exploratory, and mentoring activities. Have teachers create an interdisciplinary unit that focuses on preparing for college, including career exploration (social studies), choosing a college (geography, economics), earnings for different professions in your region (economics, math), costs (math, economics), research on colleges and careers (language arts) resume building (language arts).
- Integrate study skills into all curriculum areas, especially goal-setting, time-management, and self-evaluation skills. Check our [How-To-Study.com](#) for both free and commercial resources. Enlist parents to help reinforce study skills at home. See the [Great Schools](#) website for guidance.

## 8<sup>th</sup> Grade

- Have students review and revise “My College Plan” and, with the help of a counselor or mentor, identify the courses they will take in high school to meet college requirements for their field(s) of interest. See [Within My Reach](#) pages 8-9 for a model plan. Compare the students’ lists with the “course blueprint” from the College Board. Also, check out what the [ACT](#) testing program has to say about choosing rigorous courses.
- Help students look for a volunteer experience that will let them learn some of the skills of the contemporary workplace, build their public service resume, and connect them with other adults who can support their college plans. These experiences can be arranged in the school itself, where students can volunteer in the library, computer center, school offices, tutorial programs, and with other good adult role models. Recruit students as teacher aides or create a [Future Educators’](#) club to give middle school students the experience of helping others to learn. Even if they decide not to become teachers, it encourages college attendance and continuing education. See examples of these clubs from [Revere, MA](#) and [Minnesota](#).
- Set up visitations for the local high school and have high school students showcase their school – giving a kids’ eye view of what to expect and how to succeed. Focus on academics and extracurricular opportunities. Encourage high school students to talk about their post-secondary plans with middle schoolers.
- Engage your faculty in conversations about how to ease the transition from middle school to high school and try some of the best practices that are recommended for successful high school preparation. See the [Southern Regional Education Board](#) material, [On Target: Transitioning from Middle School to High School](#),

# High School – All Grades

## Raising Awareness

- ❑ Orient yourself to the [vital role principals play](#) in getting students ready for college admission and success, especially [creating a culture](#) of college-going in your school and [leadership tools](#) for promoting college as an option for all students.
- ❑ Create a high school level “College Support Team” comprised of teachers, counselors, students, and parents who plan programs, activities and support structures to create a culture of college attendance in the school. Have this team consider supportive activities such as:
  - ✓ Regularly-scheduled events, seminars, meetings and activities designed to help students advance their college preparation and deal with the “nuts and bolts” of college prep.
  - ✓ Regular features in the school newsletter or other public outlet to raise community awareness about getting ready for college, covering college costs, the pay-off for college, and case studies of local students who were successful in college.
  - ✓ Group sessions to talk about the kinds of support that students need to advance their college preparations and to remove barriers to college prep in the school.
  - ✓ Advising sessions on key college preparation activities for each grade level: selecting the right courses, preparing for college admissions testing, exploring financial aid, choosing the right program/college/major, career exploration, etc.
  - ✓ Mentoring programs that match students with adults who can provide advice, information and support for their college goals.
  - ✓ Organized tutoring and test prep programs to help students build necessary skills and strong academic credentials.
- ❑ Make communication with the home and community about college attendance a top priority. Prepare a short presentation for parent groups, local civic organizations, clubs and church groups – anyone who will listen – about the benefits of college attendance and what each group can do to support it.
- ❑ Send reminders to students and parents about strategic times in the college preparation process – selecting courses for the coming year, preparing for admissions testing, financial aid planning deadlines, application cycles, etc. There is nothing like an informed parent supporting the school’s efforts to promote student success.
- ❑ Use faculty meetings to promote the idea of college attendance for all students among the teaching staff and build support for college access and admission. Stories of successful students, data on the “pay off” for post secondary education, and classroom strategies to promote college aspirations are powerful tools building teacher commitment.
- ❑ Make sure each student has a [college action plan](#) that is revised and updated every year.
- ❑ Share the [Parent Checklist](#) from [College Prep 101](#) and engage parents in conversation about what they can do to help prepare their child for college admission and success.

## Relationships

- Create mentorships and other relationships with adults who can support students' college goals. Use teachers, other local post-secondary educated community members, or virtual mentorships, such as [www.aspireoregon.org](http://www.aspireoregon.org), especially designed for Oregon schools, to strengthen the commitment to attend college. Click [here](#) to see what the research says about these programs and how they work.
- Support student affinity groups based on academic, artistic, technological (STEM) or other college-relevant pursuits – such as clubs, competitions, or service groups that bring like-minded students together around common interests and create relationships with adult mentors with specific interest in the field.
- Encourage student mentorships, in which trained, older [HS students serve as guides and mentors](#) to incoming students to model productive high school performance and encourage high aspirations. Students can even create these programs themselves, with help from [Do It.org](http://DoIt.org) or the [National Youth Network](#) from the U.S. Justice Department.
- Seek opportunities for internships that allow students to practice 21<sup>st</sup> Century work skills and establish relationships with adults and organizations that do professional work in the community. (One excellent source of internships is local nonprofit agencies. They always require help, and students often bring new skills and energy the agencies need.)
- Create relationships with local post-secondary institutions so that they are committed to working with your students to prepare for admission and success. Invite speakers, secure materials, and arrange visits to stimulate interest among HS students. College admission and financial aid officers are often very willing and able to speak to student and parent groups. Check out [Resources for Building Partnerships](#), or information about [Early College](#) high school programs, or the [Community College Research Center](#) for information on tech prep and dual enrollment programs.

## Right Courses

- Identify students with skill deficiencies that may keep them from enrolling in the advanced courses they need to prepare for college. Provide assistance to those students. Utilize college-bound high school students as [peer tutors](#) for younger students, thereby providing both academic support and models for college attendance. Get help on setting up programs from [Siuslaw High School](#) (OR), or [Classroom Peer Tutoring](#).
- Educate students and parents about the courses students must take in high school to qualify for college admission and financial aid. Make sure that all students have the prerequisite skills to succeed in those courses. Share with students and parents the [College Board high school planner](#).
- Identify students who need additional help in tough courses, and train students, teachers, volunteers and parents to use online resources, such as [Khan Academy](#), to aid student learning.
- Use interest inventories to begin a systematic analysis of the kinds of interests and skills that might lead to specific [career](#) paths. Provide [career information for teachers](#) that can be

incorporated into their academic classes and link the content to potential careers.

- ❑ Make sure your school offers, and that your students are aware of, courses that will earn college credit in their junior and senior years: [Advanced Placement](#), [International Baccalaureate](#), or [Dual Credit Enrollment Options](#) (Oregon). Some high schools also provide classrooms in which regional colleges and universities can offer courses in the school's community – thereby bringing the classes to the students and others in the community.

### **Relevance**

- ❑ Use age-appropriate interest inventories to begin to identify and explore potential careers and necessary educational preparations with students. [Check out Mapping Your Future](#), [The Princeton Review Career Quiz](#), or the [I Seek Career Explorer](#).
- ❑ Establish an on-going college and career orientation program that encourages students to talk with adults (teachers, librarians, relatives, family members, friends, school guests) about their jobs and the kind of education they needed to do them.
- ❑ Direct students to online activities and resources, such as the [NASA](#) site, which uses virtual field trips, activities and games to explore different career options. Create a school-wide assignment to explore careers and the educational requirements for each, including regional colleges and universities where the preparation can be achieved.

### **Reality of Affordability**

- ❑ Introduce parents and students to information about college costs and financial aid, emphasizing that college is affordable and the pay-off is high. Use age-appropriate materials such as [My Future, My Way](#) or its companion website: [www.federalstudentaid.ed.gov/early](http://www.federalstudentaid.ed.gov/early).
- ❑ Teach parents to use [FAFSA4Caster](#) to find out how much federal aid their child might receive.
- ❑ Routinely provide information about what parents need to do to prepare for college financing. Host “forms nights” at the school or local community centers where school personnel are available to help parents complete necessary financial aid forms.
- ❑ Have students and parents complete the [Financial Aid and Scholarship Wizard](#) from the U. S. Department of Education to identify college costs and sources of aid.

### **Rigor**

- ❑ Engage your faculty in an examination of your school to see how it measures up in terms of creating the “habits of mind” and attitudinal factors that contribute to college success. Use David Conley’s “[What Makes a Student College Ready?](#)” and other work as a springboard for discussion ([Redefining College Readiness](#), [Re-thinking College Readiness](#)).
- ❑ Educate yourself about the kinds of leadership that promotes a rigorous curriculum for all students. See [Rigorous Schools and Classrooms: Leading the Way](#) by Ron Williamson and Barbara Blackburn for detailed information.
- ❑ Engage your faculty in open and frank discussions of [rigor](#), what it [means](#), and how it can be [infused](#) into the school's curriculum.

## 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Grades

- Use interest inventories to begin to identify and explore potential careers and necessary educational preparations with students. [Check out Mapping Your Future](#), [The Princeton Review Career Quiz](#), or the [I Seek Career Explorer](#).
- Encourage – maybe even require – students to identify career options and the education required for each. See the [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) site for information and resources. Also have students check out interactive sites, such as [NASA](#), [Careers in Law Enforcement](#), [Forestry](#), [Medicine and Health](#), [Teaching](#), the [Marine Industry](#), and dozens of others tailored to your community and student body. Just enter the terms “careers in [name of field]” in a search engine, and dozens of resources will pop up.
- Check to see if your school can offer [The PLAN](#), an ACT preparation test, for 10<sup>th</sup> graders. A local corporation or philanthropy may be interested in sponsoring any costs.
- Provide for at least an annual review of each student’s “[My College Plan](#),” to be sure that they are on track for graduation and college admission. Better yet, try to involve parents in the planning as well. This might be the agenda for a break out session at “parent night” or a service offered to local community and church groups.
- Encourage students to participate in [extracurricular](#) or constructive [volunteer](#) and [work](#) activities, not only to strengthen their bonds with good adult role models, but also to build their college resumes.
- Make sure that students and their parents are aware of courses for which they can earn college credit in their junior and senior years. It’s a great way to significantly lower the cost of college attendance and get a head start on degree completion.
- Provide a [transition](#) and orientation program for incoming 9<sup>th</sup> graders to prepare them for the rigors of high school, orient them to the school and its offerings, and intervene early in potential academic problems.
- Remind parents to complete and update their [FAFSA4CASTER](#), and encourage them to look for college support that might be available from their employers, civic organizations, or other sources outside of the school and regular financial aid channels.
- Share the excellent, comprehensive [9<sup>th</sup>](#) and [10<sup>th</sup>](#) grade planning agenda from [College Prep 101](#) with faculty, students and parents and talk with them about what they can do to provide or engage in the recommended opportunities and promote students’ college preparations.

## 11<sup>th</sup> Grade

- Share the excellent, comprehensive [11th](#) grade planning agenda from [College Prep 101](#) with faculty, students and parents and talk with them about what they can do to provide or engage in the recommended opportunities and promote students' college preparations.
- Review your school's guidance and mentor program and the status of 11<sup>th</sup> grade students' mentor relationships to be sure they have the adult guidance they need for making crucial college decisions.
- Provide specific, targeted college and financial aid information events for students and parents. Focus on selecting a college and program, paying for college, and preparing for the admissions process.
- Review each 11<sup>th</sup> grader's "My College Plan" to be sure they are on track for graduation and college admission. The junior year is not too late to fill in gaps in a student's academic or extracurricular record.
- Have students research colleges they are interested in attending and identify their specific admissions requirements, including courses and the [standardized admissions tests](#) they must take.
- Direct students toward [free](#), inexpensive or [online PSAT prep](#) programs and books to help get ready for the PSAT.
- Encourage every 11<sup>th</sup> grader to take the PSAT in the fall and identify areas in which individual students and your 11<sup>th</sup> graders as a group need improvement. Orient 11<sup>th</sup> graders to admissions [testing requirements](#) and test prep programs.
- Encourage students to research schools that interest them and begin to gather material on programs, costs and admission from the schools' websites. If possible, arrange campus visits to a nearby college to give students an orientation to college life. Or, if a visit isn't possible, provide a session on college life that includes graduates of your high school who are currently attending college, [online materials](#), and other guests who have completed college.
- Create a test-prep course for students planning to take the [ACT](#) and [SAT](#).
- Help students register for, prepare for, and take the ACT or SAT in the spring.
- Solicit funding from external donors to help pay the costs for standardized testing for students who are unable to afford it.
- Assist students as they begin to research private scholarship sources.
- Create partnerships with local businesses and non-profit agencies to provide [internships](#) or volunteer opportunities for students.

## 12<sup>th</sup> Grade

- Make sure mentors stay connected with students so they don't slack off and either blow an important course or fail to meet an admissions deadline or requirement.
- Help students find volunteer or internship opportunities to strengthen their applications.
- Continue to assist students with applications for admission, financial aid, and other college-related requirements.
- Create a streamlined process for providing timely teacher and principal recommendations for student applications.
- Create a process for reviewing student admission essays, cover letters and other communications with the colleges.

### September-November

- Help students arrange campus visits to schools in which they are interested. Conduct visits to local/regional schools for students whose parents are unable to assist.
- Make sure students with borderline scores, or those who wish to improve, re-take the SAT or ACT in the fall.
- Have counselors meet with all seniors at the opening of school to assure they are on track for graduation and that they are sticking to "My College Plan."
- Have students make a [list of schools](#) to which they will apply, the application requirements, and all deadlines.
- Explain to students and families how "[early admission](#)" and "[early decision](#)" works if they have found a college they are absolutely certain they want to attend. Make sure they know the deadlines for this program.
- Sponsor "[application](#)" [workshops](#) to help students with their [college applications](#), including developing their resumes and achievements. Help students create portfolios when required by the college.
- Provide a financial aid refresher session; focus on [completing the FAFSA](#) early so it is competitive for all financial aid sources. Have students and parents review information about paying for college – through both [conventional](#) and some [unconventional](#) sources.

### December-February

- Encourage students to [apply to 3 or more schools](#) that interest them – one or two that they're pretty certain will admit them, one that is a little more competitive, and one that is a real stretch. Ask them to describe [why they picked each one](#).
- Help students apply for scholarships offered by the colleges to which they have applied.
- Complete the FAFSA as soon as possible after January 1.
- Help students and parents review their [Student Aid Report \(SAR\)](#) – the summary of information from their FAFSA – for accuracy and completeness.

### **March-May**

- Make sure final high school transcripts are sent to the colleges to which students have applied.
- Help students choose a college and make sure they notify in writing those they decide not to attend.
- Help them complete any required forms and make sure they understand the need for required deposits, etc.

### **Summer**

- Encourage students to get a job to earn money for college expenses. Help with placements if possible.
- Help students and parents review orientation materials from the chosen college – especially for first-generation college students.
- Provide students with information on what they can and should [bring to college](#) if they are living on campus.

### **After They Have Begun College Career**

- Stay in touch with graduates while they are in college. They may be a great source of help in preparing your current students for college admission and success, and may even be great future employees for your school or community.