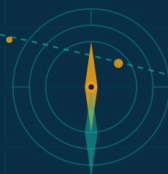


Your Teen's High School & College Admissions Strategy Guide

For ambitious Bay Area families ready to help their teen build a smart, holistic strategy – and a high school experience worthy of everything they're capable of.



FIND YOUR WAY * BY DESIGN
masterplanacademy.org



The teens who achieve their college admissions goals, *and* thrive, aren't necessarily the ones who worked hardest.

They're the ones who had a plan they designed for themselves.

There's a meaningful difference between the experience of a teen who reacts to high school -- *oftentimes this involves scrambling to build a profile senior year, choosing activities based on what looks good, hoping everything comes together in time* -- and the experience of a teen who designs it.

The second teen isn't necessarily smarter or more talented. Often, they didn't even work *harder*. They just started with a clearer picture of who they are, where they want to go, and what they want to build during high school and before college application season arrives.

A plan doesn't remove the hard work. It makes the hard work count for more.

That's what this guide is designed to help you build.

WHAT THIS GUIDE COVERS

- 1 The Landscape**
What the college admissions environment actually looks like for your teen's graduating class -- and what it takes to stand out. A landscape increasingly affected by tech and sheer population growth.
- 2 The Snapshot**
A 5-dimension assessment to help you and your teen identify where you have strong foundations and where there are real opportunities to move closer to your goals. Insights that a GPA or practice SAT score can't give you.
- 3 The Strategy Builder**
A set of questions and planning tools to help your teen begin building a real direction -- before the pressure of senior year hits. Use this to add structure to conversations with your teen and jumpstart planning.
- 4 What Comes Next**
How the Designing High School program takes your teen from these questions to a complete college admissions strategy and high school plan. Get a glimpse of the program and how it can help your teen.

The environment your teen is entering.

College acceptance rates are at **historic lows** -- and the job market your teen is entering is being **reshaped by AI** faster than most families realize. AI is replacing so much entry-level work that, even in technical fields, qualities like **strategic thinking**, ability to tell a **persuasive story** about what you're building, and **interpersonal skills**/social fitness are counting for more.

The teens who stand out in this environment aren't just the ones with the highest grades and test scores. They're the ones who know **what they're building**, can **speak authentically** about it, and have a range of **execution** and **interpersonal skills** to get things done and beneficially impact others.

3.6%

Stanford admission rate

Lowest in university history
Stanford CDS 2024-25

11%

UC Berkeley admission rate

Down from 17% in 2020
UC Berkeley Admissions 2024

300M

Jobs exposed to AI automation

Entry-level law, finance, tech
Goldman Sachs Economics, 2023

The most competitive applicants aren't the ones with the highest numbers. They're the ones with the clearest direction and the most authentic story to tell, paired with the skills to get things done.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOUR TEEN

Credentials aren't enough on their own. Story matters.

Near-perfect grades and strong **test scores** are increasingly **table stakes** at competitive schools -- not differentiators. What distinguishes applicants is **the story** those credentials support. This makes sense if we take the **viewpoint of college admissions officers**. For one thing, admissions officers are people too, and humans (especially those reading thousands of dry applications) **remember a persuasive story** better than another 99th percentile SAT score. Also, each season, they strive to build an **incoming freshman class** filled with students who will both **enrich** each other in **class discussions**, and show the greatest promise of future success. A compelling story can signal both.

Direction matters more than perfection. So do purpose and leadership.

Colleges are explicitly selecting for students who know what they're building and why. A teen with a **clear, authentic direction** -- even if imperfect on paper -- is a **more compelling applicant** than one with impressive numbers, but no coherent narrative. Students with clear **growth** reflected in **meaningful accomplishments** (especially reflecting leadership) they can connect to who they are and a sense of purpose, promise to contribute more to student clubs, research, and other activities outside the classroom. These students **possess a clarity** on what they're **doing in college** that keeps them **moving forward, growing**, and **leading** rather than just taking part. This leads to authentic accomplishments in college and career success that boost the school's reputation (and of course alumni donations).

The window to build that direction is now. The benefits are lower stress and greater creativity.

A **rising 10th or 11th** grader who starts this work today has **two to three years** to build something real. Meanwhile, many rising 12th graders find themselves entering reaction mode. The earlier the strategy, the more it compounds. With **less stress** and more time to **think holistically** and **strategically**, teens can exercise greater **creative control** over their next stage. That sense of creative control is **proven to make** the teen years **happier**, while reducing burnout.

Where does your teen stand?

You can complete this snapshot on your own as a starting point -- or sit down with your teen and work through it together. Either approach works well. There are no right answers. The goal is honest clarity, not a grade.

[] On Track [] In Progress [] Gap Identified

01 STRENGTHS AND DIRECTION

Your teen has a genuine sense of what they're good at, what energizes them, and what kind of impact they want to have -- and can articulate it clearly and with humility.

[☐] On Track	[☒] In Progress	[☐] Gap Identified
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*If a college admissions officer asked your teen 'what makes you uniquely you?' -- could they answer confidently in 60 seconds? Note that this is **not about** having a **perfect answer** OR a **final answer**. It's about having done enough reflection and smart exploration to have come up with a strong working hypothesis, and being able to express it.*

02 CAREER AND MAJOR CLARITY

Your teen has explored real career pathways using actual data on salaries, growth, and required education -- and has a working hypothesis about where they're headed.

[☒] On Track	[☐] In Progress	[☐] Gap Identified
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*Has your teen stress-tested their career interests against real-world information, or are they still working from assumptions or from hopes about an "ideal" future? Having **ideas** that are **backed up** by real **data** gives your teen a menu of options. From the experimental viewpoint of a designer, having solid options means you can **refine** and **update** your plan later. It's an ongoing process.*

03 COLLEGE ADMISSIONS STRATEGY

Your teen has a multi-year plan connecting course choices, activities, and college targets. The approach has been shaped by deliberate strategy rather than by circumstances and timing, and goes deeper than just "take every honors and AP".

[☐] On Track	[☐] In Progress	[☐] Gap Identified
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*Does your teen have a college admissions **strategy** that's genuinely **theirs** -- or has the approach been shaped primarily by what's come up (for example activities friends are doing)? The latter can feel disconnected or random. It's great to try different activities and subjects of course -- that's what helps us grow. But, there's a way to bring together **intentional exploration** with a thoughtful approach to **pursuing the goals** your teen **already has**, that will move them forward strategically.*

Where does your teen stand? (continued)

[] On Track [] In Progress [] Gap Identified

04 EXECUTION SKILLS AND PLANNING SYSTEMS

Your teen has real systems to manage their time and learning efficiently, track goals across different parts of their life, plan out larger objectives over a semester or more, and make consistent progress -- not just good intentions that fade under pressure.

[☐] On Track	[☐] In Progress	[☐] Gap Identified
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*When your teen has a big goal, do they have the skills and a **system** for breaking it down and following through -- or does progress depend on reminders and pressure? If they are on top of things, are stress or perfectionism a problem? Many teens are **ready to tackle their goals systematically** and would like a way to pursue both **success AND balance**. Have they built the skills, including skills for **inner balance** and **social fitness**, to consistently create what they want?*

05 AUTHENTIC ACCOMPLISHMENTS: Building, Serving, Leading

Your teen is building a genuine record of impact in areas they actually care about -- not a resume of activities chosen primarily for how they appear.

The clearest signal: can your teen point to something they built, led, or meaningfully changed -- not just participated in? Think: an initiative they started, a problem they solved for others with a sense of service, a role where their absence would have been felt.

[☐] On Track	[☐] In Progress	[☐] Gap Identified
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*Are your teen's **activities** and **accomplishments** a genuine **reflection of who they are** -- or have they been shaped primarily by what looks good on applications or to others? Oftentimes, when activities and accomplishments are authentic, you can start to see a **clear pattern emerge**. Their **strengths** and **direction** start to **connect**. If they're proactive and socially skilled, they may start to **uncover new opportunities** that fit them. They also have **greater energy**, avoid burnout, and increasingly find themselves leading and serving others.*

INTERPRETING YOUR SNAPSHOT

0-1 gaps: Your teen has a strong foundation. The strategy starter on the next pages will help you sharpen and formalize what's already working.

2-3 gaps: Your teen has real momentum in some areas and meaningful work ahead in others. The strategy starter will help you prioritize where to focus.

4-5 gaps: Your teen is at exactly the right moment to build a real strategy. The work ahead is significant -- and the earlier you start, the more it compounds.

Start building your teen's strategy

Most high schoolers don't yet have a real strategy -- they have a schedule. Work through these questions with your teen. Don't worry about having all the answers -- the questions themselves are the starting point.

A -- THE BIG PICTURE

What does your teen want to build during high school -- and what do they want to be known for?

By the end of high school, my teen wants to have built:

adfdasfadsf

The college or program that might best fit who my teen is becoming:

One career direction (or maybe a couple) my teen is genuinely curious about right now:

One place where my teen could move from participating to leading, building, or solving a real problem for others:

B -- THIS YEAR'S FOCUS

What are the 1-2 most important things your teen could do this school year to make meaningful progress?

GOAL 01 FOR THIS YEAR

What's the first step? Who needs to be involved? What would success look like by the end of this school year?:

GOAL 02 FOR THIS YEAR

What's the first step? Who needs to be involved? What would success look like by the end of this school year?:

TO MAKE ROOM FOR THESE GOALS, MY TEEN SHOULD CONSIDER STOPPING OR DIVERTING TIME/ENERGY AWAY FROM:

(This is all about prioritization. Naming what your teen will protect time/energy from is as important as naming what they'll pursue.)

C -- HONEST QUESTIONS: WHERE ARE YOUR TEEN'S BIGGEST OPPORTUNITIES TO GROW AND MOVE CLOSER TO THEIR GOALS? (check any that apply)

Even the most motivated Bay Area teens can find themselves reacting to high school rather than designing it. Checking these isn't a failure -- it's clarity on where the biggest opportunities to grow are.

☐ My teen seems over-scheduled but doesn't yet have a clear direction tying it together. We could use a clearer sense of what the time and effort they put in are going to add up to.

☐ My teen sometimes chooses activities based mostly on what looks good. They might be happier and go deeper into activities if they based their choices on a mix of genuine interest and strategic advantage.

☐ Our college admissions approach has been shaped to a good extent by outside circumstances/peers (e.g. seeing/hearing what others are doing or hearing generalized advice). My teen and I could use more of a personalized strategy.

☐ My teen works hard but doesn't have the skills or a system for consistent execution. They could use greater organization, a stronger approach to allocating time/energy, and/or stronger abilities in the area of influence, social interaction, and inner balance in the face of pressure.

☒ My teen can't yet clearly express what makes them unique as an applicant. (For example by connecting their accomplishments/things they're building to a sense of purpose and to their individual experience and strengths.)

READING YOUR STRATEGY BUILDER

If the Big Picture fields were hard to fill in -- or you checked two or more of the Honest Questions -- that's not a sign your teen is behind. It's a sign you're asking the right questions at the right moment.

The families who get the most out of Designing High School are the ones who arrive with exactly this kind of clarity about where the biggest opportunities to accelerate progress are. The program is built to help your teen make the most of them -- systematically, before the pressure hits.

What comes next.

HOW DESIGNING HIGH SCHOOL FITS INTO YOUR BIG PICTURE

You and your teen have the ambition. The drive to get into a college that genuinely fits and creates real opportunities. But also, to find a direction that excites them and plays to their strengths. To build a high school story worthy of everything they're capable of -- by design, not by accident. What's often missing is the holistic picture that connects those ambitions, and a real system for designing the path there.



Most college prep -- including private counseling -- addresses one piece of that picture, and often too late. School counselors are stretched, sometimes across hundreds of students, and rarely have the bandwidth to help your teen build a personalized, proactive strategy. Private admissions counseling, unless you're spending at the \$20-30k level, typically engages senior year -- building a narrative after the high school years have already done the shaping. By then, the most important strategic window to shape your teen's path has passed.

Designing High School is the layer that changes that equation. Your teen builds a holistic view of what they want -- for college, for career, for the kind of person they're becoming. They develop a real integrated strategy. And they acquire the planning tools and execution skills to follow through on it themselves.

This is the highest-leverage investment you can make in your teen's high school years. The one that makes everything else pay off.

What your teen builds here.

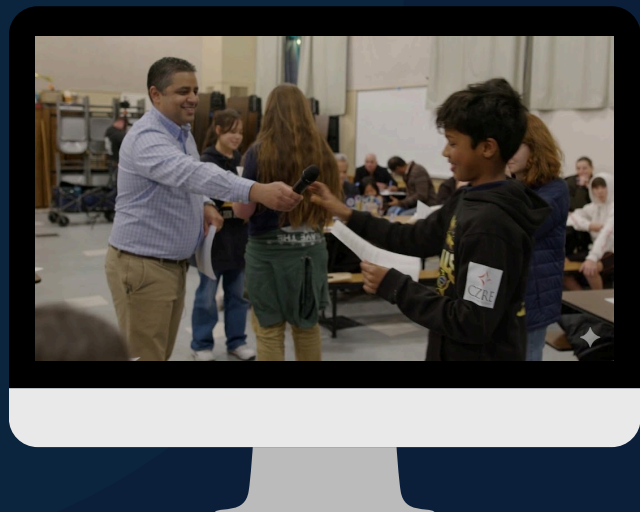
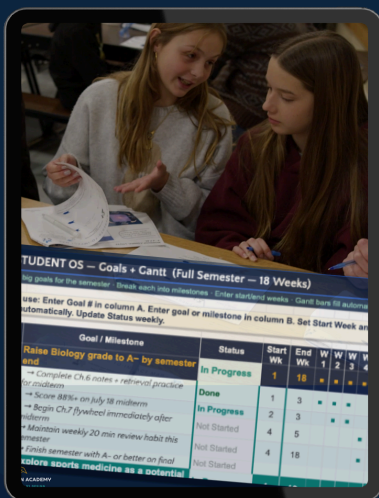
This guide was designed to surface the questions that matter most -- and most families who work through it find two or three dimensions where genuine clarity is still missing. That clarity is a huge opportunity.

Designing High School is where those questions get answered -- not by an advisor working backwards from your teen's senior year profile, but by your teen themselves, building forward from who they actually are.

DESIGNING HIGH SCHOOL -- WHAT TEENS BUILD HERE

An 8-week, online program in a small, intentional cohort of 8-12 self-driven Bay Area teens -- built for ambitious 10th and 11th graders who are ready to build a smart, holistic college admissions strategy and plan for high school, and want peers who are doing the same.

- **A clear, authentic personal narrative** -- your teen develops the strategic clarity to articulate who they are and what they're building, from the inside out, before the pressure hits. The foundation for powerful essays.
- **A real college admissions strategy** -- a multi-year plan connecting course choices, activities, and college + major targets, built around your teen's strengths and direction rather than assembled at the last minute



- **Career and major clarity built on real data and real prototypes** -- your teen doesn't just research potential futures, they model and test them using AI research tools, so the direction they choose is one they've actually stress-tested
- **A complete execution system** -- the Student OS and AI-powered learning and research habits high performers run on, supported by targeted skills in financial literacy, inner balance, and social fitness -- because sustainable execution requires more than a good calendar
- **A Multi-Year Academic and Activity Plan** -- a living strategic map that gives every course choice, activity, and opportunity a clear purpose, so nothing your teen does is wasted
- **A personal strategy presentation** -- their complete plan, built and presented by them, ready to power conversations with family, counselors, and mentors long after the program ends

ENROLL YOUR STUDENT IN DESIGNING HIGH SCHOOL

If working through this guide surfaced questions your teen can't yet answer -- about direction, about what they're building, about what makes them distinctly them -- you've uncovered a major key to their progress. They're exactly what this program is designed to address. The families who benefit most are the ones who start before they feel ready. There's still time to shape what comes next.

**Ready to build your teen's strategy? Book a Free 20-Min Call:
calendly.com/neil-dandavati/mpa-parent-teen-discovery-call**

ABOUT YOUR INSTRUCTOR



Neil Dandavati is the founder and lead instructor of Master Plan Academy. Unlike most academic coaches, his background spans teaching, consulting, technology, and government -- giving him a uniquely practical lens on what strategic thinking, career planning, and real-world execution actually look like across fields. He has built college, career, and technology curriculum that has reached 2,000+ students, and holds degrees from Harvard University and UC Berkeley.

The result is a program built not just by an educator, but by someone who has operated at the intersection of strategy, technology, and real-world execution -- and knows how to teach it.

Cohort limited to 8-12 students -- Begins August 22, 2026 -- Priority Pricing through June 30

Want to learn more first? masterplanacademy.org/designing-high-school

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