

10 tips for thriving in high school — from those who've come out the other side

Recent college grads share their best advice about what they wish they'd known (and done) in high school.

by: *GreatSchools Staff*

High school students have a lot to think about, from math tests to sports to new social situations — not to mention the big “Where will I go to college?” question on every teen’s mind. We asked recent college graduates to share their perspective: Now that a few years have passed, what do they wish they had known?

Pass along our top 10 high school tips to your son or daughter, and use them as talking points at home to help them survive — and thrive — in high school.

1. Pursue activities that truly interest you.

“If there’s anything I regret, it’s that I never tried to do more during my free time,” explains Bona Kang, who attended UC Berkeley. “I was tempted to join Mathletes but never did because of the general unfavorable status... Later I realized that probably would have been a great experience.”

Don’t make decisions about extracurricular activities based on what other people think or what might look good on an application. Pick something you find interesting and get involved. Evidence of genuine passion and commitment to any activity is one of the most valuable aspects of a college application, and when you do arrive on campus, it will be easier to join an arts group, sports team, or club if you have some previous experience. Student groups are a great way to find your niche early on in college and may even lead to some of your closest friendships and most meaningful experiences.

2. Make the most of high school academics.

Take advantage of the opportunity to form strong relationships with teachers. Even in large classes, a little extra effort goes a long way. “Get to know your teachers... Go talk to them after school or at lunch. They can help you navigate high school and manage the college application process,” suggests Sheryl Linsky, a graduate of the Yale School of Management.

Linsky also advises saving a few of your best essays and projects that might come in handy for applications. “Keep track of the coursework you’re proud of — you never know when you might need a writing sample or an essay topic.” Finally, try to avoid stressful competition with others. Instead, focus on doing your own best work. Linsky says, “Don’t measure your academic success against your friends and classmates. Challenge yourself and dive into things you find interesting!”

3. Work hard in language class.

Many college students have opportunities to study abroad that may be partially or wholly subsidized by a university program, and language fluency can increase your opportunities to explore different parts of the world. Although language classes might seem abstract or boring, the hard work in high school will be worth it later on.

Elise West, a graduate of the Darden Graduate School of Business, learned the hard way. “I dreaded my French classes throughout high school, but then I couldn’t study abroad in all the places I wanted to go... Perhaps if I had taken French class more seriously, I would be fluent now.”

4. Be yourself (Seriously)

This might seem cliché, but there’s a reason why you hear it so much — it’s important! You’ll get the most satisfaction out of high school if you focus on the people and activities that feel right to you, regardless of what seems cool or acceptable at that moment. As Alastair Brown, a Cornell University graduate, explains, “Anyone can do anything with their lives — students should not define themselves by their place in high school.”

The social aspects of high school can be particularly overwhelming, but Megan Fox, a Sonoma State University graduate, encourages high schoolers to try to accept and even embrace those interactions. “Your teenage years are incredibly emotionally charged... I wish somebody had told me to be as present as I could in those moments instead of feeling embarrassed and stressed out.”

5. Think about college early (but don’t let it make you crazy!)

There’s no need to agonize over college the moment you enter high school, but it is important to do everything you can to make a good decision. There are many schools where you can have a wonderful experience, so do your best to narrow it down to a few realistic choices that seem like a good fit. Rather than obsess over every school statistic, take a broader perspective. “Look at colleges that have a variety of things you’re interested in, where the student body seems like people you relate to, and you’ll find your way once you get there,” assures Linsky.

Be sure to think about the aspects that can have a huge impact on your experience, such as size, location, and options for financial aid. Lauren Ryan, a graduate of The George Washington University, explains, “I regret not thinking more about what type of college I wanted! It is much easier to spend three years gradually figuring out what you want than doing it all senior fall... I’m not saying freshmen should study college literature for hours upon hours every week, but it’s important for parents and students to discuss choices early.”

6. Take practice standardized tests

The SATs and ACTs are an important aspect of your college application, and if you study you're much more likely to have higher scores. Sheryl points out that "It's not about innate intelligence — [you can learn to take that test better.](#)"

Check out test prep books from the library and work on a few practice problems or vocabulary words a night, then take a timed practice test every other Sunday. If you've been studying, chances are your scores will start to go up, and you'll be much more prepared and confident when test day rolls around.

7. You don't have to map out your entire future now

High school students face a lot of big decisions, and sometimes it feels like you need to have your college major and career path already figured out by senior year. Sera Herold, a University of San Francisco graduate, says this is not the case. "What many students fail to realize is that you can always change majors or schools — there's no shame in trying something out and deciding it's not for you."

Rather than attempting to plan the next 10 years now, keep your options open and learn as much as you can about what's available to you. "Don't worry if you don't know what you'll want to major in when you get to college," Linsky explains. "It's more important to leave yourself open to new things you never even thought of."

8. Try to see the bigger picture

Even though it might be hard to imagine life beyond high school, it does exist. High school is a wonderful time to make friends, but it's also not your last opportunity to meet people and form close relationships. "A lot of students don't realize that the world is not limited to the people in their friend groups... I regret that I didn't reach out to people who enjoyed different activities and had different opinions. It would have helped me become more open-minded and accepting a lot earlier," explains Kang.

You'll enter a whole new world of people before you know it, so focus less on the social hierarchy of high school and more on getting to know people who interest you — in the end, that will matter much more.

9. Take care of yourself

High school can be exhausting, and it will catch up with you if you don't get enough rest. As Linsky says, "Just because your friends only need six hours of sleep doesn't mean you can survive on that little. You'll learn more and do better if you're well rested." In addition to sleeping enough, eating well and drinking plenty of water can really make a difference.

Finally, whatever you do, don't start smoking! If nothing else, think of how extremely unpleasant it will be to kick the habit when you inevitably try to quit years later.

10. Ask for advice

It's amazing how people will open up, so don't hesitate to ask a teacher, parent, or older student for some tips. Even a brief question can lead to further discussion, and you might make a connection or form a friendship you wouldn't have otherwise. Recognize that some things just have to be learned the hard way — through experience. Ask for advice, think about what other people have to say, and ultimately do your best to make the decisions that are right for you.