Caveat
ACADEMIC SERVICES

FREE · FOR PARENTS OF GRADES 6 TO 8

The Caveat Family Guide to High School

Getting ready for high school in grades 6 to 8, in six chapters. Written for parents, in plain words, with a short list to do at the end of every chapter.

By Marcus Shaw, founder · Caveat Academic Services · November 2026 edition

Contents

1 **The math track**
Why the 8th grade math decision reaches all the way to senior year.

2 **Choosing 9th grade courses**
Honors, world language, electives and the registration form.

3 **Study habits that carry over**
Planners, grade portals and the skills high school assumes.

4 **Activities worth starting early**
Trying things in middle school without overloading the week.

5 **What colleges will and won't see**
Middle school grades, early high school credit and the fresh start.

6 **The summer before 9th grade**
A short summer plan, and the first weeks of high school.

How to use this guide. Read the chapter for where your student is now, then do the short list at the end. Start with chapters 1 and 2 before 9th grade registration, usually between January and March of 8th grade. Parents of 6th and 7th graders: chapters 1, 3 and 4. Every figure and college in this guide is an example, and each college sets its own policies.

CHAPTER 1

The math track

The most important college decision most families make happens in middle school, and it rarely feels like one. The math course your student takes in 8th grade sets how far they can go in math by senior year.

Why math is different

Most high school subjects reset each year. Math does not. Each course builds on the one before, so the starting point decides the finish line. A student who starts high school one course ahead usually stays one course ahead; a student who starts one course behind usually needs a summer course or a doubled-up year to catch up.

The common sequence

Many schools follow some version of this path. Some use integrated math instead, with names like Math 1, Math 2 and Math 3, but the idea is the same.

IF ALGEBRA I IS IN	9TH GRADE	10TH GRADE	11TH GRADE	12TH GRADE
7th grade	Algebra II	Precalculus	Calculus	Advanced math or statistics
8th grade	Geometry	Algebra II	Precalculus	Calculus
9th grade	Algebra I	Geometry	Algebra II	Precalculus or statistics

> Example sequence only. Course names, order and options differ by school and state. Ask your student's school for its own math sequence.

Does my student need calculus?

Many colleges do not require calculus, and most admit plenty of students who never took it. Some highly selective colleges, and many engineering, science and business programs, look for calculus or for the most advanced math a school offers. If your student might want one of those paths, it helps to keep calculus reachable. If not, a strong grade in precalculus or statistics is a fine finish.

THE GOAL IS OPTIONS, NOT SPEED

Pushing a student into a course they are not ready for can backfire. A shaky foundation in algebra shows up again in every later course. The right placement is the most advanced one your student can do well in.

How placement is decided

Schools place students into 8th or 9th grade math in different ways: a grade in the current course, a placement test, a teacher recommendation, or a mix. Ask your student's school three questions this year:

1. How is math placement decided for next year, and when?
2. Is there a placement test or an appeal if we disagree?
3. Will the high school accept a course taken in middle school, and will it appear on the high school transcript?

If your student is a year behind the path you want

There are usually a few ways to catch up, depending on what the school allows:

- A summer course, often geometry, taken through the school or an approved provider.
- Two math courses in the same year, such as geometry with Algebra II.
- Skipping calculus and finishing with a strong statistics or precalculus grade.

Check with the high school before choosing one. Some schools only accept summer courses from certain providers, and colleges see where every course was taken.

Signs of a good fit

- Your student earns steady grades in math without hours of nightly struggle.
- They can explain how they solved a problem, not only get the answer.
- Their current teacher recommends the next level.

Do this now

- [ ] Find out which math course your student will take next year and how that was decided.
- [ ] Ask the high school for its math sequence and write down where your student's path ends.
- [ ] Decide as a family whether calculus should stay reachable.
- [ ] Ask whether there is a placement test or appeal, and its date.
- [ ] Try the math path planner to see each option side by side.

Free tool: The math path planner. Pick when Algebra I happens and see where math can lead by senior year. app.caveatacademic.com/math-path.html

Want someone to handle this part? Your Caveat advisor checks the math placement, builds the four-year plan before 9th grade registration and keeps the math track on course every semester. You approve it.

CHAPTER 2

Choosing 9th grade courses

The 9th grade registration form is usually due in the spring of 8th grade, often after one short parent night. It is the first page of the high school transcript, so it deserves more than one evening.

When it happens

Many high schools hold course registration between January and March for the following fall. Some ask for the form at a parent night; others use an online portal. Ask your student's middle school counselor in the fall of 8th grade for the dates, so the decision is not made on the night itself.

What a 9th grade schedule usually includes

SUBJECT	TYPICAL 9TH GRADE COURSE	CHOICES TO MAKE
English	English 9	Regular or honors
Math	Depends on 8th grade math (chapter 1)	Level and whether calculus stays reachable
Science	Biology or physical science	Regular or honors
Social studies	World history, geography or civics	Regular or honors, if offered
World language	Level I, or level II if started in middle school	Which language, and whether to start now
Electives	One or two	Arts, career and technical courses, PE, clubs for credit

Example schedule only. Each school and state has its own graduation requirements and course names.

Honors or regular?

Honors in 9th grade is a good choice in a subject your student enjoys and does well in. It is not required in every subject. A schedule with honors in one or two strong subjects and regular courses elsewhere is common and sensible. Ask how easy it is to move between levels in the first weeks if a placement is wrong.

Start the world language now

Many colleges expect two years of one world language, and many recommend three or four. Starting in 9th grade, or continuing a language begun in middle school, keeps those years easy to reach.

Changing languages partway through usually means starting over at level I.

Electives with a purpose

Electives are where your student can try a real interest: art, music, computer science, engineering, health sciences, business. One elective that turns into a four-year thread can become the most interesting line on a college application. Ask whether the school offers career pathways that build across all four years.

Questions for the parent night

- What are the graduation requirements, and how many credits does 9th grade usually cover?
- How are students placed into honors, and can they move levels after school starts?
- Which middle school courses count for high school credit?
- Which electives lead into multi-year pathways?
- Does the school offer AP, IB or dual enrollment later, and what do students need to take now to be ready?

LEAVE ROOM IN THE WEEK

A 9th grader is learning a new building, new teachers and a heavier load. Protect sleep, one or two activities and family time. A schedule that works in October is better than an impressive one that falls apart by winter.

Do this now

- [ ] Ask the middle school counselor for the 9th grade registration dates.
- [ ] Get the high school's course catalog and graduation requirements.
- [ ] Pick one or two subjects for honors based on interest and grades.
- [ ] Choose a world language your student can continue for at least two years.
- [ ] Choose one elective that matches a real interest.

Free tool: The 9th grade schedule builder. Check the schedule before registration: core courses, the math path, honors load and a four-year sketch. app.caveatacademic.com/ninth-grade-schedule.html

Want someone to handle this part? Your Caveat advisor reviews the course catalog with your family, drafts the 9th grade schedule and the four-year plan around it, and checks it before the form is due. You sign the form.

CHAPTER 3

Study habits that carry over

High school assumes skills that middle school rarely teaches directly: keeping track of seven classes, planning a week and asking for help before a grade slips. Middle school is the low-stakes place to build them.

Why habits matter more than grades right now

Middle school grades rarely follow a student to college. The habits do. A student who arrives in 9th grade able to plan a week, check their own grades and email a teacher starts high school with an advantage that shows up in every class.

The five habits

HABIT	WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE	START IN
One planner	Every assignment and test written in one place, paper or digital	6th grade
A weekly look ahead	Ten minutes each Sunday to see the week's tests and due dates	6th or 7th grade
Checking the grade portal	The student checks their own grades and missing work, not only the parent	7th grade
Asking for help early	Going to a teacher before a test, not after a low grade	7th grade
Emailing a teacher	A short, polite email with a clear question	8th grade

> Suggested ages only. Every student is different; start where your student is.

Missing work is the early warning

In middle school, most grade drops come from missing or late work rather than from not understanding the material. A weekly check of the grade portal catches it while it is still easy to fix. The goal is for your student to do that check, with you nearby, rather than for you to do it for them.

Hand it over gradually

6TH GRADE	Sit together for the Sunday look ahead. You model it; they write it down.
7TH GRADE	They lead the look ahead and the portal check. You ask questions.
8TH GRADE	They do it alone. You check in once a week and help only when asked.

9TH GRADE	They own it. You hear about it at a weekly check-in.

A short teacher email

Many students have never written one. A simple model helps:

EXAMPLE EMAIL

Hi Ms. Lopez, I was absent on Tuesday and missed the science lab. Could I make it up this week, or is there an alternate assignment? Thank you, Jordan (3rd period)

Sleep, phones and the week

Many sleep experts recommend nine to twelve hours a night for children 6 to 12 and eight to ten hours for teenagers. A phone that charges outside the bedroom is one of the simplest changes a family can make. Protecting a few free evenings each week also matters; a schedule with no slack breaks the first time a big project lands.

> General guidance only. Talk with your pediatrician about your own child's needs.

Do this now

- [ ] Choose one planner with your student, paper or digital, and use it this week.
- [ ] Set a ten-minute Sunday look ahead on the family calendar.
- [ ] Show your student how to check their own grades and missing work.
- [ ] Write a model teacher email together and save it.
- [ ] Pick a spot outside the bedroom where the phone charges at night.

Free tool: The executive function self-check. Sixteen statements for the student and a parent, with results by skill and where to start. app.caveatacademic.com/ef-check.html

Want someone to handle this part? Your Caveat advisor meets with your student every week, builds a pacing plan for every class and sends you a weekly progress report, so the habits stick before high school.

CHAPTER 4

Activities worth starting early

Middle school is the time to try things, not to build a résumé. The activities that matter in high school usually start as something a 12–year-old was curious about.

Explore first

In grades 6 and 7, the goal is breadth: a sport, an instrument, a club, a building project, volunteering with family. Most will not last, and that is the point. Your student is learning what they look forward to.

Watch for what sticks

By 8th grade, a few activities usually stand out. Signs of a keeper:

- Your student does it without being reminded.
- They talk about it at dinner.
- They want to get better at it, not only show up.
- They would be disappointed if it stopped.

Those are the activities worth carrying into high school, where colleges look for commitment, growth and responsibility over time.

Avoid the overload

A full calendar in middle school can crowd out sleep, homework and free time, and it often leads to burnout by 10th grade. Two or three regular activities is plenty for most students. Leave at least a few evenings a week open.

Summers

SUMMER IDEA	COST	WHAT IT BUILDS
Reading widely, by choice	Free or library	Vocabulary, focus, curiosity
A camp or class in a real interest	Varies	Skill and a test of the interest
Volunteering with family	Free	Responsibility and community
A small project: a garden, a website, a business	Low	Initiative
Rest	Free	Everything else

> Colleges do not expect expensive summer programs. Many strong applicants spent their summers on jobs, family responsibilities or projects of their own.

What carries into high school

Applications usually ask about activities from 9th grade on. An activity that started earlier still counts if your student keeps going: four years of high school robotics that began with a 7th grade club reads as long commitment. Middle school is where those threads start.

FAMILY RESPONSIBILITIES COUNT

Caring for younger siblings, helping with a family business or translating for a relative are real responsibilities. In high school, they belong on the activities list.

Do this now

- [ ] List every activity your student has tried in the past year.
- [ ] Ask your student which two they would miss most.
- [ ] Count the free evenings in a typical week.
- [ ] Plan one summer idea from the table above.
- [ ] Start a simple record of activities, dates and hours to keep through high school.

Free tool: The activities planner. See where the depth is, what to build next for your student's grade, and a draft activities list. app.caveatacademic.com/activities-planner.html

Want someone to handle this part? Your Caveat advisor helps your student find the activities worth keeping, balances them with schoolwork in the weekly plan and starts the activities record that colleges will read later.

CHAPTER 5

What colleges will and won't see

Parents of middle schoolers often worry that a hard year in 7th grade will follow their child to college. In most cases it will not. Here is what carries forward and what does not.

Usually not seen

- **Middle school grades.** Most colleges look at the high school transcript, grades 9 through 12.
- **Middle school test scores** from state tests or classroom assessments.
- **Discipline or attendance records** from middle school, in most cases.

Sometimes seen

- **High school courses taken in middle school**, such as Algebra I or a first-year world language. Some districts list them on the high school transcript, with or without the grade; others do not. Ask your district.
- **The math and language path.** Even if the middle school grade is not listed, the course your student reaches by senior year reflects where they started.
- **Activities that began earlier** and continue in high school.

> Policies differ by district, state and college. Ask your student's high school how it records courses taken before 9th grade.

Where middle school grades do matter

Middle school grades are not a college issue, but they can matter for the next step: placement into honors or advanced math, admission to selective or magnet high schools, and some programs that start in 9th grade. Check the requirements for any program your student might want.

The fresh start

For most students, 9th grade is a fresh start on the transcript colleges will read. That makes the transition year important. A strong, steady 9th grade sets a pattern that colleges like to see: grades that hold or rise over four years.

AN UPWARD TREND READS WELL

Colleges often notice the shape of a transcript, not only the average. A student who struggled early and improved steadily tells a good story. So does one who started strong and stayed there.

What to do with a hard middle school year

- Treat it as information: what got in the way, and what would help?
- Fix the habits now, while the stakes are low (chapter 3).
- Choose a 9th grade schedule your student can do well in (chapter 2).
- Leave it behind. It is not on the record colleges read.

Do this now

- [ ] Ask the high school how it records high school courses taken in middle school.
- [ ] Check the entry requirements for any special program your student is considering.
- [ ] Talk with your student about 9th grade as a fresh start.
- [ ] If this year has been hard, name one habit to change before high school.
- [ ] Keep copies of any middle school course that may count for high school credit.

Free tool: The math path planner. See how the math course your student takes now shapes the path colleges will see. app.caveatacademic.com/math-path.html

Want someone to handle this part? Your Caveat advisor checks how your student's middle school courses will be recorded, plans 9th grade around a strong start and tracks the transcript from the first semester.

CHAPTER 6

The summer before 9th grade

The summer before 9th grade does not need to be busy. A little reading, a light math review and a few hours of getting organized are enough to start high school well.

A balanced summer

WEEKS	FOCUS
Early summer	Rest. The year was long.
Middle of summer	Reading by choice, a few hours of math review, one activity or job
Last two weeks	Schedules, supplies, a campus visit and setting up the planner

> An example rhythm. Families with travel, work or caregiving will shape it differently.

A light math review

Math skills fade over the summer more than most subjects. Twenty minutes a few times a week on the course your student just finished keeps them ready for the next one. Many schools post summer review packets; free online practice works too.

Read anything

Reading by choice builds vocabulary and stamina for high school English and history. Graphic novels, sports writing, fantasy series and nonfiction all count. Check whether the high school assigns summer reading, and leave time for it.

Get organized before day one

- Walk the campus, or join the orientation, so the first day is less overwhelming.
- Set up the planner and the Sunday look ahead from chapter 3.
- Make sure your student can log into the school's grade portal and email.
- Agree on how often you will check in about school, and how.

A college course before 9th grade?

Some students take a single online college course the summer before high school, usually in a subject they are strong in. It is not necessary, and it is not right for everyone. A college grade is permanent, and each college decides how that credit counts. If your student is ready for it, it can be a confidence builder.

The first six weeks

WEEK 1	Learn the building, the schedule and each teacher's expectations.
WEEKS 2 TO 3	Start the Sunday look ahead and the weekly portal check.
WEEKS 3 TO 4	Join one or two activities.
WEEKS 5 TO 6	Check grades in every class. If one is slipping, your student emails that teacher now.

THE HANDOFF TO THE COLLEGE GUIDE

Once your student starts 9th grade, The Caveat Family Guide to College picks up with chapter 1, the four-year plan.

Do this now

- [ ] Plan two weeks of real rest at the start of summer.
- [ ] Find a math review packet or free practice for the course just finished.
- [ ] Ask the high school about summer reading and orientation dates.
- [ ] Set up the planner and grade portal login before the first day.
- [ ] Read chapter 1 of The Caveat Family Guide to College before 9th grade starts.

Free tool: Start before 9th grade. What a summer college course before high school involves, and whether it fits your student. app.caveatacademic.com/summer.html

Want someone to handle this part? Your Caveat advisor builds the summer plan, sets up the planner and weekly check-ins before day one, and stays with your student through the first semester of high school.

Caveat
ACADEMIC SERVICES

Rather have someone plan it with you?

Your Caveat advisor checks the math placement, drafts the 9th grade schedule and the four-year plan, and sets up a weekly check-in so your student starts high school organized.

Book a free 20-minute call · caveatacademic.com/book

team@caveatacademic.com · 602.677.6883

Each college decides admission, aid and how credit counts; this guide works from published information and never promises an outcome. All figures, plans and colleges shown are examples. Caveat Academic Services is an independent college preparation company. Read the guide online at app.caveatacademic.com/high-school-guide.html.