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College Bound: What Do Students and Families Need to Know and Do



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College Bound: What Do Students and Families Need to Know and Do

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Overview

Every year, typically in March, posts from proud parents of college-bound students begin to flood social media. These posts often include high school seniors' college choice and intended major, along with a baby picture from their PreK graduation. The posts do not share how the process of choosing a post-graduate pathway to a potential career unfolded. From the perspective of a district leader, I knew the process from a superficial level. As a parent of two high school-age children, I started to wonder what the journey was really like when it's your kid's future at stake.

As an educator and a parent of high school-aged children, I found myself thinking about how much students and families are expected to know about a process that can feel complicated and overwhelming. Families may be deeply invested in their children's futures and still be unfamiliar with particular steps, deadlines, resources, or opportunities. Students may know they want to attend college without yet knowing what they want to study, what kind of environment will help them thrive, or how to evaluate their options. A school's approach to postsecondary planning matters.

I spoke with four college students in September of their freshman year, along with their parents, about their journey to becoming college freshmen. Three students graduated from New York State public high schools (Rockland, Long Island, Westchester), and one graduated from a New York State private high school (an all-girls high school on Staten Island). Three of the students were the first child in the family to attend college; one was the second. Both parents of all four students earned at least a bachelor's degree.

Several themes emerged from the conversations worthy of further exploration. The first is how the decision to attend college emerged. The second is the investment the college process demands. The structure of and embedded opportunities in the school program significantly impacted students and families. Finally, the common and unique influential factors and individual decision-making processes surfaced.

1. Choice: To go or not to go to college?

For each student, the decision to go to college didn't really feel like a decision. All four students had their sights set on college for as far back as they could remember. Ryan relayed, "I'd say I always wanted to go to college. I thought that was the normal thing to do, and I never really thought of it when I was growing up. I never once thought of looking at trades to do after high school."

Abby said, "I always knew that I wanted to go to college, probably because both my parents went to college and they kind of encouraged us to go to college. They encouraged us to be good in school." At Emma's high school graduation, they announce the graduates' names, where they are going to college, and what they intend to study. Alex said, "Maybe like 5 or 6 kids in 110 kids (graduating class size) didn't go to college."

> *In short, college was the pathway without question for the students and the expectation for their high school.*

An interesting twist for Alex was his father's questioning of his choice to go to college. Alex described, "Dad had a conversation with me about not thinking it was a good idea for me to go to college. He was advising me not to go to college because he thinks I think differently than the normal college student." I asked him what that meant, and he elaborated, "He thinks my brain is not for academics, and I'm meant for other things like creating my own things instead of following a path. I think he was trying to open my eyes to other paths that weren't going to college, like working, working with him, or doing other things." This questioning left Alex "on the fence about going to school or not; Mom did not have an opinion. I spoke with my older sister, who said I should go to school. I thought, why would I listen to them and not just do what I want to do? It's my decision." He elaborated, "I said to Mom and Dad, I definitely want to go to school for one year and feel it out. If I decide I want to study something or find something I want to do in the future, then I'll really commit and follow that path."

Alex's reflection of that conversation included him saying, "He made me think instead of just following. He made it about me and is this the best step for me?"

This raises an important question:
How much of the college pathway is shaped by individual choice,
and how much is shaped by family, school, and community culture?

2. Investment: What's required?

Yes, of course the students worked hard to land themselves a spot as college freshmen. Emma took the PSAT once, the SAT three times, and the ACT twice. She took an SAT and an ACT prep course recommended by her school counselor. Abbie and Alex had similar experiences taking tests multiple times and prep courses. I asked Abbie what the most challenging part of the process was; she replied, "I'd say probably just working hard to maintain good enough grades to get into good enough schools. I always felt like I had to work really hard in school to obtain those grades. And I also felt it was a little difficult to write this piece because I never really considered myself a strong writer. So it was a little bit challenging."

The pathway to becoming a college freshman required financial investment by the families, including but not limited to:

- ✓ Traveling expenses to visit schools, some with multiple visits to the same school;
- ✓ Hiring someone to do the FAFSA, with a long-term contract including annual reapplication;
- ✓ Paying a private contractor to support completion of the Common App and essay writing;
- ✓ Traveling expenses and registration costs for internships/conferences;
- ✓ PSAT, ACT and SAT fees; and
- ✓ Prep course fees and tutors.

The families invested not only financially, but also in other ways throughout the process.

Emma's mother put together a spreadsheet, "I wrote down every bit of important data from each school like the tuition, scholarship, program notes, proximity to home, etc." She elaborated, "We were trying to check all the boxes and find which school it was that we thought was the best fit. And Matt and I ultimately wanted to make her happy. Scranton, I thought, was probably the best for the location. It was only two hours from home. They gave her very generous merit scholarships. I just couldn't get Emma to connect to it."

Ryan's mother said, "If you want to know more of his journey, his mother took him on his journey. He really had no idea what he wanted to study. He always knew he wanted to go to college. Money was a factor, so we looked at state schools." His mother applied to Sienna for him without him knowing.

Abbie's family found, encouraged, and paid for her to fly to Florida for a national conference as a high school junior.

Alex and Abbie's fathers completed the FAFSA for them.

Families also accessed available resources. Almost every student said they relied on a parent for support with their essay. Abbie knew she could ask one of her parents for help with the essay because "they are pretty good at writing." Alex said, "Personally, I went to my friend's mom, who is a high school English teacher along with my teacher, and she helped me." Ryan's mother, Dianne, accessed multiple friends and family members for different supports, including filling out the FAFSA and guidance through the process.

The process requires students and families to invest time, finances, resources, and emotional energy in the college process.

3. School Program: How does it impact the journey?

Differences in high school experience and preparation pathways affected stress levels for students and families. The private school on Staten Island was the most supportive. In addition to a school counselor, the school had a college counselor and junior college counselor.

Emma described, "Every year since freshman year we had a meeting, and then my junior year we had multiple meetings throughout the year with my college guidance counselor. So I remember my freshman year they were kind of just talking about the basics about the College Board." In her junior year, a once-a-week college prep course took place during school hours. She described, "In the beginning, they showed us how to create and write a resume; they showed us the College Board, and then we had time to brainstorm ideas for our essay, and then we had time to write the essay, too. And then junior year also, everyone in our grade had a meeting with the college guidance counselor and our parents were invited, and she just recommended a few colleges to us based on our majors, and she went over that."

The family from Staten Island indicated a milestone event was a parent-child-counselor meeting in April of junior year. The parent indicated, "She (the counselor) helped us set up things because there were a lot of steps. She really held their hands throughout this whole process. She's really amazing. She's well known out here (on Staten Island) because she goes above and beyond. She gets to know each girl personally, and Emma said that at the meeting we had with her last year, she knew Emma enough to say, 'Hey, I know she wants to do this major (nursing). I know her grades. This is how she did on her SAT. Here's about five to ten schools that I think would be perfect for her.' And she knew about our family. 'You have four kids. Matt is a retired firefighter; these are the schools that you have the best shot of getting merit scholarships from.' They also advised on the FAFSA."

Alex's counselor also had an important junior-year meeting with him and his parents. Alex's mother said, "His counselor was amazing. She met with us in the spring of junior year. Joe, Alex, and I met in person at the school. She set up a timeline for us." Alex said, "She discussed where I wanted to go to school, what I was looking for in a school, the size of the school I wanted, and how to apply; she went over the Common App, she went over my brag sheets, she went over with me how to get my letters of recommendation."



For schools that rely on the annual large-group parent meeting with the counselor in the spring of junior year, it may not provide enough support, even for well-resourced, college-educated families. This certainly was the case for Ryan. As per his mother, "Spring of junior year, you go to this meeting and the counselors are there and they tell you that you have to fill out a FAFSA and they have a panel. They gave us a booklet. It was just very overwhelming. People were asking questions about the colleges or talking about the essays, and we did get a checklist. Then my friend, who is a counselor in another district, came over and calmed me down. She said he should start his essay (spring of junior year). A friend of mine at work came over and sat down and filled it (FAFSA) out with me." The common sentiment for Ryan and his mother about their school's process was that they told them what to do but not how to do it.

For Ryan, "I felt like the guidance counselor would just say the same thing. Fill that out, and that was it. Never how." However, for Alex, "Any questions went to my counselor. Especially for the Common App. I would email or call or go see her, and she was readily available and always able to help with what I needed or answer my questions or my parents' questions." The process was very much two-way for Alex. "She reached out to me about due dates and when things had to be finished, like brag sheets and activity sheets for the Common App."

Several students had summer workshops going into senior year. At Emma's one-day summer workshop, they finalized the Common App. Abbie's school ran a two half-day summer workshop, "And I don't know how long they've been doing it, but it's a really good course. On the first day, it's more structured, but on the second day there is more choice. It's like literally they just have every counselor, every teacher at tables, and if you want to work on your extracurriculars or your essay or anything like that, you just go from table to table, and they just work with you." They worked on the Common App, finalizing their essays and supplementals.

Emma is the first of four children in the family. Her mother said, "I have to say her school made the process easier for us." I asked if, without the school's guidance, would you have known what to do. She replied, "I don't think I would have. And our next child goes to a different high school. They don't do this process as they did at Emma's. I've already been told that we're pretty much on our own and she's a junior now. So at least I have an idea of what we have to do."

Families clearly played a significant role, but their experiences also depended heavily on what the school provided programmatically with post-secondary planning. The level of structure and access to counseling varied considerably across the four students with significant impact on each student and family journey.

Three additional important components of the school program include the course selection process, experiential learning, and career exploration:

Course Selection

I was surprised that none of the students talked about counselors working with them during the course selection process, either encouraging electives on new topics or connecting courses they are good at and topics they are interested in with their core sequences and/or electives. Emma said, "I mean, you definitely could choose; there's definitely a good amount of options. I know there are engineering classes, architecture classes, and art classes. So if whoever was interested in those, they definitely had different places they could go to explore those. I feel like she (counselor) saw what I was more focused on, and she kind of just encouraged me to keep going with that." Alex indicated, "I remember thinking what would look good when applying to a school, so I took Project Lead the Way courses." As per Alex's mother, "she (counselor) had input when you thought you wanted PT and you were choosing your science for senior year."

Course selection is an annual process; an embedded opportunity for counselors to connect with students and support the direction of the learning opportunities and experiences. Counselors should capitalize on course selection as an opportunity to check in with students about their post-graduate plans and provide guidance through recommendations, including course pathways and electives.

Experiential Learning

Both of the nursing majors engaged in experiential learning opportunities. The student from Staten Island's school counselor recommended she intern at a hospital. The counselor guided her through the application process, and several students from the private high school engaged in the internship. Emma indicated the meeting with the counselor when the internship was recommended was a milestone in the college planning process. Abbie attended a national student leader conference the summer between her junior and senior year at the University of Miami for a health and medicine program to "see if that's something I wanted to do." After attending the conference, there was no doubt where Abbie wanted to enroll.

Experiential learning can support a student's decision about a major they are thinking about and/or a school they want to attend.

Career Exploration: I was curious about what high schools were doing with career exploration. Emma said she attended a career panel, "where these people who work at the hospital were just talking about their experience and answering questions from the audience." Ryan took a class called Careers in 9th grade and did not recall doing any career exploration. Abby recalled attending a few career fairs. "I did go more towards health science-related booths, but I did also explore some others I never really would have thought of. I heard some engineering people talk and some more like architecture people should be more math oriented, but they weren't as much of interest to me as something in the medical field."

Exposure to industries outside of the student's personal experiences is an important component in the post-secondary planning process.

4. Influential Factors and Decision Making: What does it come down to?

Both Emma and Abbie were looking for a quality nursing program with direct entry to nursing. Abbie said it was about "how good the programs were and how good of a fit I think I would have been there. Fit was based on location and how I thought I would fit in academically. I judged that by where my GPA and my SAT scores fit in within their different ranges." In reality, once Abbie finished the national student leader conference at the University of Miami, she knew she wanted to study nursing there, and as long as she was accepted, that is where she was going. Emma wanted to be in the New England area, a few hours away from her home in Staten Island, a college bigger than her high school, close to the beach, with sororities and football life. In her words, "the full college experience." One factor I was surprised to learn influenced Emma was TikTok. Emma said, "Before we saw each of the schools, if we had the tour booked, I would look on TikTok before just to see what people had to say about the school."

Unlike Emma and Abbie, who both knew they wanted to be nurses, Ryan and Alex started their freshman year as undecided majors. In our conversations, both of them brought up finances. Ryan's mother said, "I was looking at price tags on things, and then the reason why he ended up at Sienna was because my sister-in-law kept saying, 'Why don't you look at Sienna' and I said I can't afford it. It's $70,000, and his grades weren't the strongest. So when I heard merit, I thought it was because you only get money for really high grades or something like that. So, I was hesitant, so that's why we were really only looking at the state schools because I was going by the affordability factor.

Then at a track meet, Ryan's mother ran into a woman who loved Sienna and said, "Why doesn't he apply?" She replied, "I can't afford it." But the woman explained, "They give you money. There's other scholarships." So, when Ryan applied, it ended up being close to $10,000 difference than what he would have paid at a state school. He went from paying $60,000 or $70,000 a year to $34,000 a year.

Alex's family was planning on moving to North Carolina and he said, "I think we can get in-state tuition and I didn't want to invest fully in something I wasn't completely 100% sure of." His mother added, "We told him if he wanted to go to school he had to go in North Carolina."

Each student applied to multiple schools. Each student took advantage of the SUNY free application week and visited their selected school. The sorting process was easier for some than others.

One of the meetings in early junior year with the college counselor included a sorting of the schools Emma was interested in and/or had visited and put them into reach, target and safety schools. They added colleges to the list for her to consider. In the end, Emma's mother said, "I was trying to help Emma make a decision because she struggled big time. She didn't decide until April 30th and May 1st is the deadline. You have to decide by then. So yeah, we were just kind of like eliminating."

Abbie's mother said, "She always wanted to go to the University of Miami." Abbie said, "I mean I was only really besides that, probably considering two other schools more seriously. I didn't think I was going to get into it because it was more competitive. I knew after the conference that is where I wanted to go."

Alex said, "I looked at North Carolina schools and got a feel for which ones I feel like I could fit into. I applied to 7 schools and I scheduled 3-4 tours. In my final decision, those were the only ones I really thought about." He further explained, "The first thing I looked at was the acceptance rate. I thought I knew what I wanted to do but that did not influence my selection that much. I was thinking about PT, some schools had PT programs."

What students were looking for in their schools varied and impacted where they decided to apply. Once applications were underway, the process became less about completing tasks and more about making decisions, determining fit, affordability, program options and strength, and personal preference.



Summary

The conversations that informed this article suggest that navigating the path to college involves far more than completing applications and meeting deadlines. The decision to attend college, the investment required to pursue that goal, the structure and opportunities provided by the high school, and the individual influences that shape decision-making are interconnected. Together, these factors influence how students and families understand, experience, and navigate the college-going process.

The decision to attend college begins long before students submit applications. While college-bound students may place expectations for success on themselves, parents should also be aware of their conscious and subconscious expectations and their family's definition of success for their child. These expectations can shape students' aspirations, academic choices, and perceptions of what is possible.

The decision develops over time through experiences, relationships, opportunities, and the messages students receive about their future. For many students, these formalized decisions begin taking shape during their first year of high school, when they start establishing academic habits, selecting courses, and forming ideas about who they are as students and what they might become. Although these early decisions may not be intentional, they can influence the opportunities available to them later.

The college process also requires a substantial investment from students and their families. Parents are called upon to provide social and emotional guidance, technical assistance, and financial and time commitments throughout the postsecondary planning process. Families may need to expand and/or capitalize on their networks, seek information, identify resources, and learn to navigate unfamiliar systems to support their children's college aspirations.

Students and parents must balance the practical demands of the process with the emotional weight of making decisions about the future. If college-educated, well-resourced families from high-achieving high schools sometimes find the process overwhelming and stressful, what might the experience look like for families without the same resources, familiarity, or support networks? This question underscores the importance of examining not only students' aspirations but also the resources and circumstances that enable them to pursue those aspirations.

The structure of the high school program and the opportunities embedded within it can significantly shape this experience. The rigor and organization of postsecondary planning, the accessibility and quality of school counseling, and the availability of individualized guidance influence how prepared students and families feel to navigate the process. Schools can reduce uncertainty and stress by establishing a clear, intentional, four-year postsecondary planning program that begins in freshman year. Students and families should receive an overview of the steps, expectations, and timelines ahead, with opportunities to revisit and refine their plans as students' interests and goals evolve. Each student should have regular individual meetings with a school counselor that extend beyond course selection and address academic progress, career interests, and postsecondary goals.

Career exploration should be an integral part of this process rather than an optional experience that students must discover or pursue independently. Career fairs, industry panels, internships, job-shadowing experiences, and hands-on opportunities can expose students to professions they may not otherwise encounter. Similarly, thoughtful course selection can help students explore areas of interest, strengthen skills, and discover new possibilities. Because graduation requirements and core academic courses can limit the availability of electives, students and counselors should consider how course choices can support existing interests while introducing students to unfamiliar subjects and fields.

The college application process itself also benefits from clear structures and early preparation. By the spring of junior year, students and families should have access to guidance that helps them understand application requirements, develop a realistic timeline, and identify the tasks that can be completed before senior year.

Summer workshops can provide dedicated time to organize materials, begin applications, and address outstanding requirements. With much of the preparation completed before senior year, students can devote that year to refining their college lists, submitting applications, evaluating acceptance offers, visiting campuses, and making informed decisions. Such a structure does not eliminate every challenge, but it can make the process more manageable and help ensure that students' opportunities are not determined solely by their families' ability to navigate the process.

Although students and families share common experiences, the influences shaping individual college decisions are not the same. The conversations revealed the importance of family expectations, school-based support, personal interests, extracurricular experiences, and access to information and resources.

Students' decisions are shaped by the opportunities available to them, the people who influence them, and the futures they can imagine for themselves. Family members may provide encouragement and guidance, but their familiarity with particular careers and educational pathways can also shape the options students consider. When students have limited exposure to professions beyond those represented in their immediate families and communities, their understanding of what is possible may be correspondingly narrow.

For example, a student who does not know a scientist personally may not envision studying chemistry or physics in college, even after taking those subjects in high school. The student may associate those disciplines primarily with teaching rather than recognize the range of careers they can lead to. Although Abbie and Emma knew they wanted to become nurses, nursing represents a familiar and readily understood career for many students. Other fields may be less visible and require more intentional exposure before students can imagine themselves pursuing them. These examples illustrate why career exploration is critical: students cannot meaningfully evaluate options they do not know exist.

Experiences outside the classroom also contribute to students' developing interests and identities. Athletics, school clubs, part-time employment, volunteering, and other activities can help students discover their strengths, develop skills, and learn what they enjoy. Participation in Science Olympiad or a robotics club, for instance, may deepen a student's interest in a science-related field, while employment in different industries can introduce students to unfamiliar roles and working environments.

Parents can support these experiences by encouraging exploration, providing transportation, helping cover associated costs when possible, and making time for their children's interests. Schools can complement this support by ensuring that opportunities are accessible and by helping students recognize how their experiences connect to their evolving goals. The significance of these activities extends beyond strengthening a college application; they can also help students better understand themselves and the possibilities available to them.

Recommendations

The conversations explored in this piece highlight the importance of beginning postsecondary planning early, recognizing the investment required of families, strengthening the structures and opportunities provided by schools, and acknowledging the unique influences that shape each student's decision-making process.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the college-going process is best understood as a collaborative and evolving process shaped by students, families, and schools.

The primary participants—the student, parent or parents, and high school counselor—bring different perspectives, responsibilities, and resources to the process. Their contributions, however, are not always equally available or balanced.

Some families have the knowledge, time, financial means, and professional networks to supplement school-based guidance, while others may depend more heavily on the support provided by the school. Similarly, students differ in their interests, experiences, confidence, and understanding of postsecondary opportunities. These differences help explain why a process that appears straightforward for some may be confusing, stressful, or inaccessible for others.

Schools have a responsibility that extends beyond providing information about colleges and application requirements. They must help students and families understand how to navigate the process, when to complete important tasks, where to access assistance, and how to evaluate the options available to them. There is a meaningful difference between telling families what to do and helping them understand how to do it.

Effective postsecondary planning requires structure, predictable timelines, accessible counseling, individualized guidance, and opportunities for students to explore careers and educational pathways before they are expected to make consequential decisions. When these supports are inconsistent or absent, students may have to rely on family resources or personal networks to fill the gaps, potentially reinforcing differences in access to information and opportunity.

Ultimately, a young person is making a decision that may significantly influence their educational and professional future. Although that decision is consequential, students should not be expected to make it in isolation or without adequate preparation. They need parents who can provide guidance and encouragement, school counselors who can offer knowledgeable and individualized support, and educational environments that expose them to a range of possibilities. They also need opportunities to reflect on their interests, learn from experience, and develop their own understanding of what success means to them.

The goal is not to prescribe a single pathway but to ensure that students have the information, experiences, and support necessary to make thoughtful decisions about their futures.

A more intentional approach to postsecondary planning has the potential to make the process more manageable, more informed, and less dependent on the resources families happen to possess.

It also creates space for students to explore possibilities beyond those immediately familiar to them and to make decisions grounded in a broader understanding of their interests, abilities, and opportunities.

What would it look like if every student and family had access to a clear, intentional, four-year postsecondary planning process, rather than having success depend so heavily on the school, counselor, family network, or financial resources they happen to have?

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The College Journey: What Support Could Look Like

A four-year pathway to help students and families plan, prepare, and make informed decisions.

Freshman Year
Explore and Learn

- Big-picture overview of postsecondary options
- Introduction to career exploration
- Set goals and build awareness

Sophomore Year
Build and Prepare

- Continued career exploration
- Course selection aligned with goals
- Learn about standardized testing
- Family information sessions

Junior Year
Plan and Take Action

- Individual counselor meeting
- Family meeting
- Develop college list
- Take standardized tests
- Work on essays
- Begin financial aid preparation

Summer Before Senior Year
Get Ready

- Complete Common App
- Refine essays
- Request recommendations
- Finalize college list
- Ensure all possible components are completed before August 1

Senior Year
Apply and Transition

- Submit applications
- Complete FAFSA and financial aid forms
- Compare offers and costs
- Visit campuses (if needed)
- Make a decision
- Plan for a successful transition

Ongoing Throughout High School

Student voice | Family support | Counselor access | Career exploration | Financial guidance | Equity and access for all students

Telling Families What vs. Showing Families How

Information is important. Guidance makes the difference.

Telling Families What
General information, but limited support

- Here are the deadlines.
- Here are the forms you need to complete.
- Here are the tests you should take.
- Here is a list of colleges.
- Here is information about financial aid.
- Here are your options.

Families know what needs to be done, but may not understand how to do it.

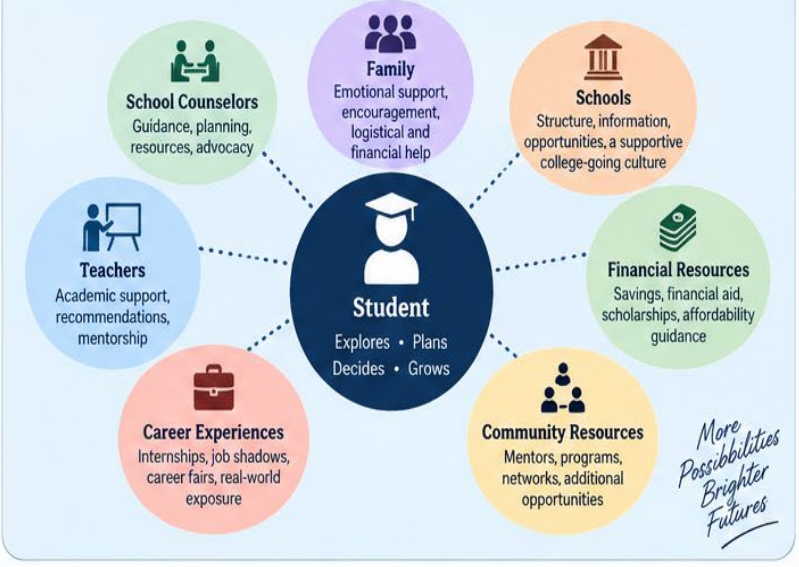
Showing Families How
Hands-on guidance and ongoing support

- Step-by-step explanation of the process
- Help with completing forms and applications
- Individualized counseling and planning
- Opportunities for questions
- Workshops for students and families
- Support with essays, financial aid, and comparing options
- Career exploration and real-world experiences

Families gain the knowledge, skills, and confidence to navigate the process.

Who Supports the Student?

A successful college journey takes a team.



Dr. Tina DeSa is the parent of two high school students and a lifelong educator who began her career as a classroom teacher, and has served as an Elementary Principal, Assistant Superintendent for Pupil Personnel Services, and as Superintendent of Schools. Her leadership efforts advance a whole child philosophy based on student-centered decision making. Throughout her career, she is recognized for her collaborative leadership style, data-informed approach, and ability to build strong, trusting relationships. Her expertise in curriculum development, instructional leadership, strategic planning, and student support services add value to every community she serves.

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