



From Aspirations to Action: The Role of Middle School Parents in Making the Dream of College a Reality

BY ALISA F. CUNNINGHAM, WENDY ERISMAN, PH.D., AND SHANNON M. LOONEY

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From Aspirations to Action: The Role of Middle School Parents in Making the Dream of College a Reality is a major national report by the **Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP)** that examines the crucial stage at which middle school students and their parents must begin to make choices about going to college. Parents of adolescent students are in a unique position to help ensure their children's success in postsecondary education as they could provide early guidance in the relevancy of college to success in life, academic preparation, and high educational aspirations.

Parents of middle school students have high expectations that their children are likely to enroll in college. Unfortunately, some families are not aware of college planning requirements, leaving students at risk of not properly preparing for college. At the same time, many parents do not take the necessary steps to start planning for their children's pathway to college, from gathering information about admissions or the academic curriculum required for college to planning financially for the eventuality of their children's college education. To address these questions, IHEP conducted a national survey of parents of middle school students to ask about their efforts to plan for college. The findings from this survey are grouped into four categories: aspirations, college knowledge and planning, academic preparation, and financial preparation.

Aspirations

Most parents of middle school students are confident that their child is going to college and believe college is very important to their child's future.

- Nearly nine out of 10 (87 percent) of parents expected their child to go to college; less than 1 percent did not.
- Most parents (75 percent) said that a college degree is necessary to get ahead in today's world.
- Parents with higher levels of educational attainment were more likely to expect their child to attend college, while those who did not graduate from high school were less likely to have this expectation and more likely to say that college enrollment would be the child's decision.

College Knowledge and Planning

Middle school students consistently say that their parents are a key source of information about college planning. However, many parents have not yet taken the specific steps that would be necessary for their child to attend college.

- More than 45 percent of parents did not report taking any of the college planning actions asked in the survey. This percentage was even higher for parents who had never attended college.

- More than a third of parents reported having no sources of information on college preparation or admission.
- Less than 20 percent of parents reported taking steps such as researching colleges, meeting with teachers or counselors, and looking into the college admissions process—all critical parts of the college enrollment process.

Academic Preparation

The role of parents is crucial in ensuring that their children are enrolled in a college preparatory curriculum.

- Parents were fairly realistic about when their child should start taking classes to prepare for college, with 66 percent saying in the ninth grade and only about 2 percent saying that classes should start later.
- More than 80 percent of all parents felt that they knew what classes their child needed to take, but the survey did not test whether parents' knowledge was accurate in terms of course requirements.
- In addition, parents with lower levels of education were less confident about what classes their children should take.

Financial Preparation

An important role of parents during the path to college is financial planning. Most parents felt that they should pay for college, with or without the student's help.

- Two-thirds had not started saving, and about a quarter had not taken any financial steps to prepare for college. Of those who have prepared financially, 37 percent reported saving money and 30 percent reported cutting back on spending.
- Overall, 38 percent of parents believed that they have the primary responsibility for paying for college, while 43 percent believed that responsibility was shared with their child.

- Most parents were aware of financial aid in a general sense, but 11 percent could not name any type of aid.
- Parents whose children are most likely to need financial aid were the least likely to be aware of the various forms of aid. For example, parents with bachelor's degrees were significantly more likely to mention Pell Grants than parents with a high school degree or less.

Recommendations

College Knowledge

- Groups that advocate for Latinos, African Americans, low-income families, immigrants, and others should distribute materials that increase college knowledge in all their outreach campaigns.
- Informational materials should target specific populations and take into account special challenges, such as limited English language proficiency and access to the Internet.

Financial Literacy and Saving

- Financial institutions should support financial literacy campaigns that reach diverse public audiences. At the same time, they should target their own clientele by including in all their promotions materials easy-to-read explanations of how to save for college and, perhaps more important, why parents should start saving early.
- Parents of elementary and middle school students should know the details of what it costs to attend area colleges, including tuition, fees, and other potential expenses.

Early Intervention Programs

- Early intervention programs should include career exploration and exercises that help map a student's future, as well as information on academic and financial planning in preparation for college.
- Early intervention programs should be coordinated within each school district or county so they can work together seamlessly and effectively.

Middle and High School

- Schools and counselors must reach out to parents and students to explain which courses are necessary for college and why it is important to plan for college in other ways. Information about college options should be a standard part of any life skills curriculum taught in middle and high school, and schools should offer college planning workshops to parents well before students begin the application process.
- Congress should support the Success in the Middle Act of 2007 (H.R. 3406), recently introduced to offer federal support to improve the education of middle school students in low-performing schools. The act would authorize \$1 billion a year for formula grants to states to provide grants to local school districts. One of the act's mandates for sub-grant recipients would be to inform students about high school graduation and college admissions requirements.

For more information about *From Aspirations to Action: The Role of Middle School Parents in Making the Dream of College a Reality*, please contact IHEP's Research department at research@ihep.org. For reporters seeking media opportunities, please contact IHEP's Communications & Marketing department at communications@ihep.org.

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INSTITUTE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY
1320 19th Street, NW, Suite 400
Washington, DC 20036

202 861 8223 **TELEPHONE**
202 861 9307 **FACSIMILE**
www.ihep.org **WEB**

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12061 Bluemont Way
Reston, VA 20190
www.salliemae.org **WEB**