Middle School

- ❑ One of the most helpful strategies for highly mobile military children is to plan two years in advance. By doing so, you will build time into your schedule to make any necessary changes that may arise. As an example, in the spring of your 8th grade year, develop your high school four-year plan with a high school counselor. Review the MCEC® Recommended Academic Plan beforehand.
- ❑ Challenge yourself by taking the most rigorous courses you can. Some subjects, particularly math or foreign language, have predetermined sequences, so look ahead and make sure you are keeping your options open for the future.
- ❑ Look into taking high school classes, if possible. If you do, check into end-of-course tests as some schools require not only completion of a course but also a passing grade on an end-of-course test in order to award credit.
- ❑ Explore rigorous programs, such as AVID and IB programs, as well as pre-AP courses.
- ❑ Begin discussing and planning for college expenses with parents and counselors.
- ❑ Tests become more common now. Every time you take a standardized test, discuss the results with your counselor. Add all test scores and any test information to your portfolio.
- ❑ Build a solid base for both academics and extracurricular activities - what you do in high school directly impacts where you can go to college.
- ❑ Consider participating in the *Junior Student 2 Student*™ (JS2S) program sponsored by MCEC® (if available).
- ❑ Investigate taking the SAT and ACT for practice only. Scores from these tests can be used to qualify for certain scholarships and recognitions, such as the Duke Talent Identification Program.
- ❑ During summers, attend camps of interest at local colleges. You'll not only have fun but will also get a taste of life at that college.
- ❑ See summer school as an opportunity to fulfill requirements, explore a new subject, or build a stronger base in core subjects.

Freshman Year

- ❑ If you can, visit your high school before classes begin. If visiting in person is not an option, check to see if the school has a website or *Student 2 Student*™ program so you can make a connection before classes start. You'll feel more comfortable the first day if you already have the lay of the land.
- ❑ Finalize your four-year plan. Make sure to talk about it with your parents.
- ❑ Continue to think two years ahead - what do you want to be doing in your junior year?
- ❑ Get to know your counselor and the counseling office. Lots of information and resources will be available to you there.
- ❑ Know your course descriptions.
- ❑ If you have not already done so, complete Algebra I. Studies have found students who take rigorous math courses throughout high school have better grades in high school and college and higher rates of college acceptance and graduation.
- ❑ Take your PE requirement to ensure it won't be an obstacle later.
- ❑ Does the state you currently live in or have plans to move to require a state assessment? If yes, when? What is tested? Ask a lot of questions so you can prepare accordingly.
- ❑ Explore end-of-course testing requirements and exit level testing at your school. Inquire about alternatives to these tests if moving poses any problems.
- ❑ Take a practice PSAT and PLAN (pre-ACT) if offered. This will help you be more comfortable with the tests when you take them later.
- ❑ Explore the extracurricular and community organizations open to you. Search out leadership opportunities in the organizations you join.
- ❑ If interested, join JROTC.
- ❑ Also investigate community service opportunities. If you participate, be sure you track your hours - some schools require community service and the information can also be helpful for college applications.
- ❑ Check out the requirements of honorary groups and recognitions such as National Honor Society and *Who's Who Among American High School Students*.
- ❑ Start thinking about college and what you would like to gain from college.
- ❑ Find out how your school computes grade point averages (GPAs) and class ranks. Many scholarship and internship opportunities set specific requirements for one or both of these, so it is important to understand how they are determined.
- ❑ Gather two recommendations. Sources of recommendations can include teachers, counselors, coaches, or club sponsors. Add the recommendations to your portfolio. Keeping it up-to-date will help make transitions less stressful.

Sophomore Year

- ❑ Refer back to MCEC® Recommended Academic Plan to ensure you are taking the right classes at the right time.
- ❑ Meet with your counselor and re-evaluate your four-year plan. Make any needed changes and discuss them with your parents.
- ❑ Start thinking now about your senior year. The choices you make now affect the choices you will have then.
- ❑ Check your Grade Point Average (GPA) – is it where you want it to be? If not, do what you need to do to change it? The GPA college admissions rely on are usually from the first three years of high school.
- ❑ Enroll in Advanced Placement (AP) classes where possible. They are also available online if not offered by your school. Take the AP exam as you may receive college credit if your score meets a college's requirements.
- ❑ Complete Algebra II and/or Geometry.
- ❑ Take the PSAT and/or the PLAN. If you took them before, compare your results to see if any areas need additional study.
- ❑ Prepare for the SAT, SAT II and/or ACT. There are multiple ways to prepare – old exam questions, prep materials in book and computer form, and classes. Decide what will work best for you. Decide when you will take the exam(s) and plan your study time accordingly.
- ❑ Do you have to take state exit exams? Are there end-of-course tests? Continue to ask questions about what is required and add test results and information to your portfolio.
- ❑ If you want to attend a military academy, request materials and start planning now.
- ❑ Investigate careers.
- ❑ Think more about what type of college you plan to attend. Start reading up on various colleges to make sure you are exploring all options.
- ❑ Consider community colleges as an option. Many have excellent student-instructor ratios and teachers who love to teach. Attending a community college can also hold down your college expenses. You may be able to take some community college classes now - check and see.
- ❑ Prepare for college application fees and exam fees. These can add up quickly. There are many options if finances are an issue, so talk with your counselor.
- ❑ If you work, be careful that it does not affect your grades.

Junior Year

All Year

- ❑ Meet with your counselor and double-check your progress on your four-year plan.
- ❑ Continue to take rigorous classes, including AP, AVID, and IB where possible. If you take AP classes, make sure you take the associated AP exams.
- ❑ Continue to take mathematics. Make sure you have completed at least Geometry and Algebra II by the end of the year.
- ❑ Enroll in college courses after checking that the credits will transfer to your potential university.
- ❑ Continue to check out college websites. Begin to request college brochures and catalogs to gather more information.
- ❑ Visit colleges, in person or online. Some high schools offer days off for college visits. Virtual tours are also available for most universities.

Fall

- ❑ Check your GPA for accuracy and determine class rank, if applicable. Gather information on how these are determined in case a move occurs before graduation.
- ❑ Ask if you need to take a high school exit exam. If so, learn what it covers and when it will be administered so you can prepare. If you missed some topics (such as state history) due to moves, ask about waivers or alternatives.
- ❑ Take the PSAT/NMSQT (National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test) - only Junior results can qualify you for scholarships. Use the exam results to highlight any areas that need further study before taking the SAT.
- ❑ When you feel prepared, take the SAT, SAT II, and ACT exams. Sitting for the exams early will allow you to apply for early admission or early decision as well as providing you enough time to retake the exam(s) if desired.
- ❑ Look into Girls/Boys State if interested. Ask your guidance counselor about any other competitive programs offered in your school or area.
- ❑ If you choose to go to a public college or university where your parent is stationed, you should qualify for in-state tuition rates under the Higher Education Opportunity Act. This Act affects all military personnel, their spouses, and their dependent children.
- ❑ If you are applying to a military academy, begin the process.
- ❑ Write a first draft of your resume. Include employment history, volunteer work, classes, and hobbies. Ask a counselor or an English teacher to review it and make suggestions for improvement. See the College Admissions Workbook™ for sample resume templates.
- ❑ Draft your college application essay. Make sure to highlight those issues and experiences that make you special. Ask your counselor or an English teacher to evaluate the essay, then use the feedback to improve it.
- ❑ If you hope to qualify for an athletic scholarship, visit with coaches at your potential college.

Spring

- ❑ Plan to mail your college applications by October. Make a timeline to guarantee all the pieces will be complete by then.
- ❑ Request college admissions materials for early admission. Many colleges have online admissions processes so see if that is an option you have available.
- ❑ Request financial aid information from the colleges you are considering. The high cost of college makes it important to shop for a good deal, just as you would with any other large purchase.
- ❑ Ask about scholarships, grants, and their deadlines. Explore these on your own as well to make sure you know all that are available to you. Then apply to those for which you qualify - why walk away from free money?
- ❑ Some colleges have a limited amount of campus housing. Ask if you need to sign up now.

Summer

- ❑ If you have not taken the SAT, SAT II, and/or the ACT, do so now!
- ❑ If possible, visit colleges. While there, visit the department in which you plan to major and see if you can sit in on any classes.
- ❑ Check to see if auditions are required at any of the colleges you are considering.
- ❑ Ask if any of the colleges you are considering have a summer reading list. If not, keep reading for pleasure.
- ❑ Enroll in college courses after checking that the credits will transfer to your potential university.
- ❑ Plan for the potential purchase of a computer or laptop. Some colleges and disciplines require students to have their own computer and, even if it is not required, it may be helpful to have one.
- ❑ Continue to consider possible careers. If working, get a recommendation from your supervisor.

Senior Year

All Year

- ❑ You've gotten this far - don't let deadlines trip you up now!
- ❑ When you turn 18, register to vote. Also register for the draft, if applicable.

Fall

- ❑ Meet with your counselor and review your four-year plan to make sure you are on track for graduation.
- ❑ Schedule a meeting with your counselor and parents to plan your senior year.
- ❑ Request official transcripts early in the fall. These can sometimes take some time to run.
- ❑ Check if you need to take a high school exit exam. If so, gather all the necessary information so you can prepare.
- ❑ If you scored well on the SAT or ACT, sign up for and take GRE test. The scores are good for five years.
- ❑ Are any college-specific admission tests, auditions, or portfolio submissions required? If so, collect all the needed materials or make the needed appointments.
- ❑ If you are interested in attending a military academy, pay careful attention to deadlines and requirements.
- ❑ Add to your resume and finalize it after asking your counselor or a teacher to review it.
- ❑ Continue to take AP classes - they are available online if your school doesn't offer them.
- ❑ Check when financial aid applications are due.

October

- ❑ If you have not already done so, finalize your college application essay.
- ❑ Complete and mail application to your first choice colleges.
- ❑ Do any of your prospective colleges require an interview? If so, schedule the interview and then prepare with practice interviews. Make sure to highlight your unique experiences.
- ❑ Check your GPA and determine class rank, if applicable (especially if you moved).
- ❑ Continue to take advanced math classes such as Statistics, Pre-Calculus, or Calculus.

November

- ❑ Complete and mail applications to your second choice colleges.
- ❑ Talk about Work Study options with colleges.
- ❑ If interested, ask about ROTC programs.
- ❑ Take your mid-year exams very seriously. Some colleges may want transcripts of your fall semester grades.

December

- ❑ Set up a second meeting with your counselor and parents to check your senior year plans.
- ❑ If you are not satisfied with your SAT, SAT II or ACT scores, there is one more chance now!
- ❑ Early college decisions will begin to come in to students.
- ❑ Check on dual/concurrent enrollment. You may be able to start earning college credits now.
- ❑ Talk with alumni and colleges about fraternities or sororities, if interested.
- ❑ Pay any graduation fees. Untimely payment can hold up transcript and record requests.

January/February

- ❑ Pick up a Free Application For Federal Student Aid, also known as FAFSA.
- ❑ Have your parents file their income tax forms early (Jan/Feb) so all the needed information is available.
- ❑ Check to see if your state has a graduation test. As with other tests, make sure you know the details of the test so you may prepare. If covered topics include ones you missed due to moves, ask for a waiver or alternative options.
- ❑ Get on the waiting list for college housing. Make deposits.

March/April

- ❑ Send official transcripts and GPA to colleges after ensuring their accuracy.
- ❑ Watch for local scholarship deadlines. Continue to apply for scholarships and grants.
- ❑ Register for applicable AP exams.
- ❑ You must be accepted into college by this time in order to be considered for financial aid.

May

- ❑ Take all necessary AP and IB exams. Make sure to check the score required by colleges in which you are interested so you know what is needed to earn college credit.
- ❑ Consider financial aid offers. Ask if any other assistance is available if the costs are still too high - there may be additional options available.
- ❑ Notify colleges of your decision to attend or not to attend their campus. Be timely with both as others may be waiting to hear about the space offered to you.
- ❑ Does your college require you to have a computer and/or other technology? Check college requirements and computer compatibility to make sure you get what you need.
- ❑ Register for any needed college summer camps, such as ROTC, sports, or band.

Summer

- ❑ Prepare for your college freshman year
- ❑ Congratulate yourself on all your hard work!

Parents

While your child is in Middle School…

- ❑ Stay involved in your student's education! Attend parent-teacher conferences with your student, visit the high school counselor to create a high school four-year plan, and begin discussing/planning for college expenses.

Freshman Year…

- ❑ Continue to stay involved in your student's education. If possible, visit the school with your child before classes begin.
- ❑ Get a school calendar to help you keep track of activities at school. Research shows that involved parents help students successfully transition to high school.

Sophomore Year…

- ❑ If possible, fit college visits into family trips. Helping your child find the right collegiate fit will help make the transition to college go smoothly. Talk with your student about how best to cover exam and college application fees.

Junior Year…

- ❑ Meet with your student and student's guidance counselor to make sure all the graduation requirements are being met.

Senior Year…

- ❑ Complete financial aid forms with your child. Use this process as another opportunity to discuss financial arrangements for college. If your child is considering multiple schools, compare the total costs of each school.
- ❑ Talk with your student about the danger of credit card use while in college. Many credit card companies target college students, often pushing high interest cards. Talk seriously about the downside of debt before it accumulates.
- ❑ Celebrate your student's graduation! Make sure your child knows how proud you are!

If You Are Moving...

- ❑ Check the starting date for school.
- ❑ Research school options.
- ❑ Check to see if your present and new school have a *Student 2 Student*™ (S2S) or *Junior Student 2 Student*™ (JS2S) team that can help you prepare to leave and help you find ways to fit into your new school setting.
- ❑ Obtain records.
- ❑ Obtain recommendations from teachers, coaches, and others before you move.
- ❑ Make sure your portfolio is up-to-date.
- ❑ Document volunteer hours and extracurricular activities; obtain any needed verification.
- ❑ Learn about your new home's state tests. Ask about testing schedules and topics so you can prepare. Check SchoolQuest™ at <www.schoolquest.org> and visit the State Education Resources. There is a link to your state's education agency and information about state testing.
- ❑ Take a copy of your transcripts and an explanation of the grading scale.
- ❑ Take your course description guide/booklet.
- ❑ Bring documentation, contact information, and resources for any special programs or activities in which you participate.
- ❑ If you move before or during your senior year, have all of the above plus your class rank, including an explanation of how it was calculated, and all standardized test scores.

CRITICAL:

If you will be moving, be sure to check the start date for your new school. Classes in some school districts start as early as the first week of August. Since many also require that students attend class for a specific number of days, failure to start on time could result in a loss of credit or retention.

Programs to Help You Prepare for College

Structured programs can help you in your quest for rigorous coursework. Institutions of higher education are familiar with these programs, so participation in them can open many doors.

Advanced Placement Courses and Exams

Advanced Placement classes are essentially college courses offered in high school. Many colleges award college credit to those students who take an AP exam and receive a certain score. (Each college makes a determination of the minimum score needed for college credit, so check to see what score the colleges in which you are interested require.) Make sure that you take the AP exams in May if you want to be able to receive college credit.

If your school does not offer AP classes or you are homeschooled, know that AP courses are available online. One source of online AP classes is APEX Learning at <www.apexlearning.com>.

Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID)

The AVID program is focused on helping students who have the potential to succeed in a rigorous academic program but who need some support and help along the way. In the AVID program, students take college preparatory courses and an AVID class which teaches note taking and study skills. Teachers and mentors help students develop an academic plan and discuss how to successfully apply to and pay for college. If you want to learn more about the AVID program and the schools that use the AVID program, visit their website at <www.avid.org>.

International Baccalaureate (IB)

The International Baccalaureate program is composed of a comprehensive curriculum that encourages students to become active learners. IB has several age-specific programs, including the Middle Years Programme (for students age 11-16) and the Diploma Programme (for students age 16-19 years old), and is found in schools all over the world. To learn more about the program and to see a directory of participating schools, see their website at <www.ibo.org>.

SAT and ACT Exams

As part of the college application process, you will be exposed to the alphabet soup of standardized testing. Before you know it, you'll be talking about the SAT, PSAT, SAT Subject Tests (formerly known as SAT II), ACT, and PLAN with ease. Check with the schools you are interested in to see which test or combination of tests they require. Information about the SAT, PSAT, and SAT Subject Tests can be found at <www.collegeboard.org> while information about the ACT and PLAN can be found at <www.act.org>. Both sites list exam dates, allow online registration for exams, and contain loads of other helpful information about higher education and the college application process.

Be aware that there is a fee to take each of these exams. Many districts and schools help provide funding to cover these fees if money is tight; waivers are also available through both testing services if financial eligibility requirements are met.

Selecting a College that is Best for You

The idea of choosing a college can seem overwhelming at first. Breaking the process down into manageable tasks will help you get through it while maintaining your focus on the desired outcome - finding a college that is the best fit for you.

Where Do You Want to Go?

The most important piece of deciding which college is best for you is deciding where you want to go. Based on your goals, what do you want to gain from college? What is most important to you? The answers to those questions will help you discover which college is best for you.

Getting the Lay of the Land - College Guides and Rankings

College guides and rankings can provide you with good overviews of a variety of schools. They can also give you insight into the competitiveness of a college's admissions process and the costs involved with attendance at that college. However, they cannot tell you which college is best for you. Decide on your priorities, and then use the information in guides and rankings to gather the data you need to compare colleges. You can visit your local library or bookstore to browse the many college guides available. Peterson's, one of the most comprehensive college guides, is also available online at <www.petersons.com>. For a list of different rankings, visit <www.sourcebookscollege.com/parents-guide/guideforparents.com-FAQ.html>.

LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

Ask your guidance counselor and at least one teacher to write a recommendation each year. Coaches and club sponsors are also good sources of letters of recommendation.

Campus Tours - See for Yourself

Once you have developed a list of possible schools, it is time to visit them. While there, sit in on a class or two (after checking with the professor) and talk with current students to get a feel for the school.

While in-person visits are helpful, they are not always possible. If you cannot visit a school in person, know that you can take a look at many college campuses without stepping away from your computer. Thousands of campus tours are available online at <www.ecampustours.com>. You can also get the student perspective from afar at <www.studentsreview.com>.

Compare and Contrast

Think about what you liked and didn't like about each school. Be sure to consider the whole picture, all the while keeping in mind the characteristics that are most important to you. Academic opportunities, student life, location, and cost are some of the areas to consider. When looking at cost, make sure you are comparing total costs. Tuition and housing are big ticket items but additional costs, including books, materials, and fees, can add up quickly. Financial aid packages can also vary widely from school to school, so make sure you are comparing apples to apples. There is help available - the College Board has produced the *College Cost & Financial Aid Handbook* to aid your efforts.

Create Your Application Game Plan

Make a list of colleges that represent the range of schools that are realistic for you. The range should include the categories of (1) dream colleges, (2) good prospects, and (3) safety schools. Experts recommend applying to 1-3 schools in each category so you cover the entire range of possibilities. Create a schedule to ensure you have time to complete a strong application; if your time is limited, complete fewer applications so the ones you complete are as sound as possible. Decide if you want to seek early action or early decision and plan accordingly.

For more information on selecting schools and the college application process, see the *College Option Foundation: The Total College Success Program* in the Chart Your Course™ packet.

Students Who have Special Needs

Many colleges offer accommodations for students with special needs. Be sure to tell the college if you have any special needs; some accommodations may require time to arrange so be sure to mention this early.

Paying for College

Creating a strategy to pay for college will have both short-term and long-term implications. It can be easy to focus attention solely on immediate consequences, but also keeping an eye on future issues will allow you to reap the most benefit from your college experience. At the start, fully exploring the total costs of different colleges and the methods of paying for college will give you the information you need to make an informed decision when selecting a school. Down the road, it will also give you the opportunity to graduate with as little debt as possible, which will allow you more options post-college. With tuition and other costs associated with college attendance rising, more and more students are graduating saddled with heavy debt, which limits their choices on decisions as far ranging as career selection, graduate school attendance, and relocation. Make sure that the doors college can open for you are not closed by the limitations of repaying large amounts of debt.

Scholarships and Grants

Scholarships and grants are important pieces of your payment strategy. These are funds that do not have to be repaid, so you get the positive of paying college costs without the negative of increasing debt. Many people mistakenly believe that scholarships and grants are only available to straight "A" students or skilled athletes. This is simply untrue! There are scholarships and grants for students participating in every activity you can imagine (duck calling, anyone?), as well as funds for students from virtually any heritage or background, including military children. Every year millions of dollars in scholarship money go unclaimed, so make sure you explore this option fully. Many websites have links to free scholarship and grant databases, which makes the research simple. Some to explore include <www.fastweb.com> and <www.scholarships.com>.

Financial Aid

The financial aid process is an important and potentially confusing one. Luckily, there are resources to help you make the best decision for your circumstances. The U.S. Department of Education hosts a website that provides an overview to the federal financial aid process, including links to required forms, at <www.studentaid.ed.gov>. Many states and schools also have financial aid available to students.

Saving for College

Another way to cover college expenses without piling up debt is to save for college. Several savings vehicles exist specifically to help families save funds for education. To learn more about 529 plans, Coverdell Education Savings Accounts, UGMA/UTMA Accounts (Uniform Gift to Minors Act/Uniform Transfers to Minors Act), educational savings bonds, and other options, go to <www.savingforcollege.com>.

Residential Tuition

If you choose to go to a public college or university where your parent is stationed, you should qualify for in-state tuition rates under Section 114 of Public Law 110-315 ("Higher Education Opportunity Act") which took effect on 01 July 2009 and affects all military personnel, their spouses, and their dependent children. Acknowledging the mobile lifestyle of military families, many states have extended residential tuition to military children. Check on the states where you are considering attending college as the difference between residential and non-residential tuition rates can be significant.

Another Option: Vocational or Career and Technical Education

Beginning in middle school and continuing through high school, students in most schools can take advantage of vocational classes or career and technical programs. Some of these culminate in a certificate awarded at graduation while others continue through two-year community or technical colleges or four-year colleges. At the high school level, programs can be either integrated into the high school program or located in a separate center geared specifically toward vocational-technical programs. These programs are an important link to both the work place and post-secondary education. Talk with teachers and your guidance counselor to see if your current school has a program that might interest you.

At the high school level, many vocational student organizations exist that allow you to explore your interest in a particular area. These organizations typically provide the opportunity to participate on a local level, choose to take part in local and national competitions, take advantage of leadership opportunities, and meet others. Check with your guidance counselor for the organizations in your school and area.

For more information on vocational education, visit the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Vocational and Adult Education at <www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae>. Also check with your high school and local community colleges to see what they have to offer.

If you aren't sure what career you want to pursue, there are several career and personality assessments that can help you gain some insight. Check out the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, the Strong Interest Inventory, and the Jackson Vocational Interest Survey. You may also want to explore the WorkKeys assessments, a job skills assessment system, at <www.act.org/workkeys>. Talk with your guidance counselor or check online for more information about these and others.

Other Sources of Information

This document may not fully address all your questions or issues. If you require more information, here are some other resources to explore:

- For questions specific to a state's exams or requirements visit Education Resource Center at <www.SchoolQuest.org>.
- To gather information about schools or school districts before a move, visit the MCEC® online education database, SchoolQuest™, at <www.schoolquest.org>.
- You can also check out the MCEC® website at <www.militarychild.org> for more ideas.