



CDS Class of 2026 High School Application Information

Introduction

While applying to high school is new to many eighth-grade families, CDS has many years of experience with the process, as the Class of 2026 will be our 21st graduating class. CDS has an excellent track record of having our students accepted at their schools of choice.

This information is intended as an introduction to the high school search and application process. Starting in August, you will receive regular communication to help you in this process.

CDS has always viewed the high school search and application process as a team effort. **Principal responsibility for the process rests with the eighth-grade students and their parents.** However, CDS has a comprehensive program designed to help your family navigate the high school search and application process. Administrators and faculty experienced in the process are here to support and assist your child and your family. However, they do not “place” your child in a high school. Admission to high school in San Francisco is competitive, and at the end of the day, the high schools themselves determine to whom they will offer admission. The CDS team has relationships with the high schools and our program is well-known and respected.

The CDS high school team consists of:

- High School Transition Counselor, Amanda Richard, amandar@cds-sf.org
- Middle School Director
- Head of School
- Eighth Grade Humanities Teacher
- Seventh/Eighth Grade Math Teacher

Amanda Richard is the point person for the CDS team, so she is the person to contact first if you have questions or concerns. One of the first steps is to arrange a one-on-one meeting to discuss your child, the schools in which your child and family may be interested, and any concerns you may have about the high school search and application process. In addition, Amanda will meet one-on-one with your child to get to know them better.

High School Process Class

In the fall, all eighth graders will participate in a class dedicated to the high school application process. This class is designed to support your child and may include:

- Check-ins with each student about high schools they are interested in, the status of scheduling visits and open houses, application deadlines, etc.
- Discussions about the high school application process designed to provide emotional support for your child as well as guidance for behavior during school visits and interviews (how to be yourself, proper body language, etc.)
- Classroom time dedicated to writing and revising the student components of the application. Using this time wisely has proven to be critical to managing the application process.
- Interview practice

Five Steps to High School

The high school search and application process follows a predictable timeline and can be broken down into five steps:

1. Research Your Options and Prepare for the Process (Now-August)
2. Visit Schools (September-December)
3. Apply (October-January)
4. Wait (January-March)
5. Decide (Mid-March)

Staying on top of the timeline is the best way to minimize stress and maximize your opportunity to schedule visits, tests, auditions, shadow days, open houses, etc. at the schools you are interested in on the dates and times that work for your family.

Step 1. Research Your Options and Prepare for the Process (Now-August)

Take the time now and over the summer to learn about the public, independent (private), faith-based (parochial), and charter school options in San Francisco and the Bay Area. Also, consider boarding school as a possible option.

- This spring and summer, check out the high school websites. Most high school websites have comprehensive and prominently displayed admission sections that answer many questions about the school. As a starting point, we have provided [a list of the websites](#) for many San Francisco and Bay Area independent and parochial schools at the end of this document. This is just a starting point, so please take the time to do your own research.
- Create an organizational system for your family. You will need a way to keep track of all the dates and details involved with this process. Many families have found that a Google doc or sheet works well, as it can be accessed from anywhere. Some families also use a shared Google calendar or a combination of the student's planner and a wall calendar. However, it is necessary that the student be able to access this information from school for use during the high school class, so we highly recommend that at least part of the information be accessible electronically.
- **Make note of the dates when schools begin accepting online inquiries and scheduling visits and open houses, and return to the websites as soon as online inquiries and admission**

schedules open. Many schools begin opening up online inquiries and taking registrations for open houses, visit days, and other admission events in August. **Some events fill up very quickly, so it is important to sign up as early as possible.**

- The San Francisco Unified School District's website is www.sfusd.edu. Several public schools, such as [Lowell](#), Ruth Asawa School of the Arts ([SOTA](#)), [Gateway](#), and [City Arts and Leadership](#), have special admission procedures. Please make sure to visit their websites to familiarize yourself with them.
- If boarding school interests your family, you should visit the website of The Association of Boarding Schools ([TABS](#)). Many boarding schools are happy to schedule a visit with your child on the CDS campus.
- Consider what your family can afford for tuition. Most independent high school tuition is now close to or exceeds \$60,000 a year in the Bay Area; Catholic/parochial school tuition, while less, is still substantial. While independent and Catholic/parochial high schools do have financial aid available, the number of awards is limited.
- Consider location/transportation realities. Some families, particularly those with two or more children, may prefer schools closer to home. Other families are willing to look anywhere in the city or even outside the city at high schools such as The Nueva School on the Peninsula or Marin Academy in San Rafael.
- Begin to think about and plan for standardized testing preparation. Taking a standardized test (SSAT or HSPT) is a skill and most students should be practicing the tips and strategies at a minimum. The best way to prepare for standardized tests is to practice consistently over a long period of time. Summer is an ideal time to begin this practice since it does not compete with the work requirements of the regular school year. (Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, many independent schools have removed the requirement for the SSAT. There has been no decision on testing requirements for the 2025-2026 application cycle.)
- Consider attending sporting, artistic, or summer camp events at the schools you may be interested in attending.

Step 2. Visit Schools (September-December)

Students and families are responsible for signing up for open houses and other admission events, and for arranging student visit/shadow days. Most of this can be done online through each school's website or a common application portal such as Ravenna. **Some events fill up very quickly, so it is important to sign up as early as possible.**

Step 3. Apply (October-January)

The application process for independent and faith-based schools typically consists of these parts:

- **School application**
 - **Demographic information** – Name, address, phone number, etc.
 - **Short answer questions for students** - An example of a typical question might be “If you could meet any person from history, real or fictional, who would it be and why?” Most schools will ask why their particular school is a fit for the student. **This is one of**

the most important questions on the application. The school wants to know that you understand who they are and that you are excited about their program.

- **Personal Statement** – an essay by the student on a specific topic requested by the school. The personal statement is a chance for your child to show the admission committees at the high schools more about who they are or their interests. Think of the personal statement as a chance for your child to speak directly to people wondering what makes them excited, motivated, or proud. This is a chance for the admission committees to hear the student’s voice. It is not a good idea for family members to heavily edit a student’s essay and excessive bragging does not impress the committees. **Use of an AI tool like Chat GPT is strictly prohibited for any writing in an application.**
- **Parent/Guardian Essay** – an essay by the parents/guardians on a specific topic requested by the school. Often, parents/guardians are asked to write a “letter of recommendation” for their child or something else along this theme.
- **Teacher recommendations** – Teacher recommendations are the part of the application that involves CDS teachers. High schools use them as a way to find out what kind of learner your child is, how they contribute in the classroom, and ways in which they differentiate themselves from other students. Independent schools generally request three recommendations: English teacher, Math teacher, and Middle School Director/Counselor. The faith-based schools request one recommendation from the Middle School Director/Counselor. The CDS high school team will manage the recommendation process.
- **Transcripts** – most schools request transcripts for seventh grade and the first semester of eighth grade. The CDS high school team will manage the transcript process.
- **Test scores** from a standardized test, such as the SSAT (for independent and boarding schools) or the High School Placement Test (HSPT) (for Catholic/Parochial schools). These tests are discussed in more detail below. There are many ways to prepare for several of the standardized tests, including test prep books, prep courses, online test prep portals, and individual and group tutoring. (Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, many independent schools have removed the requirement for the SSAT. There has been no decision on testing requirements for the 2025-2026 application cycle.)
- **Student Interview** – the student and parents are responsible for arranging interviews. CDS provides some coaching and practice on how to interview as part of the high school process class.

The application process for San Francisco public schools varies depending on the school. For public non-charter schools such as Balboa, Lincoln, or Mission High School, there is a single San Francisco Unified School District ([SFUSD](#)) application that must be completed. Public charter schools such as [Gateway](#) and [City Arts and Leadership](#) conduct a lottery to select students, so parents must submit a separate application to participate in the lottery. [Lowell](#) and Ruth Asawa School of the Arts ([SOTA](#)) require that the SFUSD application be completed and also have their own applications that must be completed. SOTA typically requires an audition or portfolio as part of the application process. If you think your family will be interested in SOTA, you should begin to think about the required portfolio or audition and consult with Amanda Richard before summer begins. It is challenging to put together a portfolio or audition piece while also managing the regular admission process in the fall. Lowell requires that students take a standardized test that they administer in January.

Step 4. Wait (January to March)

Admission decisions are released in March. From January to March, students should stay focused on school and enjoy eighth grade!

Step 5. Decide (Mid-March)

Once decisions are received, sometimes there are hard choices to be made. This is a time to review everything you know about the schools and to have your child revisit campuses, if necessary or allowed.

Parent and School Responsibilities

Parent Responsibilities

Parents are responsible for:

- Providing stability and support for your child
- Reassuring your child, especially during high-stress times such as testing dates, application deadlines, and decision dates
- Researching school options with your child
- Helping your child make realistic choices
- Arranging visits/shadow days
- Guiding your child in completing applications
- Writing the parent essay for independent and Catholic school applications
- Registering your child for standardized tests and ensuring CDS receives test results for the SSAT, if applicable
- Preparing your child for visits/interviews
- Informing CDS front desk staff and reminding your child to inform their teachers when they will be absent for school visits
- Helping to keep your child organized and on schedule
- Providing timely and accurate information to the CDS high school team
- Providing timely and accurate information to high school admission personnel
- Maintaining confidentiality
- Applying for financial aid if needed
- Being ambassadors for CDS
- Asking for help when needed

CDS High School Team Responsibilities

The CDS high school team is responsible for:

- Providing guidance and support to students and families
- Meeting with parents to explain the application process and helping them set realistic high school choices
- Meeting with all eighth graders to discuss the high school process
- Providing timely information about the high school process

- Establishing relationships with high school admissions personnel
- Visiting high schools and promoting the CDS program and students
- Coordinating teacher recommendations and transcript requests
- Providing information, as needed, to high school admissions personnel
- Advocating for students where appropriate
- Maintaining confidentiality

Standardized Testing

Many independent and faith-based/parochial high schools have historically required that students take a standardized test. During the 2024-2025 admission season, the SSAT was either not required or optional for most schools, and the HSPT was required. We do not yet know what will be required for the 2025-2026 admission season.

The Secondary School Admission Test (SSAT)

As part of the application process, some independent and boarding schools require applicants to take the SSAT, a standardized test developed by The Enrollment Management Association. There are several options for test preparation:

- Every student who registers for the SSAT will have access to the organization's online practice portal.
- There are a number of readily available test prep books, which include practice tests, as well as online test prep resources.
- There are several online testing practice portals available for purchase, such as [Test Innovators](#).
- There are several outside organizations that offer SSAT preparation. CDS is most familiar with One Smart Kid, Nurturing Wisdom, C2, and Tutor Corps, but there are others.
- The test prep strategy is best determined at our individual meeting after the results of the baseline test, if administered, are received.

There are two types of SSAT tests: national tests and flex tests. Students may take more than one national test, but can only take one flex test.

Prior to the pandemic, CDS typically offered the SSAT as a flex test to eighth graders in late October. If offered, only CDS eighth graders participate in this test; it is not open to non-CDS students. Please note that if your child is part of the SMART Program, Breakthrough SF, or A Better Chance, those organizations may also offer a flex test. **Your child can only take one flex test, so please consult with Amanda Richard to determine which test your child should take.** We will provide more information about the CDS SSAT flex test, if needed, in the summer and fall, including the process for requesting special accommodations if your child has a diagnosed learning difference.

Some parents have their child take the national test in addition to the flex test. If parents choose to have their child take the national test, **parents are responsible for registering their child for the national test.** National test dates are not yet available for the upcoming admission season.

The national tests typically fill up quickly and there are only a handful of local test sites.

Registration for national tests usually opens in August. If you are registering your child for a national test, please do so as soon as possible. Choices of dates and test sites, especially for students who need testing accommodations, quickly become limited.

If you do register your child for a national test, **please designate CDS as your child's score advisor and score recipient**, which will enable us to view your child's test scores. Our code is **2378**.

The High School Placement Test (HSPT)

As part of the application process, Catholic/parochial high schools require applicants to take the HSPT, a standardized test developed by Scholastic Testing Service (STS). A few Catholic/parochial schools, such as Stuart Hall High School, will accept either the HSPT or the SSAT, but most Catholic/parochial schools accept only the HSPT. Students may only take the HSPT **once**. You can designate which schools you want to receive the test results.

Like with the SSAT, there are test prep books and online resources as well as outside organizations that offer HSPT preparation. See above for more information on test prep.

Parents are responsible for registering their child for the HSPT. The parochial high schools will post information on their websites, include information in their application, or email applicant families about the processes of registering for the HSPT and requesting special accommodations for diagnosed learning differences. The HSPT is typically held on a Saturday in December. The HSPT typically is offered only once per year.

Frequently Asked Questions

The two most frequently asked questions by parents are:

What do high schools want?

What matters most: Progress reports? Test scores? Essays?

High schools want students **and families** who support the school's mission and for whom the student will be a good fit, academically and socially. While the student is at the forefront of the application process, what parents do and say matters. High schools want families that are easy to work with.

As to what matters most, there is no exact answer to this question. Most schools look at a combination of several factors, including progress reports, recommendations, student interviews, applications and essays, and test scores; however, each school weighs these factors in its own particular way.

We know that the start of the high school search and application process can feel daunting, but we are here to help. We also want to make sure that none of us lose sight of the fact that eighth grade is a wonderful time for your child and your family, and we want your child's culminating year at CDS to be intellectually challenging, memorable – and fun!

Bay Area High Schools
Partial List of San Francisco Bay Area High School Websites

Independent Schools

The Athenian School, <http://www.athenian.org> (Danville)

The Bay School of San Francisco, <http://www.bayschoolsf.org>

Bentley School, <https://www.bentleyschool.org> (Lafayette)

Branson School, <http://www.branson.org> (Ross)

The College Preparatory School, <https://www.college-prep.org> (Oakland)

Crystal Springs Uplands School, <http://www.csus.org> (Hillsborough)

Drew School, <http://www.drewschool.org>

Head-Royce School, <http://www.headroyce.org> (Oakland)

International High School, <http://www.internationalsf.org>

Jewish Community High School, <http://www.jchsofthebay.org/page>

Lick-Wilmerding High School, <http://www.lwhs.org>

Lycee Francais High School, <https://www.lelycee.org>

Marin Academy, <http://www.ma.org> (San Rafael)

Maybeck High School, <https://www.maybeckhs.org/> (Oakland)

The Nueva School, <http://www.nuevaschool.org> (San Mateo)

Proof School, <https://www.proofschool.org/>

San Domenico School, <http://www.sandomenico.org> (San Anselmo)

San Francisco Waldorf High School, <https://www.sfwaldorf.org/high-school>

San Francisco University High School, <http://www.sfuhs.org>

Sterne School, <http://www.sterneschool.org>

The Urban School, <http://www.urbanschool.org>

Faith-Based Schools

Archbishop Riordan High School, <http://www.riordanhs.org>

Convent of the Sacred Heart, <http://www.sacredsf.org> (all-girls)

Immaculate Conception Academy, <http://www.icacademy.org> (all-girls)

Nativity High School, <https://www.nativityhs.org>

Sacred Heart Cathedral Prep, <http://www.shcp.edu/>

St. Ignatius College Preparatory, <http://www.siprep.org>

Stuart Hall High School, <http://www.sacredsf.org> (all-boys)

Public Schools

City Arts and Leadership Academy, <https://es-cat.org/>

Gateway, <http://www.gatewaypublicschools.org/page.cfm?p=350>

Lowell High School, <https://www.sfusd.edu/school/lowell-high-school>

Ruth Asawa SOTA, <https://www.sfusd.edu/school/ruth-asawa-san-francisco-school-arts>

General SFUSD website for all other SFUSD schools, <http://www.sfusd.edu/en/>