Admission accomplished

Top-five tips for success with finding the right city high school

BY MAURICE FRUMKIN

Mention the New York City public high-school admissions process, and you will hear everything from "confusing" and "overwhelming," to "crazy" or "even worse than college admissions." Why is this?

About 10 years ago, the largest citywide school choice process in the nation was created, where middle schoolers can choose from high-school programs throughout New York City. Students are then "matched" to one program on the basis of a number of factors, including school matching eligibility and priorities (different for each school), admissions methods for each program, ranks assigned to students by certain schools on the basis of previous year's academic record, and sometimes other factors, and, of course, seat availability.

Add 700 programs to choose from, and no wonder most families are confused. If you are anything like me, you didn't have to think about this when you were growing up — you just went to your local high school like everyone else.

So what can you do to give yourself the best chance of success? Let me preface this by saying that "success" is a relative term and may be defined differently depending on who you're speaking with. In the context of admissions, I define success as this: you have given yourself every possible chance of your child being matched to a high school where he can flourish and be well-prepared for life after high school — whatever that may bring.

So here are my top five success tips, based on working with hundreds of families and reviewing thousands of high-school applications. Review these with your child, and you will be on your way to success:

• Take action and educate yourself. This is called a choice process for a reason — you have to make choices when applying to high school. But without taking action and arming yourself with the right information, you will likely make poor choices and end up with a result you are not happy with. You will never be an expert, but learning as much as you can, asking questions, attending information sessions and open houses, and finding other trusted sources with information that is reliable will go a long way. Your child's school guidance counselor is a good start. Wherever you get help, do it

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now, so you won't have regrets later.

• Don't do it alone. As with many things in life, success is highly dependent on working with others and getting help. It's never too late, and seldom too early, to gather a team of "advisors." The process is much too complex, so don't think you can be an expert and do it alone. You can't. Everyone knows someone who can help, whether that's your school counselor, a teacher, a neighbor who has been through the process, friends, family, the Department of Education, websites like InsideSchools.org, or other professionals who know the process well.

And don't forget, your child should be a team captain! After all, it's your child's high-school career, not yours. Don't select schools you would have liked to attend or you think will look good to your friends. Remember, empowered students will be much happier once high-school match time comes around. And if your child is happy, you will be, too.

• Don't look back or compare yourself to others. Believe it or not, there are always other students and families who have done less than you have or are starting later than you are. So don't beat yourself up, there is no point. You are simply wasting time and energy and hurting yourself and your child's chances by harping on the past and what others are doing. What's more, not everything you hear will be accurate, so check with your counselor or another expert for the best information possible.

• Stretch yourself and keep all options open. Don't eliminate choices until you have done your research and decided for yourself. Consider as many choices as possible, and don't let someone else decide for you. In this game, any comfortable choices not made may be unavailable later on. Better to choose a less-than-ideal choice now while you can, rather than miss a golden opportunity and be left out in the cold later on.

• It's about fit. I can't tell you how many students I've spoken with who will tell you that School X is the greatest thing since sliced bread, whereas other students wouldn't apply there in a million years. Neither is wrong. Even if your friend or neighbor is telling you, "You simply HAVE to apply to Trendy High School Academy," take ownership of your choices and make the final decisions with your child. They are yours to make, and what's a great fit for one student may be a terrible fit for another. There are plenty of students who are accepted to Trendy HS and hate it, don't fit in, or finish in the bottom of their class when they could have attended Sleeper High School, loved it, and finished at the top of their class.

Bonus tip: Use a system to organize. Whether you have one day left in the admissions process or one year, none of the tips above will do you much good if you are not organized. School visits, open houses, interviews, auditions, fairs, it never seems to end.

For some of you, getting organized may mean using file folders or sticky notes. For others, it may mean using an electronic calendar, or a system provided by your counselor or another expert. Use whatever system helps you organize your materials, your time, your team, and your priorities. Just make sure you and your child are comfortable with the system, since, if neither of you use it, it will do you no good.

Consider these tips and use the time you have wisely. The last thing you want to do is look back and wonder, "What if?" High school is too important.

Maurice Frumkin is president of New York City Admissions Solutions, a Brooklyn-based firm that provides expert advice to families navigating the complex waters of city high-school admissions. Follow him on Facebook at NYCAdmissionsSolutions or on Twitter @NYCHSAdmissions, and sign up for his free weekly video tips at www.nycadmissionssolutions.com.

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