



NAVIGATING THE PATH TO HIGH SCHOOL

A practical roadmap for St. Bartholomew families

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Why I am back this year

Experience changes the advice



One child in the process

Mackenzie is now a junior at St. Thomas Aquinas. Our family has experienced the search, the transition, and the reality after enrollment.

One child approaching it

Dominic is now in fifth grade. I will begin this process again with him next school year, before urgency takes over.

The lesson I would repeat

Start with the child. Give the family time to explore. Treat transportation, cost, activities, school culture, and admission requirements as part of the decision from day one.

Parent perspective + current research

What parents should leave with tonight

Five decisions, not fifty tabs

1

A realistic starting point

What to do in sixth, seventh, or eighth grade

2

A family definition of fit

What your child wants from the experience

3

A manageable school list

Public, Catholic, independent, and magnet options

4

A dated admissions plan

Visits, applications, testing, aid, and decisions

5

A transition strategy

How summer involvement can reduce first-day uncertainty

The first conversation starts with your child

Listen before building the school list

- What do you want high school to feel like?
- Do you picture a large, traditional campus or a smaller community?
- How important are sports, performing arts, clubs, faith, or a specific career pathway?
- How much commuting time can you tolerate every day?
- Where do you feel comfortable asking for help?

Your child may value something different from you. That difference is useful information.



A school should fit the whole family

Use the same questions at every visit

ACADEMICS

Course levels, support, pathways, AP or dual enrollment

COMMUNITY

Faith, student culture, belonging, school size, counseling

EXPERIENCE

Sports, arts, clubs, leadership, traditions, school spirit

LOGISTICS

Commute, busing, pickup, after-school transportation

AFFORDABILITY

Tuition, fees, uniforms, transportation, aid, scholarships

READINESS

Testing, recommendations, portfolio, interview, deadlines

Starting early creates options

Waiting until eighth grade compresses every decision

WHEN YOU START EARLY

- ✓ Visit without pressure and compare school cultures
- ✓ Strengthen grades and study habits before records matter most
- ✓ Plan HSPT, SSAT, or magnet preparation gradually
- ✓ Explore sports, arts, STEM, and summer programs
- ✓ Budget for tuition, transportation, and fees
- ✓ Allow yourself and child the ability to change your mind after real exposure

WHEN YOU START IN EIGHTH GRADE

- Open houses and tests can fall within weeks of one another
- Applications, recommendations, and aid deadlines may overlap
- Families may miss shadow days or scholarship opportunities
- Testing can feel like a crisis instead of one part of the process
- Transportation problems may surface after a favorite emerges
- The child may feel that adults made every decision for them

Sixth grade: awareness without pressure

The goal is curiosity

EXPLORE

Name three possible school types: local public, Catholic or independent, and magnet or career-focused.

OBSERVE

Notice how your child learns, socializes, asks for help, and responds to different group sizes.

EXPOSE

Attend one open house, game, performance, or campus event simply to learn what high school feels like.

ORGANIZE

Create a family folder for school links, questions, transportation notes, and estimated costs.

Avoid turning sixth grade into a four-year admissions campaign. Build familiarity, not anxiety.

Seventh grade: build the short list

This is the ideal exploration year

FALL

Attend open houses. Compare campus scale, student energy, programs, and commute.

WINTER

Review grades and study habits. Identify whether test preparation or academic support would help.

SPRING

Narrow to four to six realistic schools. Ask about summer programs and athletic expectations, if applicable.

SUMMER

Try a camp, clinic, arts intensive, or career program. Begin low-pressure test familiarization if needed.

By the end of seventh grade, families should have a realistic short list and understand each school's admissions process.

Eighth grade: execute the plan

A sample 2026–27 admissions rhythm

SEP

Finalize list; register for visits; academic records will be provided by SBS

OCT

Open houses; shadow days; applications; test registration

NOV

HSPT or school tests; recommendations; early deadlines

DEC

Early action and financial-aid deadlines at some schools

JAN–FEB

Interviews, remaining aid forms, decisions or follow-up

SPRING

Compare offers; confirm transportation; enroll

SUMMER

Orientation, camps, sports, clubs, reading, routines

Dates vary by school. Confirm every requirement on the official admissions page.

Testing is school-specific

Register only after confirming each school’s current rule

Path	Possible requirement	Parent action
Catholic high schools	HSPT or a school entrance and scholarship exam	Confirm whether scores transfer and where the student must test.
Independent schools	SSAT, optional testing, interview, writing, or school records	Check each school. Rutgers Prep publishes SSAT dates and accepts the SAO.
Selective magnet academies	Academic record, admissions assessment, then possible interview	Review current academy requirements and sample questions.
Career magnet campuses	Application plus program-specific interview, audition, or portfolio where applicable	Attend the campus open house and examine the exact major.
Local public school	No admissions exam, based on residency	Ask about course placement, honors criteria, activities, and transition events.

Never assume that one HSPT, one application, or one recommendation satisfies every school.

Official sources: Rutgers Prep admissions; individual Catholic-school admissions pages; Middlesex County Magnet Schools.

Four pathways deserve a fair comparison

Begin broad, then narrow by fit

LOCAL PUBLIC

Residency-based, tuition-free, broad activities and course levels

Start with East Brunswick High School as the baseline option, if appropriate based on current residency.

CATHOLIC

Faith-centered communities with varied sizes, programs, and traditions

Compare diocesan and independent Catholic schools.

INDEPENDENT

Distinct educational models, often with individualized programs and aid

Look closely at culture, admissions, cost, and commute.

MAGNET / CAREER

Tuition-free county programs with specialized pathways and selective processes

Match the student's interests to the exact campus and program.

Catholic schools: close-to-home options

Updated program distinctions for 2026

School	Student experience	Admissions and visit focus
St. Thomas Aquinas, Edison	Coed; Catholic; college and career pathways in business, engineering, nursing, education, health sciences, and law	Ask about application route, placement testing, shadowing, summer arts or athletics, and transportation.
Immaculata, Somerville	Coed; AP Capstone, Marian Scholars, PREPs, arts, athletics	Open houses currently posted for Oct. 14 and Oct. 18, 2026. Confirm HSPT dates and application checklist.
Saint Joseph, Metuchen	All-boys; Brothers of the Sacred Heart; formation program; academics, athletics, clubs, service	Uses an entrance and scholarship exam process. Explore Freshman for a Day and transportation.
Mount Saint Mary Academy, Watchung	All-girls; Sisters of Mercy; 23 AP and 33 honors courses; 50+ activities	Open House Oct. 18, 2026. Entrance tests Nov. 14 or Nov. 22.

Sources: official STA, Immaculata, Saint Joseph, and Mount Saint Mary Academy sites, accessed Sept. 2026.

Catholic schools: additional regional choices

The commute must work after 3:00 p.m., too

School	Student experience	2026–27 admissions note
Union Catholic, Scotch Plains	Coed; six learning levels, strong faith focus, arts, athletics, global initiatives, technology	Current admissions page offers open houses, Viking for a Day, tours, transportation, tuition and aid information.
Saint John Vianney, Holmdel	Coed; Diocese of Trenton; broad academics, athletics, arts, and activities	Open houses Oct. 17 or 22; application due Nov. 4; HSPT Nov. 7, 2026.
Notre Dame, Lawrenceville	Coed; 70+ AP and honors courses, 50+ clubs, 57 athletics teams; 100-acre campus	Early decision deadline Nov. 6; HSPT Nov. 7, 2026 for incoming freshman scholarship consideration.
Trinity Hall, Tinton Falls	All-girls; Catholic tradition; four years of engineering; 64 clubs, sports and activities	Open houses Oct. 3 and Nov. 4, 2026. Review entrance-exam registration and affordability pages.

Sources: official Union Catholic, SJV, Notre Dame, and Trinity Hall sites, accessed Sept. 2026.

Independent schools: evaluate the educational model

Admissions, testing, and tuition policies vary

School	Why families consider it	Confirmed 2026–27 milestones
Rutgers Preparatory School, Somerset	Coed PK–12 independent school; broad academics, arts, athletics, international community	Open house Sept. 26; athletics open house Oct. 21; early action Dec. 10; application deadline Feb. 12. SSAT dates begin Oct. 10.
Ranney School, Tinton Falls	Coed independent school with a mission to know and value every child; broad programs and close faculty relationships	Fall open house is posted for Oct. 10, 2026. Confirm grade-level admissions and financial-aid calendar.

ASK BEFORE YOU APPLY

Is testing required or optional? Which application platform is used? When are aid forms due? What fees sit outside tuition? What transportation exists from East Brunswick, if any?

Sources: official Rutgers Prep and Ranney School admissions pages, accessed Sept. 2026.

The admissions calendar has four separate tracks

A school may use different deadlines for admission, testing, scholarships, and aid

Timing	Visits	Applications	Testing and decisions	Financial aid
NOW–SEPTEMBER	Register for fall open houses, tours, shadow days, and student visits.	STA and Saint Joseph already accept Class of 2031 applications. Several other schools also have live application portals.	Register for any required HSPT, entrance exam, SSAT, interview, audition, or portfolio review.	Gather the prior tax return, W-2s or 1099s, and any documents required by FACTS, Clarity, or the school.
OCTOBER	Most major open houses occur during October. Book alternatives when events overlap.	Submit early when a school links priority review or scholarships to a November deadline.	Use prep courses only after confirming which test the school requires and whether scores transfer.	Diocese of Metuchen aid opens Oct. 1. Ranney aid opens after Nov. 1.
NOVEMBER	Use tours or student visits for schools missed during open-house conflicts.	Several Catholic-school priority or firm deadlines fall in early November.	Most Catholic entrance tests occur in November. Some schools release early decisions soon afterward.	Do not assume the admission application also completes the aid application.
DECEMBER–FEBRUARY	Attend accepted-student events and revisit finalists.	Independent-school early and regular deadlines continue into winter.	Complete interviews and monitor each portal for missing records or recommendations.	Many aid and scholarship deadlines occur before final enrollment decisions.

Planning guide based on official school admissions pages reviewed Sept. 17, 2026.

Admissions dates by school: local Catholic options

Class of 2031 entry for the 2027–28 school year

School	Application and aid	Visit dates	Testing and other deadlines
St. Thomas Aquinas	Application is open now. Priority consideration for first-round admission, scholarships, and Honors goes to November applicants. Diocese aid opens Oct. 1.	Open house: Sun., Oct. 18, 1:00–4:00 p.m.	HSPT is administered in November; select the session in the application. Early-acceptance offers from the summer program must be confirmed by Nov. 1.
Immaculata	Applications accepted year-round. Apply and test during November for strongest merit and Marian Scholars consideration.	Open houses: Wed., Oct. 14, 6:00–9:00 p.m., and Sun., Oct. 18.	HSPT prep registration due Oct. 5; classes Oct. 6–29. HSPT: Nov. 6, 7, or 14 at 8:00 a.m.
Saint Joseph	Class of 2031 application is open. Apply by the school's November priority deadline for academic-scholarship consideration.	Open house: Sun., Oct. 18, 11:30 a.m.–2:00 p.m.; tours and Freshman for a Day are alternatives.	Entrance and Scholarship Exam plus student interview. Confirm the current exam session in the applicant portal.
Mount Saint Mary Academy	Application and financial-aid materials are due Nov. 30.	Open house: Sun., Oct. 18.	Entrance test: Sat., Nov. 14, or Sun., Nov. 22.

Sources: official STA, Immaculata, Saint Joseph, and Mount Saint Mary admissions pages, reviewed Sept. 17, 2026.

Admissions dates by school: regional Catholic options

Treat transportation and after-school pickup as part of the application decision

School	Application	Visit dates	Testing, decisions, and aid
Union Catholic	Online application is available. The school has not posted a complete Class of 2031 deadline calendar on its public admissions pages.	Open houses, Viking for a Day, and tours are offered; register through Ways to Visit.	Confirm the entrance test, scholarship cutoff, and aid deadline directly with Admissions before submitting.
Saint John Vianney	Application deadline: Wed., Nov. 4.	Open house: Sat., Oct. 17, or Thu., Oct. 22.	HSPT: Sat., Nov. 7. Complete tuition-assistance and scholarship steps separately.
Notre Dame	Early Decision application deadline: Fri., Nov. 6.	Tours and visit opportunities are available through Admissions.	HSPT: Sat., Nov. 7, 8:30 a.m.–12:30 p.m. for Early Decision; additional HSPT Sat., Jan. 16, 2027.
Trinity Hall	Application is available online. Confirm the current submission and aid deadlines in the admissions portal.	Open house: Sat., Oct. 3, or Wed., Nov. 4.	Entrance-exam registration is open. Confirm the selected test date on the registration form.

Sources: official Union Catholic, Saint John Vianney, Notre Dame, and Trinity Hall admissions pages, reviewed Sept. 17, 2026.

Admissions dates by school: independent and magnet options

These schools use different applications, testing rules, and timelines

School	Application milestones	Visits	Testing and financial aid
Rutgers Preparatory School	Early Action: Dec. 10. Regular application deadline: Feb. 12.	All-school open house: Sept. 26 at 10:00 a.m.; athletics open house: Oct. 21 at 5:30 p.m.	SSAT dates begin Oct. 10. Confirm score submission and the separate aid calendar.
Ranney School	Application is online through myRanney or the SSAT Standard Application Online.	Fall open house: Sat., Oct. 10 at 9:00 a.m.; private tours are available.	New-family aid deadline: Jan. 15, 2027; aid application opens after Nov. 1. Grade 9 merit scholarships use the admission record and separate scholarship requirements.
Middlesex County Magnet Schools	Apply to the exact campus and career program. Current Class of 2031 district deadlines were not yet clearly posted on the public pages reviewed.	East Brunswick Magnet: Oct. 10, Nov. 19, or Jan. 23. Other campuses publish their own events.	Selective academies may use records, an assessment, and an interview. Career programs may require an interview, audition, or portfolio.

Sources: official Rutgers Prep, Ranney School, and Middlesex County Magnet Schools pages, reviewed Sept. 17, 2026.

Middlesex County magnet schools

Tuition-free career and academy pathways for county residents

1 CHOOSE THE PROGRAM

Start with the career area or academy, not only the school name. Review the courses students take across four years.

2 CONFIRM THE PROCESS

The academies may use grades, an admissions assessment, and an interview. Other programs may use interviews, auditions, or portfolios.

3 ATTEND THE CAMPUS EVENT

Open houses explain majors, equipment, student work, transportation, and program-specific expectations.

Current example	Published information
East Brunswick Magnet open houses	Oct. 10, 10 a.m.–12 p.m.; Nov. 19, 6–8 p.m.; Jan. 23, 10 a.m.–12 p.m.
Selective academy evidence	Woodbridge Academy describes 7th-grade and first-marking-period 8th-grade records, a science/reading/math/writing test, and an interview phase.
Summer exposure	The free Early Career Exploration Institute serves Middlesex County students who completed grade 7 and are entering grade 8.

Sources: Middlesex County Magnet Schools, East Brunswick Magnet School, and Woodbridge Academy official sites.

Magnet options previously discussed

Match interests to the campus and four-year program

Campus	Primary lens for the family conversation
Edison Academy Magnet School	Selective STEM and engineering academy. Confirm Algebra I readiness, current assessment, and interview requirements.
Woodbridge Academy Magnet School	Selective allied health and biomedical sciences academy. Strong fit matters as much as general academic strength.
East Brunswick Magnet School	Career and technical programs, including arts and hands-on pathways. Review each major and any audition or interview.
Piscataway Magnet School	Career and technical programs with academics, athletics, and student activities. Compare exact majors and transportation.
Perth Amboy Magnet School	Career and technical pathways with college and career preparation. Evaluate program sequence and campus commute.

A student applies to a learning experience, not merely to a building.

Keep the local public option in the comparison

The default choice may still be the best fit



ACADEMICS

Compare honors, AP, electives, support, counseling, and course-placement rules.

EXPERIENCE

Review sports, arts, clubs, student leadership, traditions, and the size of the student body.

ACCESS

Transportation and local friendships may make participation easier and family logistics more sustainable.

COST

Tuition-free does not mean cost-free, but it changes the family's financial tradeoffs substantially.

Transportation and affordability can decide the outcome

Test the real weekday, not the map estimate

TRANSPORTATION REALITY

Drive the route at morning and dismissal times. Ask about district busing, school routes, late buses, activity pickups, weather plans, and eligibility for aid in lieu of transportation.

FULL FAMILY COST

Combine tuition with registration, technology, uniforms, lunch, books, transportation, athletics, arts, trips, deposits, and the cost of time away from work due to required participation at some schools.

FINANCIAL AID TIMING

School application and financial-aid deadlines may differ. Ask whether merit awards require a specific test date or early application.

AFTER-SCHOOL ACCESS

A student cannot benefit from clubs, tutoring, rehearsals, or sports if the family is unable manage the return trip. Build this into the decision early.

The summer before high school is part of the transition

Familiarity lowers the first-day burden

MAY-JUNE

Complete enrollment, health, placement, technology, uniform, and transportation tasks.

JUNE-JULY

Explore camps, clinics, summer arts, marching band, strength and conditioning, or bridge programs.

JULY-AUGUST

Complete reading and assignments. Practice the commute and build a realistic routine.

AUGUST

Attend orientation, team meetings, club fairs, parent sessions, and any freshman events.



The goal is not to arrive knowing everyone. The goal is to arrive knowing the place, the routine, and a few familiar faces.

After every visit, score the same six questions

Capture impressions before schools blur together

Question	Student score 1–5	Parent score 1–5	Evidence or concern
I can picture myself belonging here.			
The academic challenge and support feel right.			
I can participate in activities that matter to me.			
The commute and after-school plan are sustainable.			
The total cost works for our family.			
I understand the admissions steps and deadlines.			

Compare the evidence behind the scores. A disagreement opens a useful conversation.

Your next 30 days: A Family Guide

A short plan families can complete

THIS WEEK

Hold the child conversation and select two school categories to explore.

BY OCT. 1

Create the master calendar and register for visits or testing that requires advance booking.

BY OCT. 15

Attend or schedule at least one visit and record transportation and cost questions.

BY OCT. 31

For eighth-graders: finalize applications, recommendations, testing, and aid tasks.

ONGOING

Recheck official admissions pages. Save confirmation emails and deadline receipts.

One evening of organization now can prevent weeks of urgency later.

Official resources

Use school pages as the final authority

St. Bartholomew School school.stbartseb.com/index.html

St. Thomas Aquinas www.stahs.net

Immaculata High School www.immaculatahighschool.org

Saint Joseph High School www.stjoes.org

Mount Saint Mary Academy www.mountsaintmary.org

Rutgers Preparatory School www.rutgersprep.org/admission/how-to-apply

Ranney School www.ranneyschool.org

Union Catholic www.unioncatholic.org

Saint John Vianney www.sjvhs.com/admissions

Notre Dame High School www.ndnj.org

Trinity Hall www.trinityhallnj.org

Middlesex County Magnet Schools www.mcmsnj.net

Information checked September 16, 2026. Dates, tuition, testing, transportation, and admissions policies can change.



QUESTIONS?

The best next step is the one that helps your child understand their options.

Stephanie James

**Any questions post presentation can be sent to:
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