

*presents...*

# 5 Essential Tips to the Transition from Middle School to High School

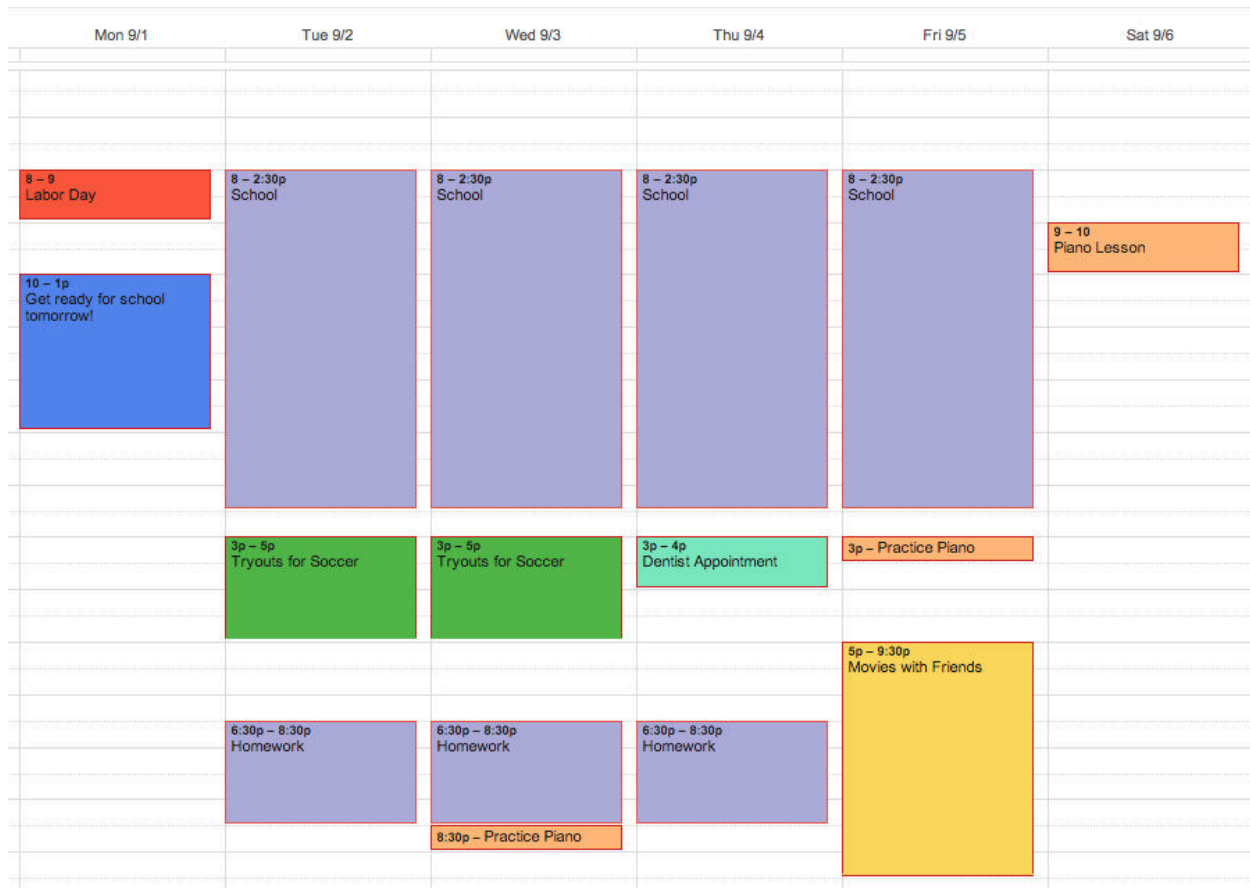
Even when the curriculum in middle school has been rigorous, in high school the expectations get amplified in ways that put students with weak Executive Function skills at risk of falling behind. While the transition from middle school to high school is fraught with tension for many parents and students, **strong Executive Function skills such as time management, planning, focus, and self-assessment are the key to easing that transition.**

During summer, many students develop or solidify those skills for a head start to a successful freshman year. Use this guide as a platform to help prepare for the fall.

# Tip 1: Manage Time

First of all, help your child become mindful of his time and how he is using it. Help him set up his own [Google calendar](#) or large paper calendar and populate it with color-coded chunks of time (i.e, blue for school, green for sports, yellow for social activities, orange for lessons), so he can plan ahead and start thinking beyond the present moment. Show him how to set reminders on his calendar, and to set aside specific times for homework.

Google calendar is also a powerful way to envision time. If your child wants to add another activity to an already packed schedule, take a look at his calendar together and ask “Where will you fit this in? Have you accounted for drive time? How long is this activity?” **This will help build time-management skills that will take him far beyond high school.**



Event color

Reminders

Eventually, your child should *own* his schedule, so that the response to “Mom, when is my soccer practice?” can be “Where can you locate that information yourself? Have you put that activity on your calendar?” **Ofentimes, the best way to build Executive Function skills is to ask leading questions to help your child actively solve a problem.** Sure, it takes longer, but it’s a wise use of time because you are building skills that emphasize independence and accountability. That’s worth investing an extra 5 minutes, right?

## Tip 2: Track Work

Another **essential** part of managing high school demands is using a system of tracking homework assignments. Some students prefer a wirebound paper planner, and many schools offer custom-made planners that account for their particular schedule rotations. Other students prefer to keep everything electronic.

CLASS	MONDAY 10/1	TUESDAY 10/2	WEDNESDAY 10/3
ENGLISH	1 Read pgs. 102-154 Pride & Prejudice	Prepare ¶ on Dan- cy & Elizabeth's relationship See Thurs	2 Study Vocab Proof ¶
MATH	Quiz Chp. 2		Pgs. 56-57, Q. 1-15 Odd
BIOLOGY		Chap. 3 Review Qs 2	1 Study for test
HISTORY	2 Read Chp. 4 Discussion Qs 1-4	3 Discussion Qs 5-10 Start to Study	Prep ¶ - Compare & Contrast 3 Study
SPANISH	2 Prep Oral Pres.	1 Prep Oral Pres.	ORAL PRESENTATION
FREE PERIOD	Meet w/ Spanish teacher to practise present.		Meet w/ Bio Teacher to review
AFTER SCHOOL	Soccer Practice 2:30-4:00	Soccer Practice 2:30-4:00 TUTOR 6:00	Soccer Game 3:00 HOME Buy Snaph Paper



Image on the left: <http://www.keywordpictures.com/keyword/study%20planners/>

Image on the right: <http://istudentpro.com/>

**The particular method is not as critical as establishing the habit of tracking work.** If a student is relying on Facebook or texting friends to find out what the homework is, that’s a clear sign that he is not managing this responsibility effectively. If he is relying on his memory to recall assignments, explain that our brains can hold only a limited amount of information at a time, and most people can’t really hold onto all of those details just from memory.

Some teachers have websites that include a calendar of homework assignments that may be synced to the student’s electronic calendar.

But effective use of a planner does not end with tracking assignments! In fact, the major mistake that we see students make when using a planner is to leave out reminders like

“Study for Latin quiz”, “Bring in permission slip”, “Do test corrections in Math”. Planners are not just for concrete assignments like worksheets, but when used well, they provide clearer details that answer these questions: **What do I need to do for tomorrow, and the week ahead? When will I do it? How long will it take me?**

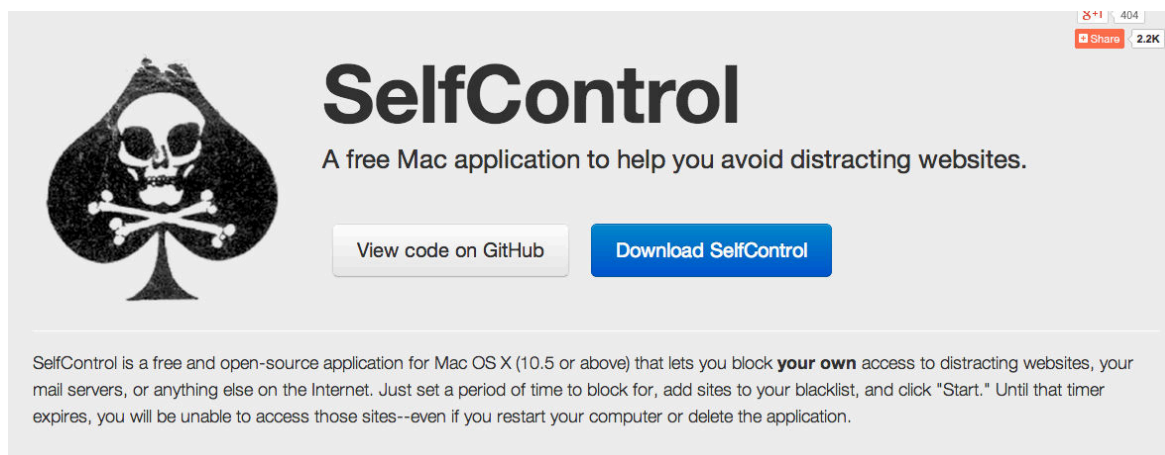
## Tip 3: Manage Distractions

OK, let’s be clear about this. We all struggle at times to manage everyday disruptions. Multitasking is part of the complex fabric of our lives. We drive, eat breakfast, listen to NPR, and have a conversation simultaneously. But schoolwork is a different matter altogether. **Until a student accepts that his time on task is crushed by interruptions via text or Youtube or Facebook or Instagram or Minecraft, he is doomed to late nights and general misery.** There is a high price we pay when rapidly switching attention from one glittery object to the next: deep, (and difficult) analytical thought processes that are needed for quality high school-level work are impeded.

As Executive Function Coaches, we hear parents bemoan 2:00 am bedtimes as a major theme in high school. Those late bedtimes are often a result of ineffective work habits and poor time management. Sometimes high-achieving students seem to compete with each other over how late they stayed up the previous night, which adds peer pressure to the mix. Yet, we know that insufficient sleep impairs learning and decision-making. And we know that it’s not a great precedent to allow a child to be absent from school to make up for sleep. So, what’s a parent to do?

**Stop the cycle of late nights and exhaustion before it can start.** Establish expectations and lights out guidelines and stick with it. A constrained period of time to be productive can be an incredible gift for students as well as adults. Have you ever found that when you have limitless time to do a task it doesn’t get done, or it gets done at the last minute?

**Use tools to manage online distractions.** For mac users, Self Control is a free app that limits access to websites for whatever amount of time you specify. We have seen many students and adults use this tool successfully to maintain productivity while online.



SelfControl is a free and open-source application for Mac OS X (10.5 or above) that lets you block **your own** access to distracting websites, your mail servers, or anything else on the Internet. Just set a period of time to block for, add sites to your blacklist, and click "Start." Until that timer expires, you will be unable to access those sites--even if you restart your computer or delete the application.

There is a version available for PC users, as well (or try Freedom). Why is it effective? Once you click "start" you cannot access blocked sites, even if you restart your computer or try to delete the application altogether. It's a powerful solution to a potent problem.

**Help your child develop a clear understanding of where and how he works best.** In other words, "know thyself." Few students work efficiently in their bedroom; there are too many fun distractions as well as a strong association with rest, relaxation, and downtime. Some students work well in the kitchen or dining room, but for others, the distractions of the family dog or siblings or a TV nearby can be too much. There are students who work best in a quiet group of peers; seeing others attending to their work serves as a cue to maintain their focus. Still others recognize a strong need for solitude and opt for a study room at the local library. Some students and adults are most productive when they are in a public area with some background "buzz", like a coffee shop.

There's no single correct way to work; rather, a willingness to be flexible and experiment with some different options can result in a work zone that's right for the individual. For students who like that "coffee shop" ambience, but can't get to one, the app [Coffitivity](#) provides the sound of a coffee shop to your laptop or other device to help you maintain your focus without the obligation to purchase a latte.



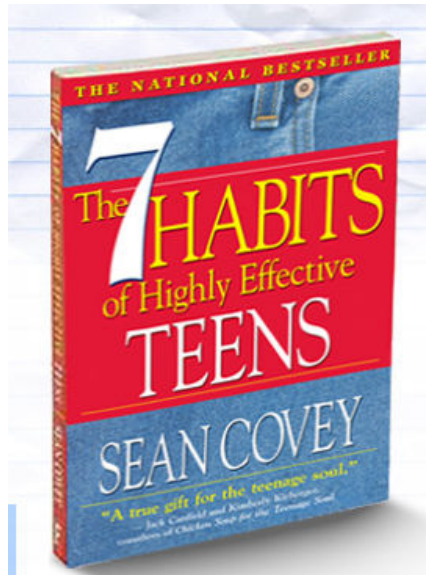
Our coffee shop sounds boost creativity. Check out these FREE tools designed to keep you at your best.

## Tip 4: Build Relationships with Teachers

Unlike middle school, high school instructors often teach more students and don't have as much opportunity to interact with them 1:1. This means students need to take an active approach to stand out from the crowd in a positive way. One of the best explanations about the importance of fostering positive relationships comes from Sean Covey, the author of [The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens](#). He describes a concept he calls The Relationship Bank Account, which "represents the amount of trust and confidence you have in each of your relationships." (Covey 132)

When students see their teachers as individuals and make an effort to connect with them, whether it's through shared interests or just a good question in class, students are more invested in their academic performance. Covey explains that, like a typical bank account, a

person can make withdrawals and deposits in his Relationship Bank Account with anyone. Specifically with teachers, deposits in the account can be related to good classroom behavior, on time homework, and thoughtful participation. When deposits are consistently made, an occasional withdrawal (perhaps an extension on a project, or a redo of a quiz) is not likely to damage the relationship.



Encourage your child to approach these relationships mindfully. Help him set goals for making consistent deposits in his Relationship Bank Account with teachers. **This is even more important when a student doesn't like a particular subject;** withdrawals are certain to happen, and he'll want to build up a surplus of goodwill with his teacher to avoid a deficit. Solid relationships with teachers can pave the way for effective self-advocacy, our next tip.

## Tip 5: Build Self-Advocacy Skills

What does it mean to be an effective self-advocate? For high school students, it means they have the ability to:

- 1) understand teachers' expectations,
- 2) assess their situation, and
- 3) initiate communication to resolve a mismatch between 1 and 2.

Sounds logical, doesn't it? Yet, as Executive Function Coaches, we see poor self-advocacy and impaired academic performance when **any** of these skills are weak. How does this happen? Let's look in more detail...

Imagine a freshman has been assigned a long term research paper in history, for example. He misinterprets some components (notecards, outline) as "optional", so that when he self-assesses his progress, he thinks "I'm good. No worries." He sees no need to check in with the teacher, and then is stunned by a low grade for the paper, because he did not fulfill all the requirements.



Or, imagine the same assignment, and the student understands the instructions (35 notecards due on October 10th), but insists that he can complete them all in a single evening, or that he can get away with jotting down a phrase or two for each one ("The teacher won't check *all* of them, will he?"). The situation is not accurately assessed, and the student pays the price.

Finally, let's say a student knows exactly what the outline should look like and when it is due, but he is completely confused about what to include in the introduction and conclusion. He is worried that he will look stupid if he asks for help in his honors class. Or he feels that it's weird or intrusive to email his teacher for help or with a question. Or he doesn't know how to articulate his questions. Instead, he asks a friend or tries to find an explanation online somewhere, and may miss the mark in the process.

In each of these scenarios, the student loses an opportunity to interact meaningfully with his teacher, and more importantly, misses out on building self-advocacy skills that are needed in every phase and sphere of life. This is where the stage is set for effective communication with everyone from college professors, to healthcare providers, to roommates and a future spouse.

So, as a parent, if you are tempted to email or call a teacher on behalf of your high school child to ask for an extension on an assignment, to clarify expectations on a project, to inquire about a grade, or ask a question about the content, think carefully. Ask yourself, "What can I do to help my child build the essential skill of self-advocacy?" **Frame the specific situation as a skill deficit and seek to develop the skill.**

For example, the situation for the student may be "I don't have my essay that's due tomorrow." The situation can be "fixed" in a number of ways (staying up until 2:00 am with your child, leaving a voicemail for your child's teacher, allowing him to stay home from school the next day). But what skill deficit has been addressed? If it was a weakness in accurate self-assessment that led to the situation, then expect the theme to reappear in other contexts until this skill is targeted. Careful use of teachers' explicit grading criteria (rubrics) and comparisons with models of excellent work are great ways to help a student develop self-assessment skills. Ask him to demonstrate evidence of rubric elements in his work and to determine what differs between his work and the model. If it was a weakness in initiating communication, help your child by role-playing an interaction with his teacher, or crafting an email template together, or brainstorming ways to explain a problem to a teacher.

photo credit: <a href="http://www.flickr.com/photos/intelfreepress/7497637986/">IntelFreePress</a> via <a href="http://photopin.com">photopin</a> <a href="http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/">cc</a>

---

*The transition from middle school to high school is filled with excitement and apprehension for both students and parents, and with good reason. Getting a firm grip on skills such as time management, tracking work, focus, communication, and self-advocacy will help your child thrive and be prepared for not only high school, but college and career.*