

TEXTING WITH TEENS:
A HIGH SCHOOL
STUDENT ENGAGEMENT
STRATEGY GUIDE

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INTRODUCTION

Engaging high school students takes teamwork and it starts with communication. As professionals, we each have full plates, and we each bring different skills and perspectives to the table—all of which need to be considered as we take steps to connect students with opportunities that will change the trajectories of their lives.

Students are busy, and they are trained consumers in every aspect of their lives. As their reasoning skills are still developing, they need applicable information that they can apply to their own success. Providing this takes finesse --- it requires us to meet them where they are. Texting helps professionals use data to create nuanced messaging that is specific to that student and builds on what that student has already shared.

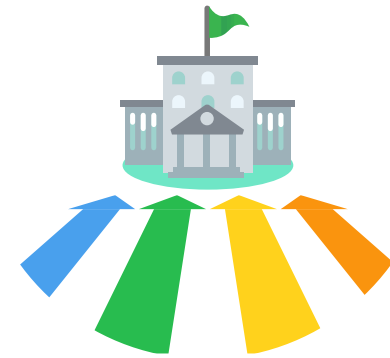
Communication strategies evolve, especially in tone, cadence, and value. Listening to students and using that feedback to hone outreach is critical to helping them. Educators must remain sensitive to the savior complex—the idea that we know more or that we are there to “fix” things. We must not make assumptions about what is best for students. Our responsibility is to provide access to accurate information, make students aware of potential opportunities, and then coach them through processes and the barriers that may arise en route to their goals.

This guide highlights strategies to successfully engage high school students, to encourage them to accept assistance and take action in their post-high school lives, whether that be toward college or work. My hope is that other K-12 schools, college access programs, and higher education admissions programs will find these tips helpful in successfully moving students across the formative finish line.

The **Baltimore City Public Schools** district (**City Schools**) includes 166 schools, serving almost 80,000 students across 92 square miles. With a huge footprint across the Baltimore region, the district educates students with a wide variety of needs and goals. Baltimore is also home to 20 traditional colleges and universities, as well as a number of alternative post-secondary learning programs.

BEST PRACTICE #1

COORDINATE COMMUNICATION ACROSS THE ORGANIZATION



We have many administrators and departments that want to “get in front of students.” While it may feel easier for individual schools to push messages out to students, we have found that coordinating district messages across our organization makes messaging more coherent and effective. Planning communication across the organization helps move students to take action. Furthermore, coordination enables us to respect the value that each person brings to moving the student forward.

By honoring our counselors' time and their deep knowledge of students while acknowledging their strained capacity, coordinated texting:



Protects the integrity of individual's roles; everyone plays to their strengths



Empowers the counselors to do what they do best



Supports our goals for student engagement and quick response times

Each counselor knows which texts will go out, with special emphasis on messages that require a direct deliverable or that may drive student inquiries to their door. Coordination builds trust between the district's central messaging coordinators and professionals directly serving students.

Building trust between the texter and the student creates a bridge to professionals who can help them. We demonstrate that we know who the individual student is to increase their sense of support. By using the name of their school and/or counselor, we reinforce that we know who they are and where they can get support. We direct students to people they know, who they trust to help them, when one-on-one follow up or intervention support is in their best interest.

At the district level, having insight about when to pivot from providing general information to triaging direct support is key to leveraging the professional strengths of our school counselors, while working as a team to share broad administrative processes. We aim to complement the work of our counselors—never to replace their work—as counselors often know more about the whole picture and may already be working closely with the students.

BEST PRACTICE #2

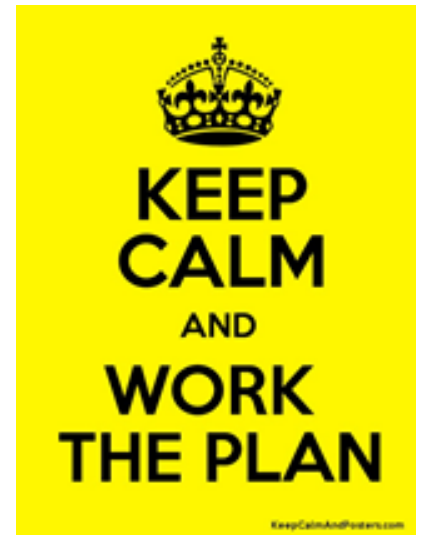
MAKE A PLAN; WORK THE PLAN

When there are so many moving parts and people contributing to the success of our young people, a cohesive plan is key. Each week the Office of College and Career Readiness sends out weekly messages to students. The goal is twofold: to provide general information that empowers students to take action, and to reinforce the actions counselors would like their students to take.

The City Schools district system texts general messaging supplements, reinforcing counselor guidance about multiple postsecondary pathways. To maintain a strong sense of teamwork, it is critical to do three things:

1. Establish the pivot point - when to continue to text and when to refer to the counselor.
2. Give counselors a heads up about who may show up at their door with particular questions
3. Frame the referral message to the student not as a pass off, but as an opportunity to connect with the right person
 - Can I graduate? Do you know [counselor_name], they can help you.

Students are not only engaging via text – across the system they are surprised by how deep the relationship is. Relationships are being developed [even when students and the sender don't know each other] and have only text messages [to build the relationship].



School Counselor and College Advisor at Baltimore City College High School, Michele Flores explains:

“Students are attached to their cell phones, and we noticed they responded very well and often to the ease and comfortability of Signal Vine. I was also surprised to receive messages from students who would otherwise not have reached out to me via email or in person. Without Signal Vine, I would not have known about some of these students’ concerns.”

BEST PRACTICE #3

OBTAIN THE OPT-IN

A good texting strategy starts with getting students to opt in. Hint: Saying “we need your cell phone number” isn’t received well by students. Instead, integrate the opt-in with “why” so that students understand the value of giving you access to their number.

TO GET STUDENTS TO OPT IN EVERY TIME

- Include the ask in every survey and outreach that you send out
- Make the ask specific and compelling: “Do we have your permission to text you college going info?”
- As soon as you get the number, upload the number into Signal Vine immediately, verify that it works and is not a parent, and start delivering value

BEST PRACTICE #4

FOCUS ON THE WHY

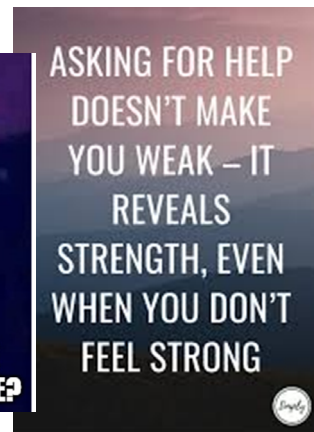
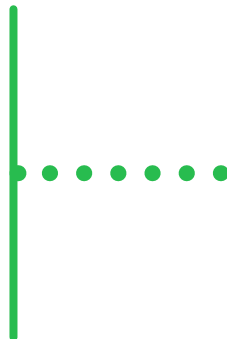
One of the toughest parts of being a teen is making decisions and understanding the long-term implications. We try to recognize this in communicating with students.

We've found that taking a generalized approach doesn't encourage students. In addition to being super clear and specific in our messaging, we take an individualized approach to earning students' engagement. We set the context by focusing on why the information is important to them personally.

Traditional Framing	City Schools Approach: Anticipating Myths and Focusing on the Why	Because City Schools Hears:
"Give us your phone number so we can text you"	"Does City Schools have your permission to text you information about college, career, and scholarship opportunities?"	"Who are you? Don't be tracking me."
"Have you filled out the FAFSA?"	"Did you know that there are 35 career and trade schools in MD where you can use your FAFSA?"	"I'm not going to college so I'm not doing FAFSA, I'm going to a Career/Technical college."
"Complete your FAFSA to receive up to \$6,495 in free money for college!"	"Want a career that still pays you when you are sick? Want a career that pays you while you are on vacation? Want a retirement account so you can keep living your best life when you turn 70? Completing the FAFSA will help fund training and education programs that will give you the quality of life you want. Do you have any FAFSA questions at this time? Y/N/Help"	"People choose to go to college so they can make more money."

<p>"We haven't heard from you in a while. Do you still need help with your FAFSA? You can still apply!"</p>	<p>"Maybe you changed your mind about college or post-high school training or want to consider a few different options. Are you interested in learning about good paying jobs that require little to no training? Y/N/Help"</p>	<p>"The options I have after high school are going to college or getting a job. I think I will keep working my job at [Costco/Amazon/etc]."</p>
<p>"You still have three months until the FAFSA priority deadline. What questions can we answer for you?"</p>	<p>"Hope you're enjoying the holiday break and giving yourself the gift of peace. If you haven't started planning for life after high school that's okay and this is a good time to begin. Take this time to reflect on next steps, check in with your school counselor when you get back, and start your new year off right! If you have started planning already, what questions do you still have?"</p>	<p>"It's too late to apply to college. I think I will get a job or something."</p>
<p>"One month until the FAFSA deadline! Do you still need help completing your FAFSA? Y/N"</p>	<p>"We are doing the dang thing! 1,480 seniors in city schools have completed a college application (whoop whoop!) but only 1,054 students have submitted a FAFSA. You have SEVEN more weeks until the March 1 state priority FAFSA deadline. Are you making money moves? Text back "HELP" if you need help with FAFSA or College Apps! Don't miss out on free cash for college and career training!"</p>	<p>"I have a month, why are you nagging me!"</p>
<p>"Have you received your financial aid award letter yet?"</p>	<p>"Hi [first_name]! This is City Schools. You need a financial aid award letter from your college (s) to be eligible for funding after the FAFSA was completed. Usually it's found in your portal online. Have you received a financial aid award letter yet? Y/N/Help"</p>	<p>"They haven't sent me my money yet."</p>

Signal Vine is a valuable tool that helps us build knowledge and shift student perspectives. The district focuses on helping students understand the 'why' of what they are being asked to do. The more that you build that relationship and show that you care about them personally, the more likely that they will take the next step. There is buy in and they realize you are asking them to do something that benefits them, not that just checks a box.

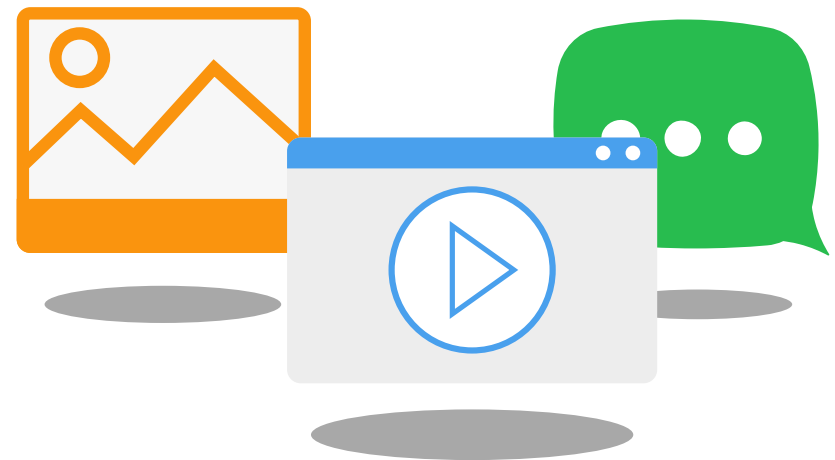


BEST PRACTICE #5

ADD VISUAL APPEAL

Students live in a dynamic world full of imagery designed to capture their attention. Our outreach tactics combine text and graphics, direct students to resource videos, and utilize other colorful imagery that motivates and compels students to consider ideas and actions. We follow up with questions or offers of support.

Help the student to understand their “why”. It isn’t just about income, it’s about health, value, impact of college on their bigger life and happiness .



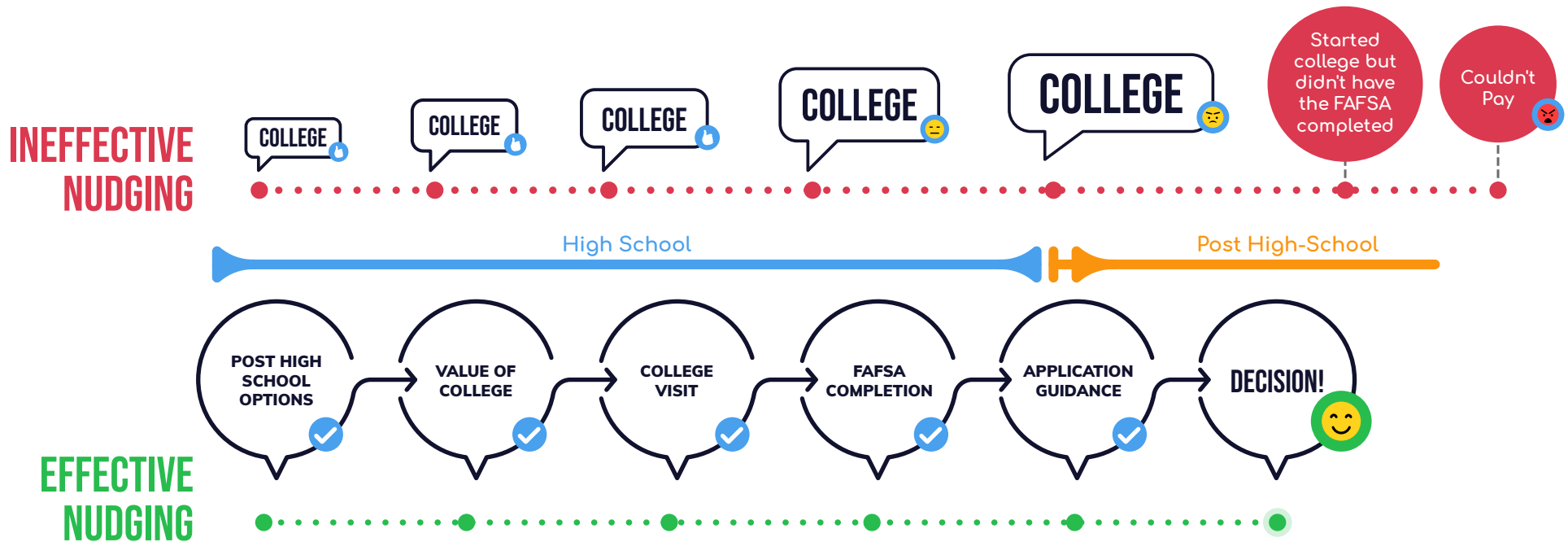
This is achieved by choosing to text students beyond when we need something. Strong engagement and trust-building opportunities come from moments encouraging students without a subsequent ask.



BEST PRACTICE #6

VARY MESSAGING, SPARK ACTION

Sometimes we push students to do things without them understanding the why or the value.



How we present information is sometimes more important than what is being said. Diversifying our messages helps us measure which approach yields the most engagement; is it mythbusting, a graphic, a specific time of day, a data point shared out? Watching for trends in these areas helps us narrow which approach to branding and packaging information most influences a student's decision to reply.

1. Question:

Not sure about college? Want to keep your options open? Let's talk about your employment options after high school, special programs like Grads2Careers, Military Options, Americorps, City Year, and other resources with the Mayor's Office of Employment Development. Which post high school options seem most interesting to you?

2. Graphic with a message:

Hi [first_name]! Maybe you changed your mind about college or post-high school training or want to consider a few different options. Are you interested in learning about good paying jobs that require little to no training? Y/N/Help



3. Invitations:

Want more help finding the right career path or college for you? Need tips for finding scholarships, requesting letters of recommendation, or sending transcripts? Join us tomorrow for access to the career surveys, tips, and tools to get you started on planning for life after high school!

In other words, it is warranted to be both proactive and explicit. Some of our students don't know what they don't know and as a result often miscalculate the benefit of receiving additional information from an expert.

EXAMPLES OF VARIED MESSAGING

Asking a student if he or she registered for an FSA ID could be less effective than sharing a graphic of the barriers that often complicate their completion of the task.

Our text may say “Did you know that applying for an FSA ID is NOT like a google account? You only get one for your whole life so you can’t make a new one if you forget that password”. We then follow this by a graphic with a list of explicit recommendations:

- Write down your username and password and store it somewhere safe (like with your taxes). You will use it every year of college.
- Make sure you register using your legal birth name as written on your social security card. Triple check to assure your date of birth, and social security number are accurate. This is how the government verifies your identity and approves your FSA ID.
- Ensure you are using a working cell phone number and an email address that does not expire. Answer the security questions accurately. These are the only three ways you can reset your password without needing to call Federal Student Aid. Your phone and email listed need to be different from what is used by a parent or the system gets confused and you will face barriers with resetting passwords now or in the future.

Similarly, asking a student if he or she has received an acceptance letter makes assumptions about the student’s knowledge of the admissions process. Rather than asking this question directly, we’ve found our students can be better served by incorporating knowledge about the process into an inquiry.

If you applied early to college, your acceptances might be coming soon! Don’t forget to check your admissions and financial aid portals to ensure the college you applied to has all your documents. (You won’t receive a decision if you didn’t send your transcript and other required materials.) Need Help?

BEST PRACTICE #7





SPEAK THEIR LANGUAGE

Well-chosen language builds trust. Meeting the student where they are means that we send messages in which we “talk like a young person.” Then, our professionals listen. They read between the lines to identify assumptions, interpret expectations, become aware of potential objections, and recognize what motivates the student. Attending to language in this way enables them to frame opportunities in ways that the student can understand and build on.

Texting is a place to build relationships with language that is meaningful to the students while also showing professionalism.

Nice, but Trite	Supportive
<p>“It’s a pleasure to support you”</p>	<p>“I’ve got you”</p> <p>“I’m proud of you”</p> <p>“We’re here for you”</p> <p>“Keep pressing, you got this”</p>
<p>“That’s not a good school”</p>	<p>“Have you checked graduation rates? Persistence rates for your demographic? Considered special programs? How do you learn best? (elements that would make the student successful)”</p>
<p>“I am here to help you with your college applications”</p>	<p>“My name is Tracy and I work at North Avenue in the Office of College and Career Readiness! I work with your counselor, Ms. Jones, and the rest of the squad at ACCE to make sure you have everything you need to explore what you want to do after high school.”</p>
<p>“Don’t forget about our January Parent Night and FAFSA event. There will be prizes!”</p>	<p>“We got the hookup from DTLR and Under Armour this year and we are looking forward to seeing you at FAFSA Fest 2021! Interview with colleges and get decisions in minutes, complete your FAFSA, and vote for our next Lyrical Challenge Winner! Sign up today using the link below!”</p>

We help students build their “academic language.” We break down messages, explaining why they are being asked to do things, so that messages aren’t overwhelming but are supportive.

Scary/Threatening	Accessible
 <p>“You’ll be getting information about verification on your portal”</p>	<p>“People can put anything on the FAFSA. It’s self-reported information. And so the gov’t uses a process called verification to make sure that the things you said on your FAFSA are true. Before they give out their money they ask for extra documents to confirm what was put on the FAFSA is accurate.”</p>
 <p>“Did you receive your acceptance or financial aid award letters? Y/N”</p>	<p>“If you’ve submitted your college apps and FAFSA we are here with next steps!</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Check your admissions and financial aid portals to ensure the college you applied to has all your documents. (You won’t receive a decision if you didn’t send your transcript and other required materials.) 2. Check your financial aid portal at the schools you were accepted to view your financial aid award letter? Need help? Y/N”
 <p>“Do you know the steps to take for a successful transition to college? Y/N”</p>	<p>“Congratulations again to all of our seniors who shared their college decisions with us last week! You made your decision, but now what? We hope this document <link> will help coach you through the steps required to transition into college. Take a look and let us know if you have any questions!”</p>
 <p>“The FAFSA deadline is in one month! Do you need help with applying? Y/N?”</p>	<p>“Did you know that a person with a four year college degree can make almost \$32,000 more than a high school graduate every year? A college degree will earn you one million dollars more in your lifetime than what you earn with your high school diploma!</p> <p>Create your FSA ID and then submit your FAFSA today to earn up to \$6,495 in free money for a training program or for college next year and you could be eligible for up to \$19,400 MORE dollars from the state!</p> <p>Need help with these steps? Y/N/Help”</p>

Signal Vine is the leading higher education AI messaging platform transforming how you reach, support, and engage students throughout their life cycle. With more than 50 million student interactions, Signal Vine's Blended Messaging® personalizes engagement using AI, workflow automation, and one-to-one messaging to keep students on the path to success. Signal Vine has been improving enrollment and retention outcomes with a proactive approach across the entire campus and student life cycle.

The company partners with more than 550 higher education institutions, including college access programs, community colleges, public and private four-years, and alumni programs.

Reach the right students with the right information at the right time.

For more information, visit

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