

A woman with blonde hair and multiple rings on her fingers is shown from the chest up, her hands hovering over a glowing, light blue crystal ball. The crystal ball is resting on a dark wooden base. The background is dark, and the scene is lit with warm, ambient light. The text on the crystal ball is in a bold, blue, sans-serif font.

THE 21-22 ADMISSIONS SEASON CRYSTAL BALL

A Guide for
Independent Schools

WRITTEN BY
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raison





The 21-22 Admissions Season Crystal Ball

Being an independent school admissions professional in 20-21 was a remarkable challenge. And everyone wants to know: Will 21-22 be back to normal? Our prediction: Not likely!

If you wish that you had a crystal ball to see what the coming admissions season will bring, you're in luck. Our guide will give you the insights to develop strategies for a successful future.

New Opportunities for Independent School Admissions

While the 2021-22 school year will be another unique year for admissions directors, new opportunities have emerged. Savvy enrollment professionals will throw out the old playbook and take in these predictions to maximize efforts.

Parents are worried about the “what ifs”

Parents watched their kids struggle last year—emotionally, socially, and academically. It was brutal, exhausting, and heart-wrenching for so many. Parents are breathing a sigh of relief that most students will be back to in-class learning in the fall.

But there is lingering angst that can't be dismissed. Parents are worried about the "what-ifs" in their heads. What if a month

into in-class learning, there is a COVID resurgence and their kids are back at home learning virtually? What if COVID-21 hits?

We predict that those thoughts are keeping parents up at night and will be motivators for them to consider private schools that have a higher probability to keep kids learning on campus.

Parents want your school's community and values

We foresee that more families will start to look at private schools because they want a community for their children that shares their personal values. Culture wars that have emerged over the past few years reveal that there is a big divide between how families define civility, values, ethics, and their moral compass. We expect to see parents seeking out a more intentional commitment to align their family [culture with that of their child's school](#).

Kids' learning needs are shifting (and becoming more clear)

As parents have had an up-close-and-personal peek into their child's school experience during the pandemic, they may have observed their child struggling a bit. Some parents have witnessed learning differences in their child and considered whether a school with smaller classes and the opportunity for more personal attention might be needed.

This trend might have been exasperated by a year of virtual school and worries about [lost learning](#). Admissions directors will see students with various learning profiles come through their doors. This is a defining moment for schools in terms of market share and innovation. Take this chance to evaluate your program with an eye toward your school's range of learning profiles, student learning support infrastructure, and areas of growth in [neurodiversity](#) and [teaching](#).

Mid-year Transfer/Enrollment

Those same parents who have been on the fence about private schools might consider moving their child [mid-year](#). Keep tabs on your enrollment, possible openings, and where you can add new students throughout the year. As enrollment professionals, some of our best success stories include children who joined our schools during a non-entry time/grade and it will be important to keep that door open all year.

Digital Advertising Has Become More Competitive (Expect to Up Your Game)

[Digital advertising is where it's at](#). Long gone are the days of print advertising in

local newspapers or magazines (we feel ancient even writing those words!). Today, we have [digital tools and data-tested strategies](#) to get our ads in front of a target audience, measure the return, and communicate with prospects in personal and unique ways. And schools are [investing and seeing results](#)—big time. If you haven't yet dabbled in [digital marketing](#), you need to. Immediately.

Schools who have been making do by managing their digital advertising internally will find advertising success in 21-22 harder than ever. Even media firms that don't necessarily have expertise in private schools will find it hard to win mindshare and conversions. The digital landscape is getting more competitive by the day (and who has the time or headspace to track the ever-changing search algorithms!?) so the schools that are working it expertly with the most advanced approach will win media share.

Virtual Events Are Sticking Around

It's true. We know some of you are ready to cancel your Zoom account for the rest of eternity but don't do it quite yet! While many private schools will resume on-campus tours and offer opportunities for in-person visits, [virtual experiences](#) are not going away and will be a key piece of your robust admissions cycle. We anticipate that you will need a balance of both in-person and [virtual opportunities for parents and students to get to know your school](#).

Now before you disregard this sage advice, take a minute to explore what a [virtual experience might bring to your marketing and admissions strategy](#).

Three Benefits of Virtual Admissions Events

As admissions professionals, we are all eager to have parents back on our campus to see our schools in action, shining! And yet, there are some great benefits to having virtual experiences built into your roster of admissions events. Don't discount how parents seeing your school virtually can build interest for your school and fuel more inquiries and applications your way. As you plan your schedule, focus on virtual opportunities to:



Improve Access

While many parents will want to see your school in person, it's a slog for most parents to take time off from work for a tour of the campus at multiple schools. It's so much easier to hop on a Zoom call to learn about a school all from the comfort of a home or office. In 20-21, schools reported their highest admissions events attendance in years! Don't let this opportunity slip by—retool the virtual opportunities that worked well and add in new ones that will open doors to new families to experience your school.



Raise Awareness

This is a big one. For many private schools, name recognition and awareness are a big factor in increasing applications and growing enrollment. We've heard some schools being described as the area's "best-kept secret" (pro tip: this notion is not good for sustaining a school!). With easy access built-in, think about virtual events as a way to build awareness, get your name out in the world, and ensure that parents are talking about your school on the soccer sidelines or at the water cooler.



Fine-Tune Messaging

While that "sell" word makes some of us feel icky, let's be honest: we are passionate about our schools and selling them to parents and students. With that in mind, it's essential that we have a solid understanding of what makes our schools distinctive and how to communicate those features. Think about virtual events as a way to curate your messaging. You have limited time and an attentive audience, so get your talking points down to a science and communicate with confidence and ease.

We predict that schools will need a balance of in-person and virtual events, so use these three tips as a way to focus your efforts and maximize the virtual experience.



Why Private Schools Will Retain the Public School Converts Gained in the Pandemic

Independent schools have long sought to attract [a choice demographic](#)—families who had chosen a public school option but who could afford private school tuition.

Admissions directors have long wondered what it would take to prove to these families that an independent school would be worth the cost. Public school parents, however, have carefully selected neighborhoods, purchased homes, and curated their own community based on a chosen public school, and shifting to a private school upends all of that planning and thinking.

In 2020, with a portal into their child’s virtual public school from the kitchen table, some public school parents got nervous. With 25+ students in a class, the simple fact that the teacher couldn’t even see all of the kids on one Zoom screen raised flags about their child “falling through the cracks.”

Our forecast shows that even with public schools returning to in-classroom teaching, private schools will continue to see an influx of inquiries from public school families.

Specifically, families with younger children might be thinking about a private school in later grades but are willing to stay in public school for the younger years.

The Cruise Ship Versus the Speedboat

The suddenness of pandemic restrictions was a great equalizer among schools. No one was prepared for it and the effect on the education system was devastating.

The massive size and bureaucracy of public school systems made for a slow response. Like a cruise ship, public school systems were too massive and complex to pivot quickly, find solutions, and execute without delay.

In contrast, like the speedboat, private schools were able to change course quickly, investing in the classroom modifications, screening equipment, and safety measures needed to offer at least partial on-campus learning.

Some parents had to witness their children at home struggling with public school distance learning while their neighbors' children were learning on campus at their private school.

That was not a good feeling and don't expect those parents to forget it! Families who have had this experience will not see their public school option in the same favorable light for years to come. Parents acknowledged how challenging this year was for administrators and teachers, and yet it was painful to watch their children

struggle and see no path for getting their children back in class. This unsettling, nagging feeling will extend to parents questioning the public school's ability to respond to their children's academic, social, and emotional needs in the future.

So, here is it: **the cruise ship versus speedboat**. Will there be a COVID-21? What struggles will emerge for our children, families, and schools in the future? Who knows what 21-22 will bring, but we predict that private schools will respond quickly with solutions

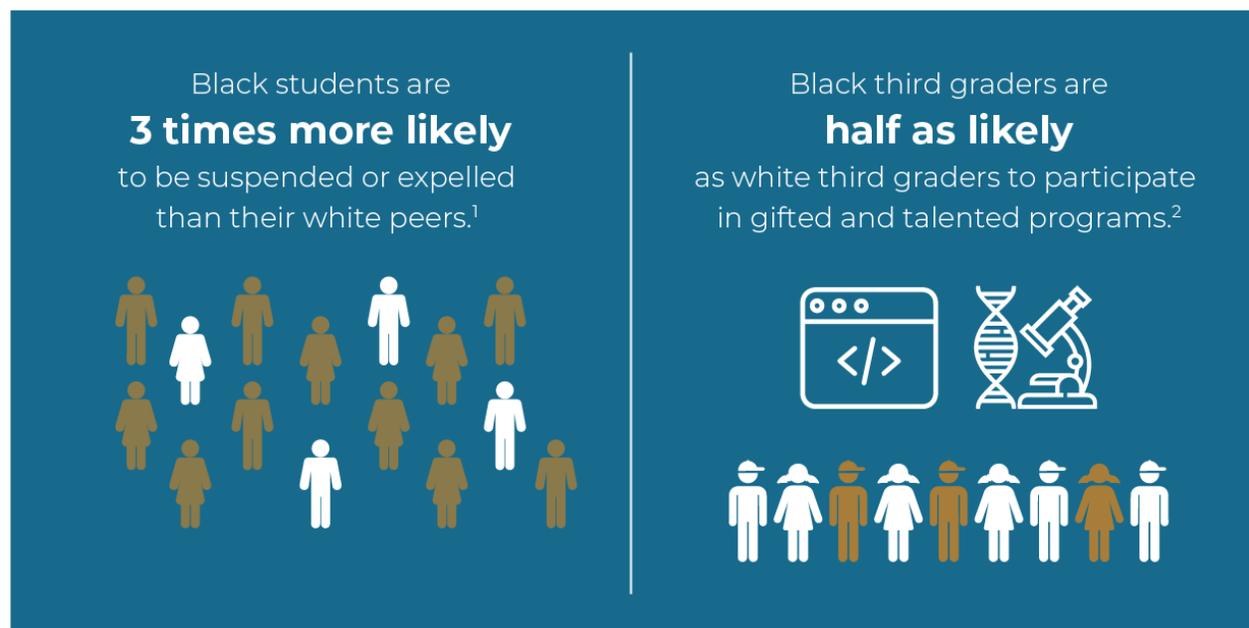
Public Schools Lose Appeal as a Civic-minded Choice

The [demonstrations of 2020](#) shone a blinding light on the scourge of racial inequity in America. Private schools have historically been viewed as inequitable due to the high price tag (and whether we like it or not, independent schools are perceived as "elite" institutions based on

that alone). The fact of the matter is that we all do pay for public schools through our taxes and the quality of public education should be equal regardless of race. [But, sadly, that is not the case](#). This year, expect public schools to face new accountability for institutional racism.

¹ [CIVIL RIGHTS DATA COLLECTION Data Snapshot: School Discipline](#)

² [Discretion and Disproportionality: Explaining the Underrepresentation of High-Achieving Students of Color in Gifted Program](#)



Two Public High Schools Of A Different Color

	Wando High	North Charleston High
Median Household Income	\$103,232	\$45,510
Free Lunch Eligible	9%	100%
Population - White	81%	7.5%
Population - Black	10%	78%
Population - Other	9%	14.5%
Proficient in Reading	91%	47%
Proficient in Math	84%	47%
AP Enrollment	36%	6%
Graduation Rate	93%	77%

Niche.com

You don't have to do much research to see how academic inequities are tied to systemic racism in the public schools around us. Consider North Charleston High, a black-majority school in a low-income school zone versus Wando High, a predominantly white school in a high-income zone of the same school district. Wando High students have strong academic results, yet over half of the students in the low-income zone are not meeting proficiency in reading and math. We all can identify schools in our part of the country that follow this pattern.

What Does It Mean for Independent Schools?

In 21-22, we predict the families who live in the high-income public school zones will have a new awareness of the privilege and inequity in their public schools. For some parents and teens, the notion of attending their local school as an act of

Special Issues for PreK-8 Schools

It can be challenging to convey to parents the value of a PreK-8 experience vs. K-12:

- 1) Who wants to go through the admissions process again in a few years?
- 2) Once families land on that high school campus, see the turf fields and state-of-the-art theaters, it's hard to compare apples to oranges.

We predict that PreK-8 schools will continue to see an uptick in public school families making the transition to private schools in elementary and middle schools. Clearly articulating the value of PreK-8 schools will be even more important as this new market continues to emerge. Schools that respond to the market will thrive by expanding academic learning supports, fine-tuning class size, maximizing extracurricular opportunities, developing expertise, and instituting innovative programs geared for young children.



civic-mindedness will be challenged. Indeed, the fight against institutional racism may be brought inside public schools in 21-22.

This presents an opportunity for independent schools to model a new standard of diversity and inclusion in 21-22.

As enrollment professionals, it is especially important to evaluate our admissions

procedures and policies, and actively and intentionally explore and [eliminate bias](#) in our work. Our goals of equity, diversity, inclusion and access will continue in the decades to come, so don't think of it as a "one and done" professional development workshop. It's vital that we dig deep, commit, and lead our schools forward.

What Does the Crystal Ball Reveal for Boarding Schools?

Last year presented some unique challenges to boarding schools. We see unique opportunities to recruit new families.

Domestic Travel Disruptions Fade Away

State-based stay-at-home orders effectively blockaded boarding schools in 2020, and through the pandemic travel had been discouraged. These restrictions will be lifted in 21-22, opening doors fully to domestic borders.

International Borders May Take Longer to Come Back

The restrictions against international travel have taken a heavy toll on boarding schools, some of which maintain an international student body of more than 50%. While most of these restrictions have been lifted, we should not expect international recruiting to bounce back to the pre-pandemic playbook.

The reputation of the United States took a hit in 2020 with violence and public spectacles making international news throughout the year, culminating in the storming of the Capitol on January 6. Some international families will have concerns over the equitable rule of law and their child's safety and well-being for years to

come. It will take time for international students to return in pre-pandemic numbers. Instead, international families may look to the UK, Canada, and Europe as alternatives for an international boarding experience.

But There Will Be Countries of Exception

New opportunities will emerge to recruit international students from some unexpected places.

While the U.S. will experience a decided move away from distance learning in the Fall of 2021, things are still very different elsewhere. Some countries are still suffering the trauma of high COVID-19 outbreaks. Most of the world is lagging far behind the U.S. in terms of the number of vaccinated citizens. Schools will not return to normal operations in these countries and a U.S. boarding school will be attractive in contrast.

Boarding schools recruiting international students should look for more students from countries like Canada that may not have been a traditional source.

Campus Pods Will Still Have Some Appeal

The value of campus pods to shelter teens from COVID-19 will diminish in 21-22 due to lowered rates of transmission. However, the

crystal ball shows that parents will have a heightened desire for a sheltered environment in general. The structure and culture that is maintained at a boarding school will be seen as an attractive solution for two problems that have become more concerning in the past year.

1. A [survey](#) of children aged 14 to 17 shows that the number of teens spending more than 4 hours a day on devices rose from 32% to 62%. Parents will be interested in the structured, enriching activities managed for teens at a boarding school as an alternative to copious screen time.
2. Navigating social norms and the challenges to those norms during COVID-19 felt like a minefield for some parents. Parents will be attracted to the more stable social culture of a boarding school environment where their children will have the chance to fully participate in traditional social activities and make positive and meaningful connections with their peers.

Parents want their kids to mature in a positive environment (something that has been in short supply). In 21-22, more parents will be attracted to the idea of “sheltering” their teens in a campus bubble that maintains a positive culture—the kind of culture that they are not seeing in their hometown.



Thriving Schools vs. Striving Schools in 21-22

Some independent schools were fortunate enough to be at capacity and turning students away in 20-21, while others struggled to stay open. Will 21-22 be more of the same?

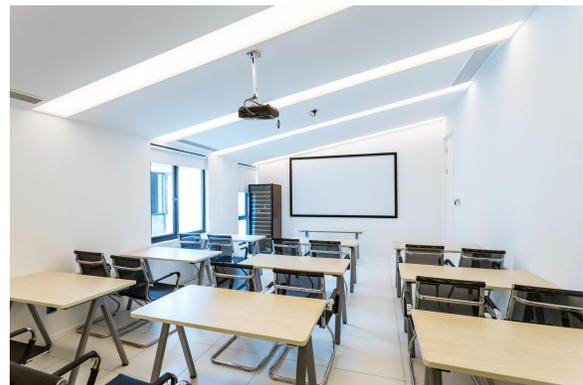
Thriving Schools Will Have Another Great Year

Large, well-established day schools in moderately- to heavily-populated areas experienced high demand through the pandemic. These schools had the resources to quickly adapt facilities to maintain at least partial in-class learning. They also made gains in admissions by being surrounded by many public schools with families frustrated with distance learning.

While most public schools will return to in-class learning in the fall of 21, the families that jumped ship in favor of a local private school will not quickly flip back to their public school. The U.S. is back in business, but we can't call it "business as usual" quite yet. The dust has not settled completely from the disruptions of the pandemic and its destructive effects.

The large dominant schools will have a great 21-22 admissions season, allowing them to work on some of the finer things.

- Increasing selectivity of mission-appropriate students
- Increasing the percentage of full-pay students
- The opportunity to make strides in meeting diversity goals



Striving Schools Will Get Some Relief But Face a Tough Long-term Outlook

The operational and financial toll of the pandemic was sadly the final blow for some schools. In contrast to large and strong day schools, many small schools that were struggling pre-COVID-19 were forced into permanent closure.

140 U.S. private schools have closed due to losses from the pandemic.



The Good News Is That The Worst Is Behind Us.

While the first few months of 2021 saw more closures, they were not of the magnitude of 2020. Unlike the summer of 2020 when more than a school per day closed in June, the closures of 2021 did not continue into the summer.

Struggling schools (we prefer to call them “striving”) will continue to feel the squeeze of financial instability as families will continue to be affected by job market volatility and a lack of confidence in their finances. Additionally, annual fund giving can be expected to dip for striving schools in 2021.

Pandemic-related Parent Concerns of 2020



A dubious perception of the value of distance learning



Fear of COVID-19 exposure



Unease with their personal financial outlook



Actual income loss due to the economic shutdowns

Will These Concerns Persist in 21-22?

We expect these first two concerns to abate in 21-22. While ongoing income loss due to economic shutdowns should be minimized, [some parents will remain concerned about the volatility of their financial futures](#) and have made (or will make) drastic changes to their lifestyles to ease financial burdens. It may take these families another year to feel enough stability to invest in private schooling.

Leading The Way With Radical Change

The striving schools that win in the coming years will be the schools that throw out the rule book, innovate, and transform their financial and operational models. Striving schools will seek new revenue streams while cutting non-productive functions (even some beloved traditions—gasp!).

The 2021-22 school year will see more school mergers. Many schools, large and

small, will make bold reductions in tuition. This will be an opportunity for striving schools to reach a new and larger economic demographic.

General disenfranchisement with public schools will be with us for years. The striving schools of 2020 that transform into thriving schools in 21-22 will be the schools that create a unique new space somewhere between the public school loyalists and the affluent independent school families of bygone days.

As You Can See, It's Going To Be Another Exciting and Challenging Year.

Not a cakewalk by any means, but there are opportunities! If we learned anything this past year, we know that challenges produce new opportunities and we've shared plenty to get you started in the right direction.

Your 21-22 admissions fortune has been laid out for you—exciting opportunities lie ahead. Now it's time to roll up your sleeves and do the hard work to manifest your admissions goals.

WRITTEN BY

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