

PLAYBOOK

Private K–12 Schools

Handshake Outreach email sequence, adapted.

Four messages, one sequence. Mail-merge ready.

ADAPTATION 14

Category notes

Private school enrollment is a multi-year financial commitment (\$20,000–\$60,000+/year) wrapped in an intensely emotional decision about a child's future. Parents begin researching one to three years before enrollment and often visit school websites dozens of times — browsing curriculum pages, faculty bios, athletic programs, and tuition schedules — before ever attending an open house. The admissions process itself can feel adversarial: standardized testing, parent interviews, letters of recommendation, and long waitlists create a power dynamic where the school evaluates the family rather than the other way around. The opportunity for a school that inverts this dynamic is significant: families are looking for a place that sees their child, not one that grades their application. The costly signal is treating the research phase as a relationship, not a funnel.

Insider terms: admissions cycle (applications typically open September, due mid-January, decisions in March), open house vs. private tour, shadow day (when a prospective student spends a day in classes), Character Skills Snapshot (SSAT's non-cognitive assessment), financial aid vs. merit scholarship (distinct processes at most schools), enrollment contract (binding commitment, often with a non-refundable deposit), re-enrollment (annual process — admission isn't permanent), net tuition (what families actually pay after aid), tuition refund insurance, advancement/development (the fundraising arm — and the expectation that families contribute beyond tuition).

MESSAGE 1 OF 4 / SEND WITHIN 4-24 HOURS

Message 1: The Honest Hello

Acknowledge the cold contact. Invert the admissions power dynamic. Give one useful insight.

Subject: A note from [First Name] at [School] – before the open house

Hi –

You've been spending some time on [School]'s website. If you're researching schools for your child, you're probably deep in the comparison phase – reading mission statements that sound similar, trying to figure out which schools mean what they say, and wondering whether the admissions process is designed to welcome your family or evaluate it.

I'm [Name], [role] at [School]. I'm writing because I'd rather have a real conversation early than meet you for the first time in a formal admissions setting where everybody's performing.

One useful thing for someone in the research phase: before you attend any school's open house, email the admissions office and ask one question – "Can my child spend a day in an actual class before we apply?" This is called a shadow day, and it tells you more about a school's culture in six hours than any brochure or tour. The schools that welcome shadow visits before application are the ones confident enough in their classrooms to let you see them unscripted. The ones that only allow visits after acceptance are, intentionally or not, asking you to commit before you've seen the product.

I'll send two more notes – short, focused on the things worth knowing whether your family ever applies to [School] or not. Easy unsubscribe.

– [Name]

[Direct line, reply-to]

MESSAGE 2 OF 4 / SEND 3-4 DAYS LATER

Message 2: The Inside Knowledge

The costly signal: the financial number most schools don't publish — and why it matters more than tuition.

Subject: The number that matters more than tuition (and most schools don't publish it)

[Name],

Following up. When families compare private schools, they almost always start with the published tuition rate. That number is real, but it's incomplete in a way that can cost you tens of thousands of dollars over a child's enrollment.

The number that matters more is net tuition — what your family will actually pay after financial aid. At most private schools, 20 to 40 percent of families receive some form of financial aid, and the average grant can cover a significant portion of tuition. But here's what most schools don't explain well: financial aid is reassessed every year. Your family's award can change — sometimes significantly — based on income changes, sibling enrollment, the school's total aid budget, and factors you can't predict. A family that receives \$15,000 in aid in year one may receive \$10,000 in year three, not because their finances changed but because the school's priorities shifted.

The question that protects you: ask the financial aid office, "What has been the average year-over-year change in aid awards for returning families over the past three years?" A school that tracks and shares that data is one that treats financial aid as a partnership. One that says "each year is assessed independently" is telling you there's no predictability — and in a commitment that lasts six to twelve years, predictability matters as much as the initial number.

One more thing most families learn too late: tuition refund insurance. If your child needs to withdraw mid-year for medical or personal reasons, you're typically liable for the full year's tuition. Refund insurance costs 1-2% of tuition and protects you from that risk. Most schools offer it during enrollment but don't emphasize it. It's worth having.

[School]'s full cost-of-attendance guide — tuition, fees, average aid awards, and a five-year historical aid retention rate — is at [link]. No form.

— [Name]

MESSAGE 3 OF 4 / SEND 5-7 DAYS LATER

Message 3: The Story

One student who almost didn't apply. The application is not a test of the family.

Subject: The student who almost didn't apply

[Name],

Wanted to share a story.

About four years ago, a mother I'll call Priya reached out to our admissions office late in the cycle – early December, when most families had already been preparing since September. Her son was a strong student at his public school but had been struggling socially. She'd been researching private schools for over a year but hadn't applied anywhere because she was convinced her family wouldn't fit – they didn't come from a private school background, didn't have alumni connections, and weren't sure they could afford it even with aid.

She almost didn't email us. She told me later she'd written and deleted the message three times before sending it.

We invited her son for a shadow day. He spent a full day in seventh-grade classes. At lunch, a student he'd never met sat down next to him and asked what video games he played. By the end of the day, he'd joined an impromptu coding session in the maker space and told his mother he wanted to come back.

Priya applied. Her son was admitted. The financial aid package made it possible. He's now in eleventh grade, co-captain of the robotics team, and – more importantly – he has friends who know him. Priya told me recently that the hardest part wasn't the application. It was believing she was allowed to ask.

I'm sharing this because the families who benefit most from a school like [School] are often the ones who assume they don't belong. If you're wondering whether your child would fit, the answer is almost certainly worth finding out. The application is not a test of your family. It's the beginning of a conversation.

If you want to have that conversation informally – before any paperwork, before any testing, before any commitment – reply or call [number]. One more note and I'll leave you alone.

– [Name]

MESSAGE 4 OF 4 / SEND 5-7 DAYS LATER

Message 4: The Clean Close

Three options. The exit is graceful. The questions are theirs to use — with anyone.

Subject: Last note from me

[Name],

Last email unless you want to stay in touch. Three options:

If you want to visit: Reply or call [number]. We'll arrange a shadow day for your child and a private conversation — not a formal interview — with an admissions counselor. If [School] isn't the right fit academically, socially, or financially, we'll tell you that honestly and, if we can, suggest schools that might be.

If you want to keep learning: [School] publishes a [monthly/quarterly] parent resource — not admissions marketing, but real guidance on topics like navigating the financial aid process, understanding learning differences, and what research says about school transitions at different ages. [link] to subscribe.

If [School] isn't the right school: Wherever your child ends up, four questions will help you choose well: (1) Can my child shadow before we apply — and will the visit be in a real class, not a curated tour? (2) What is the average financial aid retention rate for returning families? (3) What is the student attrition rate, and why do families leave? (4) Can I speak with a current parent whose child entered mid-cycle or from a non-traditional background? The schools that welcome these questions are the ones that have good answers.

Either way, I hope your family finds the right fit.

— [Name]

How to ship this

- **Replace the brackets.** [School], [Name], [role], [number], [link] — every placeholder filled, nothing left in template form.
- **Pick a real admissions director as the sender.** Not a marketing coordinator. Use the actual admissions contact's direct line and reply-to.
- **Render the body as plain text.** HTML email part, slightly large font (~16-17px), warmer-than-white background. Looks typed. Reads typed. People scan plain text differently.
- **Mind the cadence.** Message 1 within 4-24 hours of the visit. Message 2 three to four days later. Message 3 five to seven days after that. Message 4 five to seven days after that. Then stop.
- **Honor the promise.** If you said “last email,” it's the last email. Reactance kills the relationship faster than silence.