

The Path to College Basketball

What Incoming 9th & 10th Graders Need to Know — Starting This School Year

The recruiting and eligibility clock starts earlier than most families realize. This guide breaks down, in order, exactly what to do first — from making your high school team to registering with the NCAA Eligibility Center to reaching out to college coaches the right way.

STEP ONE: NONE OF THIS MATTERS IF YOU DON'T MAKE THE TEAM

Before eligibility centers and recruiting emails — the very first job for a 9th or 10th grader is making the high school roster and being ready for tryouts. College coaches, NCAA registration, and recruiting outreach are all downstream of actually playing.

- Find out the tryout date as soon as school starts — don't wait for a flyer, ask the coach directly.
- Get in the gym and the weight room now. Ballhandling, conditioning, and strength are evaluated in the first 10 minutes of tryouts.
- Know what the coach values (defense, effort, coachability) and show it every single rep — tryouts are won on hustle plays as much as skill.
- Have a backup plan: JV, freshman team, or a club/AAU season keeps you playing and developing even if varsity doesn't happen right away.
- Follow up with the coach after tryouts regardless of outcome — ask what to improve for next season.

THE MASTER TIMELINE — FIRST TO LAST

1**Make Your High School Team** 9th & 10th Grade — Every Season

- Prep for tryouts, earn your role, stay eligible academically at your school (separate from NCAA rules).
- Play up in AAU/club ball when possible — exposure and reps matter more than trophies right now.

2**Start Your Core Course Tracking** 9th Grade — Day One of Freshman Year

- Every grade in an NCAA-approved core course (English, math, science, social studies, foreign language) counts toward eligibility starting freshman year — there's no redo.
- Meet with your guidance counselor and confirm your school's official NCAA-approved course list.
- Aim well above the minimum GPA floor (2.3 for D1, 2.2 for D2) — a 3.7 transcript can calculate lower once only core classes are counted.

3**Create a Free NCAA Profile Page** Sophomore Year (10th Grade)

- Sign up for the free NCAA Profile Page at eligibilitycenter.org — this is the entry-level account and it's free.
- This is different from the paid Certification Account, which comes later (typically junior year) once you're being recruited by D1 or D2 schools.
- D3 schools don't require Eligibility Center registration at all — admissions standards are set by each individual school.

4**Lock In the 10-Before-Senior-Year Rule (D1 only)** By the End of 10th & 11th Grade

- D1 requires 10 of your 16 core courses (7 of them in English, math, or science) completed before the start of senior year — and those 7 grades are locked in and cannot be retaken to improve your GPA.
- D2 has no locked-in rule — all 16 core course grades stay improvable through senior year, which gives late bloomers more room.
- This is the single most missed rule in youth recruiting — track it starting now, not junior year.

5**Build Your Highlight & Skills Video** 10th Grade, Ongoing

- Start collecting game and skills footage now so you have a body of work by the time coaches can legally respond (see Step 7).
- Keep it simple: best plays first, full name/grad year/position/height on screen, under 3-4 minutes.

6**Begin Reaching Out to College Coaches Yourself** 9th & 10th Grade — Any Time

- Athletes can email or message college coaches at any time, in any grade — there's no restriction on a player initiating contact.
- Coaches CAN reply with general, non-personalized info (camp invites, questionnaires, school materials) at any time.
- For most sports, D1/D2 coaches legally cannot send personalized recruiting communication back (calls, direct emails, DMs) until June 15 after your sophomore year — but basketball is grouped with football, baseball, softball, and lacrosse under the same June 15 rule, so this applies here too.
- D3, NAIA, and JUCO coaches have no contact-period restriction and can respond to athletes at any grade level — this makes 9th/10th grade a great time to build those relationships.
- Email etiquette: use a professional subject line, include grad year, position, height, GPA, highlight link, and your AAU/club schedule — keep it under one page.

7**Use Social Media the Right Way** 9th & 10th Grade, Ongoing

- A player can follow, like, comment on, and DM college programs and coaches at any time — there's no rule against a recruit initiating this.
- Before a coach's contact period opens, they're limited to liking or sharing your posts — they generally can't comment or DM back yet.
- Keep your recruiting profile (Instagram/X/Hudl) public, positive, and active: game clips, camp attendance, grades/academic honors, and team-first moments. Avoid drama, negativity, or anything you wouldn't want a coach to see.
- Tag your club/AAU program and use your grad year in your bio so coaches searching a class can find you.

8**Attend Camps, Combines & Team Events** 10th Grade Summer Onward

- Camps and clinics are how D1/D2 coaches legally evaluate players before the contact period opens — get on film in front of them.
- NAIA and JUCO coaches recruit far more casually and can build relationships earlier — don't overlook these levels as legitimate paths.

9**Register & Pay for the NCAA Certification Account** Typically Junior Year (Grade 11)

- This is the paid account (\$90 U.S./territories/Canada, \$150 international, fee waivers available) required once D1 or D2 coaches are actively recruiting you.
- This is when the NCAA formally certifies your core-course GPA and confirms eligibility status.

Register for NAIA and/or JUCO Paths as Backup or Primary Options **Junior Year**

- Create a PlayNAIA.org account if NAIA programs are a fit — NAIA qualification is either a 2.30 final HS GPA alone, or two of three: 2.0 GPA, top-half class rank, or an 18 ACT/970 SAT.
- JUCO (NJCAA) requires only a high school diploma or equivalent and has open, flexible recruiting rules similar to NAIA — a strong two-year pathway to a four-year program for players who need more academic or athletic development time.

ACADEMIC ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS BY DIVISION

As of January 2023 the NCAA permanently went test-optional for initial eligibility — the SAT/ACT sliding scale is gone for D1 and D2. Eligibility now rides entirely on core-course GPA. (Individual colleges may still use test scores for admission and academic scholarships — that's separate from NCAA athletic eligibility.)

Level	Core Courses	Min. GPA	Test Score	Key Rule
NCAA D1	16 core courses	2.3 core-course GPA	Not required	10 of 16 courses (7 in Eng/math/science) locked in before senior year
NCAA D2	16 core courses	2.2 core-course GPA	Not required	No lock-in rule — all grades improvable through senior year
NCAA D3	None (NCAA-wide)	Set by each school	Set by each school	NEW for 2026-27: a free Eligibility Center Profile Page (NCAA ID) is now required, even though academic standards are still set by each school
NAIA	None	2.30 final HS GPA alone qualifies	18 ACT / 970 SAT (if using 2-of-3 path)	OR meet 2 of 3: 2.0 GPA, top-50% class rank, 18 ACT/970 SAT. Register at PlayNAIA.org
JUCO (NJCAA)	None	HS diploma or equivalent	Not required	Open, flexible recruiting — no NCAA-style contact period restrictions

Reality check: roughly 1 in 4 college-bound student-athletes fail to meet NCAA academic minimums each year — and it isn't always the weakest students. Athletes with strong overall GPAs still get flagged when non-core electives are stripped out of the calculation. Track core-course GPA specifically, not just report-card GPA.

RULE CHANGES: WHAT'S NEW & WHAT'S COMING

NEW for 2026-27 — D3 now needs an NCAA ID

Every incoming Division III athlete — not just D1/D2 — must now register with the NCAA Eligibility Center for a free NCAA ID (Profile Page). Academic standards are still set by each D3 school, but the registration step is new this year.

Coming — D1 five-year, age-based eligibility clock

In June 2026 the NCAA approved a new age-based eligibility model for Division I, replacing the old four-seasons-in-five-years system. The five-year clock starts at first full-time college enrollment or the academic year after an athlete turns 19, whichever comes first, and runs continuously (no more redshirt-driven extensions). This is fully in effect for every athlete enrolling in fall 2027 or later — which covers essentially all of today's 9th and 10th graders. It doesn't change anything you need to do now, but it's good to understand.

WHEN TO REGISTER WITH THE NCAA ELIGIBILITY CENTER

Free NCAA Profile Page — Sophomore year (10th grade)

Entry-level, no cost. Recommended starting point for every athlete, even if D1/D2 isn't confirmed yet. NEW: as of 2026-27, this is now required for D3 as well, not just D1/D2 — it issues the NCAA ID number every incoming NCAA athlete needs, regardless of division.

Paid NCAA Certification Account — Junior year (11th grade), or once actively recruited by a D1/D2 program

\$90 for U.S./territories/Canada, \$150 international. Fee waivers available. This is what officially certifies eligibility.

NAIA — PlayNAIA.org — Junior year recommended

First-time NAIA competitors must register and be cleared before their first competition.

JUCO / NJCAA — No formal early registration — handled through the college during junior/senior year

Recruiting is open and casual; official visits require the junior year to be completed first.

QUICK-REFERENCE CHECKLIST FOR THIS SCHOOL YEAR

- Confirm tryout dates and be ready — this comes first, every year.
- Meet with your counselor and get your school's NCAA-approved core course list.
- Track every grade in a core class starting now — nothing before this year can be fixed retroactively.
- Set up a free NCAA Profile Page if you're a sophomore.
- Start (or keep building) your highlight video and a clean, public, active social media presence.
- Email 5-10 target college programs with your info and highlight link — coaches can't fully respond yet, but they're watching.
- Sign up for at least one camp or exposure event this year.
- Circle June 15 after sophomore year on the calendar — that's when D1/D2 coaches can start direct communication.

Rules summarized here reflect official NCAA, NAIA, and NJCAA policy for the 2026-27 academic year, verified against NCAA.org as of August 2026, including the new D3 registration requirement and the D1 age-based eligibility model approved June 2026. Requirements change year to year — always confirm current, official rules at eligibilitycenter.org, playnaia.org, and njcaa.org, and check with your high school counselor before making decisions.

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