

HOW READY ARE

YOU



FOR THE
COLLEGE ADMISSIONS
PROCESS?

*Do you know how much
has changed?*



UNDERSTANDING
THE CHOICES



COLLEGE ADMISSION READINESS



KNOWLEDGE

Knowledge is about what students and families know regarding higher education today. It includes understanding the differences between colleges and universities, recent policy changes, and varying requirements.



CAPITAL

Capital refers to the financial resources families can invest in their students' college education. This includes money for primary and secondary school choices, test preparation, summer enrichment programs, and other resources to help students prepare for college.



WILLINGNESS TO ACT

After gaining knowledge and capital, students must decide how to use that information. Will they apply to competitive colleges or just local schools? It's also important that parents, guardians, and educators support the students' dreams and plans in the college admission process.

The college admissions process is more complex and competitive than ever before. Success in this journey requires a strategic approach, an understanding of the evolving landscape, and a commitment to preparation. It's no longer enough to rely on grades or test scores; today's applicants must demonstrate knowledge of the system, access to resources, and the willingness to act decisively. The question is:

How ready are you?

College readiness is more than a checklist; it's a mindset encompassing three critical elements: **knowledge**, **capital**, and **willingness to act**. Here's how these components come together to prepare families for navigating the admissions process effectively.



UNDERSTANDING THE ADMISSIONS LANDSCAPE

*Knowledge is the foundation of college readiness.
To make informed decisions, students and families must understand
the ever-changing dynamics of higher education.*

10 ESSENTIAL INSIGHTS FOR COLLEGE ADMISSIONS SUCCESS

1. It's a new day

The college admissions process has undergone a significant transformation. With a record number of applications and the emergence of online application platforms, even what some consider “safety schools” are now unreliable. Gaining admission to the most selective schools in the country demands more than just good grades and test scores; it requires a compelling narrative, proven resilience, and a unique perspective.

Parents must take ownership of understanding this evolving landscape to effectively support their children. The strategies that worked for students or parents 5 or 20 years ago are no longer relevant. It is imperative that parents adapt to this new admissions framework to help their children succeed.

2. Race is no longer a factor

After the Supreme Court's 2023 decision to end race-conscious admissions, families must rethink how to show diversity in college applications. Black

students should focus on sharing their identity, resilience, and contributions without mentioning race directly. Data from selective colleges shows a significant drop in Black representation in classes after the Court's ruling in 2024, making it clear that personal experiences and values are important.

Admissions officers now look for diverse experiences, leadership, and advocacy. Parents should encourage their children to highlight activities that show cultural awareness or service to underserved communities. This new situation requires thoughtful storytelling,

helping students to showcase their unique backgrounds and stand out in the admissions process.

► WHAT DOES THE LAW SAY NOW?

“Nothing in this opinion should be construed as prohibiting universities from considering an applicant’s discussion of how race affected his or her life, be it through discrimination, inspiration or otherwise.”

— Chief Justice John Roberts

3. The process has already begun

College planning begins earlier than many parents realize, especially for families considering applying to more selective colleges and universities. If this is your student’s goal, you should start preparing during middle school or early high school. Due to the necessary course sequencing and preparation required to remain competitive for these selective schools, parents must be deliberate in choosing challenging courses, exploring extracurricular interests, and preparing for standardized tests.

► NEED TO KNOW

Research shows that many U.S. colleges **accept most applicants**, with over half having acceptance rates of **67% or higher**. This means that while gaining admission is attainable for most students, those aiming for more selective schools should **start planning early**. Take the initiative to prepare for your future at a competitive institution!

4. You have to talk about money

The rising cost of college tuition is an issue every family must face. Financial planning is crucial for families with college-bound students, especially given systemic inequities in wealth distribution and financial aid access. Parents should avoid hiding financial matters from their children; open discussions can alleviate stress related to funding education.

Dipping into retirement savings or incurring unmanageable debt for college is not a viable solution. Instead, families must have honest conversations about affordability and return on investment (ROI) to make informed decisions. No family should begin this journey without a clear plan for funding their student’s education.



► NEED HELP DETERMINING AFFORDABILITY?

Most schools in the United States have a **net price calculator** on their website, as federal law requires institutions that participate in federal student aid programs to provide this tool for estimating college costs.

5. Reimagining your college list

It’s time for Black families to expand their college options beyond Ivy League schools and mainstream rankings. Consider Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), lesser-known regional universities, and smaller institutions with strong academic programs.

A solid college list is essential for a successful application process. Include a mix of safety schools — where admission is likely — target schools, where students meet average criteria, and reach schools, which are more competitive. This approach gives students diverse options to support their education and personal growth.

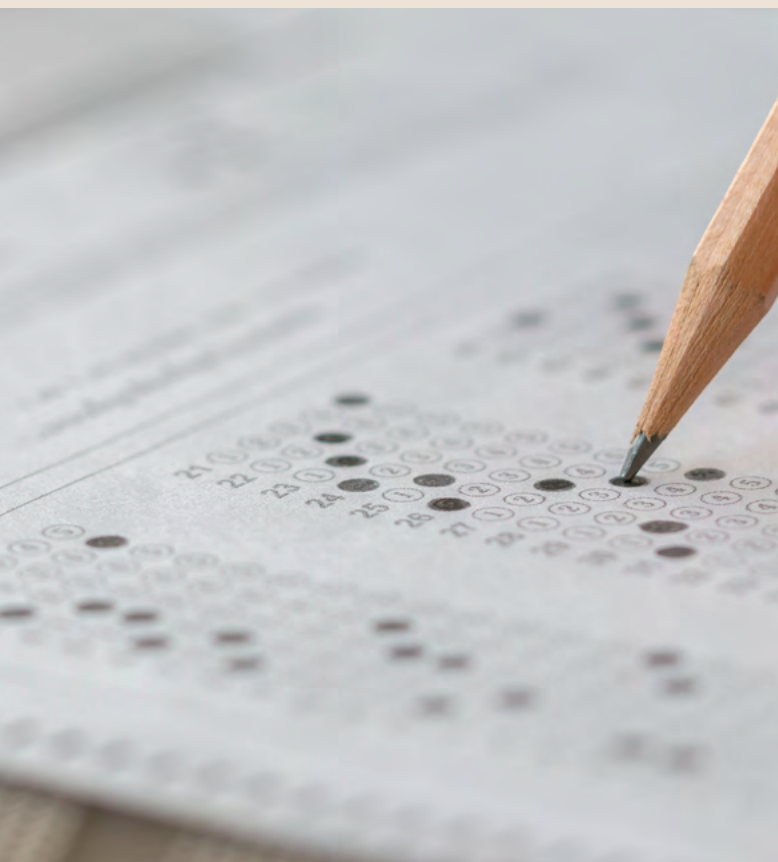
► WHAT DO THE NUMBERS SAY?

Data indicates that only around **8% of Black students** are enrolled in Ivy Plus and other highly selective institutions, which is significantly lower than their proportion in the general population. This underrepresentation may worsen following the recent Supreme Court decision that prohibited race-conscious admissions.

6. Your high school name does not matter as much as you think

Elite high schools often highlight their college placement statistics to attract families, but simply attending one does not guarantee college admission. Admissions decisions focus more on individual merit, personal stories, and institutional needs rather than just the school's reputation.

While prestigious schools offer opportunities, it's up to the student to take advantage of them. A student's success in college admissions depends more on how they utilize the resources available to them than on the school's name.



7. Testing is still a part of the process

Test-optional policies at colleges may suggest that standardized testing isn't important, but this isn't entirely true. Strong ACT or SAT scores still matter, especially for Black students seeking to differentiate themselves in a competitive admissions landscape. These scores are also essential for some merit-scholarships and honors programs.

Parents should view standardized testing as a valuable tool. Investing in test preparation and optimizing score submissions can help families use test results effectively. Testing remains crucial in college admissions, particularly at selective institutions.

▶ WHAT DO THE EXPERTS SAY?

“Testing policies are in flux: some colleges won't consider scores, some give applicants the choice, and some require scores. The safest route for an applicant is to get their best possible score by the summer before 11th grade and then work with your counselors to figure out whether sending them will help.”

— Akil Bello
Expert, college access and testing

8. Don't overlook HBCUs

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have been instrumental in advancing the educational and social status of Black Americans for nearly two centuries. These institutions offer an environment that is both supportive and culturally affirming, boasting an impressive record of successful alumni who excel in various sectors.

While it's important to recognize that HBCUs, like any institution, have challenges, we must highlight their crucial role as pillars of resilience and empowerment, particularly in the current political climate, where the fight for racial equity and access to education has never been more urgent. HBCUs provide a unique space for Black students to learn alongside their peers rather than feeling isolated as the minority. This fosters a safe environment that nurtures social, emotional, and academic growth. By overlooking the significance of HBCUs, we risk missing vital opportunities that can uplift and inspire future generations.



► THE POWER OF HBCUs

A mother shared a heartfelt story about her son, who had attended a private independent high school in New York throughout his life. He received acceptances from prestigious institutions like Yale, Emory, and several Ivy League schools, along with an offer from Morehouse College. While many in her family felt it would be a mistake for him to choose Morehouse over the other impressive options, her son was unwavering in his desire to attend there.

As the May 1st deadline approached, the mother gently asked him what he wanted to do. He paused for a moment and then expressed something profoundly moving: "All my life, I've been in predominantly white spaces. People

have often questioned my presence, wondered if I was there on a scholarship, and criticized my hair. What I truly want is to be in **a place where I can be myself**, where my identity isn't scrutinized, and **where I can just feel comfortable being me.**"

That moment struck a deep chord with his mother. She began to understand the significance of his feelings and the challenges he faced. Overwhelmed with emotion, she realized he was right. In a courageous decision, she chose to forgo the scholarships and opportunities at the other institutions and is now supporting her son's choice to attend Morehouse, so he can embrace his true self in a welcoming environment.



► A CAUTIONARY TALE

A parent who graduated from an Ivy League institution and worked as a corporate executive has two daughters. The older daughter successfully completed her education at an Ivy Plus institution, while the younger one is currently navigating the college application process.

Unfortunately, in her search for guidance, she consulted **too many sources not directly connected** to the admission field,

leading to confusion amid significant admissions changes. This ultimately resulted in a costly mistake that may have cost her daughter an early admission opportunity. Despite her resilience and ability to adapt, it's evident that an overload of opinions can complicate what should be a straightforward journey. It's essential to **streamline your approach** to important decisions; sometimes, **less truly is more.**

9. Stay away from the Wine and Cheese circuit

As parents, we take great pride in our students and are eager to celebrate their accomplishments, particularly within social circles like the Wine and Cheese circuit, where discussions about college admissions are frequent. When one family successfully navigates this complex process, they may be viewed as experts. However, the reality behind a student's admission often remains unclear, so it's important to approach their insights with a critical perspective.

College admissions — especially at selective schools — do not follow a universal formula. Each applicant's journey is unique and influenced by a variety of personal and external factors. Instead of fostering a sense of community, these discussions can sometimes become competitive and focused on seeking validation. To avoid this, it's best to seek admission advice from professionals in the field and individuals who are directly connected to schools or admissions processes.





10. Redefining success

For many families, the college admissions process is seen as the ultimate measure of success, often equating prestigious admissions with personal achievement. For Black families, however, redefining success involves focusing on purpose rather than prestige. True success lies in finding a college that meets a student's academic, social, and emotional needs — a place where they can grow and feel a sense of belonging.

Traditional markers of success like brand-name schools and high rankings can come with hidden costs, including mental health issues and financial burdens. By broadening the definition of success to include factors like cultural fit and supportive environments, families can promote long-term fulfillment and growth.

► LET'S TALK NUMBERS

Fewer than 1% of college students attend Ivy League and other highly selective private colleges like Harvard, Yale, Duke, and Stanford.



INVESTING IN THE JOURNEY

Capital goes beyond financial resources; it includes the investments families make to support a student's academic and personal growth. Key areas of investment include:



1. Financial planning

College costs can be high, so it's important for families to address affordability early. Utilizing net price calculators and exploring scholarships can help reduce expenses, while evaluating the return on investment (ROI) ensures informed decisions about which institutions to consider.

2. Enrichment opportunities

Participation in summer programs, test prep, and extracurricular activities is vital for creating a competitive college applicant. These experiences enhance a student's profile and demonstrate dedication to personal growth.

3. Access to expertise

Navigating college admissions can be complex, but seeking guidance from school counselors, independent consultants, or community organizations can provide clarity. Expert advice helps families develop tailored strategies to achieve their college goals.



TURNING PLANS INTO ACTION

Knowledge and resources are only as effective as the willingness to act on them. This means being proactive and intentional throughout the process. Key actions include:

1. Starting early

Early planning allows for a more thorough exploration of colleges, deadlines, and requirements. It also minimizes last-minute stress.

2. Building a balanced college list

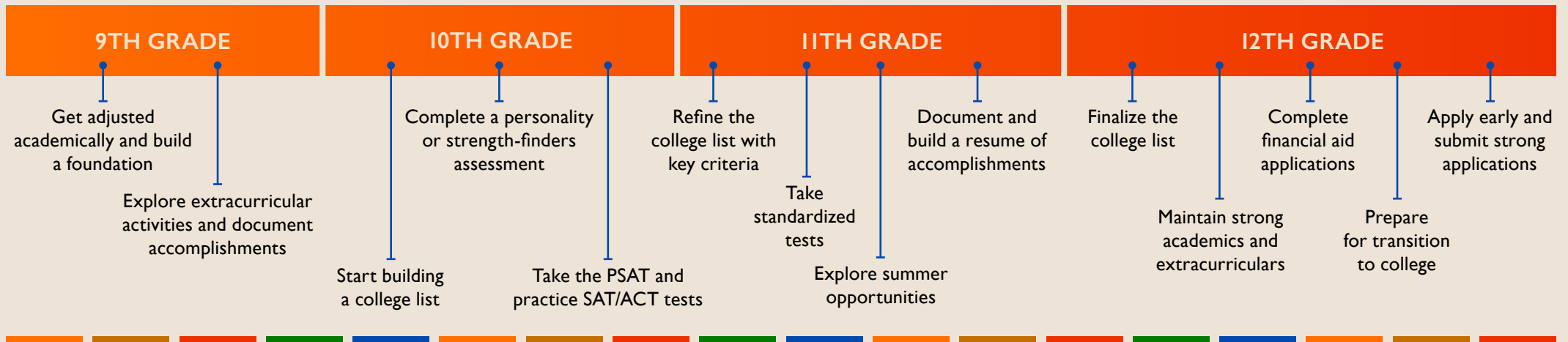
A strategic list includes a mix of reach, match, and safety schools, ensuring options that align with academic goals, financial considerations, and personal preferences.

3. Engaging in the process

From writing essays to preparing for interviews, every part of the application should reflect authenticity and effort. Families must stay organized and responsive to deadlines and opportunities.



TIMELINE FOR SUCCESS



9th grade


2 MOST IMPORTANT THINGS

1. Get adjusted academically and build a foundation

The focus should be on achieving the best grades possible and developing time management skills. Starting strong academically prepares students for advanced coursework later.

2. Explore extracurricular activities and document accomplishments

Engage in clubs, sports, and a variety of interests and activities to enrich your experience, while proactively documenting your academic and extracurricular achievements from the start.



10th grade

3 MOST IMPORTANT THINGS

1. Complete a personality or strength-finders assessment


Think about taking a personality or strength-finders assessment, which can provide valuable insights into your unique strengths and preferences. These assessments are designed to highlight the areas where you excel and things you genuinely enjoy, offering guidance as you navigate your future career and college choices. By understanding your personal attributes better, you can make more informed decisions that align with your passions and abilities.

2. Start building a college list

Start exploring colleges and universities that interest you. If possible, visit their campuses to understand the environment and culture. Consider **important factors like tuition, location, and available majors**. Early exposure will help you refine your preferences and clarify what you want in your college experience. This proactive approach will guide you toward making a more informed decision about your educational future

3. Take the PSAT and practice SAT/ACT tests

Register for the PSAT and take practice standardized tests in the spring. This will help you find effective testing strategies and familiarize you with the format and question types of the SAT or ACT. Most schools don't require standardized testing, so if you're not comfortable taking the test, you have options. Having choices is always a plus.



11th grade

4 MOST IMPORTANT THINGS

1. Refine the college list with key criteria

When refining your college list, focus on four key factors: **cost, location, major, and career prospects**. Both parents and students should also consider school size, academic offerings, and diversity. Additionally, think about schools that align with your student's faith, learning style, or any other specific needs that may be important to your family.

2. Take standardized tests

IF you and your student believe that taking the SAT or ACT should be part of your college preparation plan, it's important to prepare for these exams. The junior year is crucial for achieving strong test scores and understanding how those scores will impact the college admission process.

3. Document and build a resume of accomplishments

Create a resume of your accomplishments and continuously update it with your activities, leadership roles, and awards to build a strong application narrative. **Keep in mind that schools appreciate more depth than breadth in your experiences.** It's perfectly fine to focus on a few areas you are truly passionate about. Schools understand that not everyone is well-rounded, but they do want to see that you are actively involved

4. Explore summer opportunities

Seek summer opportunities to use the time productively, such as internships, projects, or academic programs, to enhance your college profile. **Choose activities that you genuinely enjoy, rather than those you believe will simply impress a college.**

12th grade

5 MOST IMPORTANT THINGS

1. Finalize the college list

Finalize your college list by **emphasizing a balanced and realistic selection of schools based on your individual priorities and acceptance rates**. We recommend that your list should consist of no more than 12 to 15 schools, rather than 20.

2. Apply early and submit strong applications

Avoid last-minute submissions by creating a timeline that gives you ample time to develop polished applications. Focus on crafting clear narratives and tailored essays. If applicable, research early decision and early action options at the schools you plan to apply to.

3. Complete financial aid applications

Ensure your financial future by completing the FAFSA and, if required, the CSS Profile. Don't miss out on valuable institutional and outside scholarships that can make a difference, aligning with your family's finances and the student's unique strengths. **Remember, this essential step is separate from the college application process and needs to be initiated by parents or guardians.**



4. Maintain strong academics and extracurriculars

Students must prioritize maintaining strong grades through graduation and fully commit to their activities, as performance in the senior year significantly influences admissions decisions.

5. Prepare for transition to college

Although not explicitly mentioned in the 12th-grade checklist, **helping students become more independent is essential**. They should regularly check their admission portals throughout the admission process. Once admitted, they should start considering housing, orientation, and their overall transition to campus. This approach aligns with comprehensive planning for their future.

WHAT NEXT?

As you move forward in this process, there are some essential next steps to consider.

- **Start with your College Counselor**

and discuss your student and family goals. Share any concerns and ask about academics, admission requirements, and financial aid. Remember, this is a partnership.

- **Seek educational resources that can assist your family.**

Books: Look for guides on college admissions and scholarships, like:

1. *The Ultimate Scholarship Book 2025: Billions of Dollars in Scholarships, Grants and Prizes*
2. *College Admission: From Application to Acceptance, Step by Step*
3. *The Truth about College Admission: A Family Guide to Getting In and Staying*

Online Materials: Use websites like collegeboard.com, and [National Association for College Admission Counseling \(NACAC\)](https://www.nacac.org) for articles and webinars.

Additional Support: If you feel your family could benefit from clarity and extra guidance, please consider connecting with a community-based organization (CBO) or finding an independent college consultant who truly understands your family's unique needs. There are companies and consultants that provide personalized advice, ease the stress of the process, and help you and your child develop a story and a strategy so that they stand out.



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

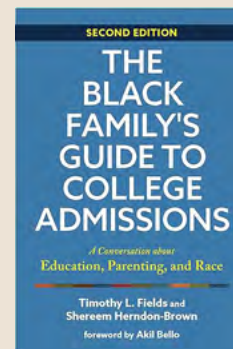


Timothy Fields and Shereem Herndon-Brown: Redefining Success in College Admissions






Timothy Fields and Shereem Herndon-Brown are leading a vital conversation about college admissions in a rapidly changing landscape. They are challenging outdated perceptions of success and are dedicated to bridging the information gap for families across the nation. As co-authors of the bestselling book, *The Black Family's Guide to College Admissions: A Conversation About Education, Parenting, and Race*, now in its second edition, they leverage over 50 years of combined experience from both high school and college perspectives. Their goal is to provide practical and empowering advice to help families navigate this evolving process.

Tim, Senior Associate Dean of Undergraduate Admission at Emory University and a Morehouse College graduate, brings insider knowledge and a passion for equity in admissions. Shereem, Founder and Chief Education Officer of Strategic Admissions Advice, specializes in offering personalized guidance to families and creating innovative college counseling curricula for schools. A graduate of Wesleyan University, he's a champion for accessible and impactful education.

Tim and Shereem provide a dynamic and thought-provoking perspective on college admissions through their book, podcast *Application to Admission*, and speaking engagements. Their impactful work has been featured in NPR, Black Enterprise, the Los Angeles Times, Forbes, and many others, and their book has been recognized as one of the premier resources in college admissions. Their recent John Muir Award from NACAC underscores their unwavering commitment to educational equity in the profession, and they are just beginning their inspiring journey to "redefine success."



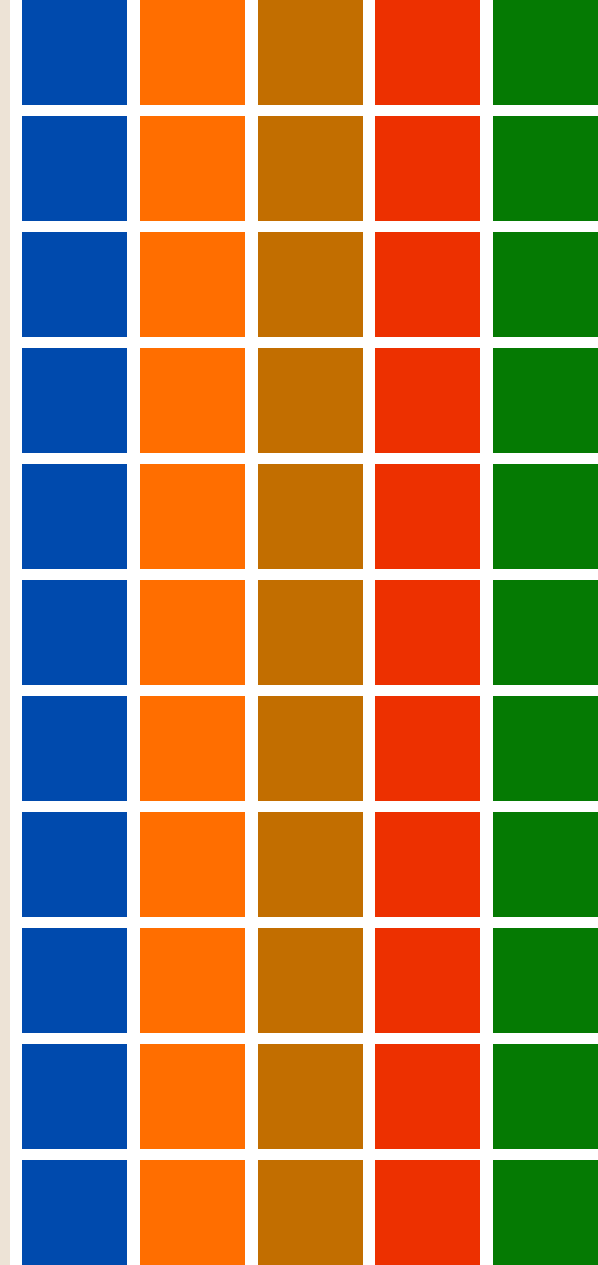
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A Conversation about Education, Parenting and Race***

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