Retention starts during the admissions process and continues through graduation and even beyond. At Minnehaha Academy, a Christian college prep school in Minneapolis, we like to think of it this way: If you’re part of mission promise, you must be part of mission delivery, and that means focusing on retention within day-to-day experiences, not just at certain times or major events.

I’m a full-on geek about admission and retention. I got interested in admissions in college and got my undergrad degree in communication studies. I followed that up by earning a master’s degree, where I studied retention through the admissions process. During an internship at a pretty intense for-profit college, I focused on applying communication theory to the retention process from inquiry through enrollment. From there, I worked in a few different admission roles, including higher ed and a startup company that marketed certificate programs, before moving to the K-12 sector.

In 2014, I joined Minnehaha Academy as the Director of Admission and Enrollment. Based on my studies, past career experiences, and current role, I see six pillars that drive successful retention strategies.
Throughout the admissions process, you’re focused on getting to know the student and the family. By the time they enroll, you understand their interests, challenges, and even their personalities. You need to make sure that all of this beautiful, valuable information doesn’t disappear after the student shows up for the first day of school. Pass on what you know to the head of school or principal, teachers, counselors, head of transportation, or school nurse. It’s not about sharing everything; it’s about ensuring the right people have the right information to help create the best experience possible for the student and the family. 

**#1 Share your valuable information.**

When I first started as admission director, it felt a little bit like I was trying to get up in people’s business because I needed to know what was happening once kids enrolled—who’s in trouble, who might not come back, and who is super happy. I had to learn how to work with principals to establish information-sharing that demonstrates why I need to know some of what they know. Now, I meet with my principal every two weeks to share information. I call it being in the weeds.

**#2 Be in the weeds.**

Because of the relationships we build with kids and their families during the admissions process, they know and trust us. That’s why it’s so important to be present, in the pick-up and drop-off line, at school carnivals, or at sporting events. People will see you and your team in these settings and tell you how things are going, good and bad. Then, you have to know what to do with the feedback, so they feel heard and know what’s going to happen next. Sometimes it’s just about listening and deferring. Other times, it’s something that needs to be referred to the person who can address the concern.

**#3 Refer or defer.**

I used to say that parents won’t pull happy and engaged kids. Now, I add to that: Parents need to be happy and engaged too. The best retention strategies take place in everyday moments. I go through the school calendar and identify events, like a soccer match or a play. Then, I invite a class and their parents to attend the event. Sometimes people just need you to tell them where to show up in order to get involved. Plus, by inviting younger kids to a varsity sporting event, they—and their parents—see their future. Another little thing that works is to snap a child’s photo on an ordinary day at school and text it to the parent. Every parent loves a picture of their kid, and it reminds them of the great investment they’re making in their child’s future.

**#5 Build retention in the little moments.**

You can have the best retention strategy in the world, and people are still going to leave. You have to focus on the story they will tell others about their experience. You want to make sure that even when families decide to leave, they feel like they were heard, understood, and have a positive view of their time at your school. We ask families who don’t enroll two bold questions. Would they ever consider returning? And will they refer other families to us? Roughly 85 percent say yes. That means they went through your whole process and would do it all again. To me, that speaks highly of your school and its ability to retain students.