FOR PARENTS OF FUTURE PAS

The Parent's Guide to PA School

What the profession is, the road your student is on, the numbers programs actually use, and exactly where a parent helps most. Written by a practicing PA who has coached pre-PA students since 2015.

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THE PA PLATFORM

What exactly is a PA?

A PA (physician assistant, also called physician associate) is a licensed medical provider who diagnoses illness, orders and interprets tests, develops treatment plans, performs procedures, and prescribes medication. PAs train in the medical model, the same approach physicians use, and practice in collaboration with physicians in every specialty, from family medicine and dermatology to surgery, emergency medicine, and psychiatry.

$135,880

Median annual pay for PAs (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, May 2025)

21% growth

Projected job growth 2025 to 2035, much faster than average

About 27 months

Typical master's-level program after a bachelor's degree

Every specialty

PAs change specialties without retraining

How PAs become PAs

After a bachelor's degree, students complete an accredited master's program (roughly two to three years of classroom study plus clinical rotations), pass the national certifying exam (the PANCE) to earn the PA-C credential, and obtain a state license. They keep certification through continuing education and periodic recertification.

Why so many students choose it

Compared with medical school, the PA route gets your student practicing medicine years sooner and with far less debt, while still offering a six-figure income, real clinical responsibility, and the freedom to move between specialties. It also tends to allow a more predictable schedule, which matters to students who want a life outside of medicine.

PA vs. Physician vs. Nurse Practitioner

	PA (PA-C)	Physician (MD or DO)	Nurse Practitioner (NP)
Training	Bachelor's degree, then a 2 to 3 year master's program	Bachelor's degree, 4 years of medical school, 3 to 7 years of residency	Nursing degree (BSN), RN experience, then a master's or doctorate in nursing
Model	Medical model, generalist training	Medical model, deepest training and full autonomy	Nursing model, population-focused
Specialty	Chosen after graduation; switch freely	Locked in at residency; switching means retraining	Chosen in school; changing usually needs another certification
Time after high school	About 6 to 7 years, plus patient care experience	11 to 15 years	About 6 to 8 years

> **Bottom line for parents:** if your student wants to practice medicine, wants flexibility, and does not want to spend their twenties in training, PA is often the best fit. The right answer still depends on the student, which is why "why PA and not MD or NP" is the question every interview asks.

The road to PA school, step by step

Programs fill a small class from hundreds of applicants, and most accepted students spend two or more years building their application before they apply.

1. A strong academic foundation

Any major works. Programs look at the overall GPA and the science GPA, and grades count from freshman year. Prerequisites usually include anatomy, physiology, chemistry, biology, microbiology, statistics, and psychology.

2. Hands-on patient care experience

The requirement that surprises families most. Many programs expect 1,000 to 2,000 hours of direct patient care in roles like medical assistant, EMT, CNA, scribe, or phlebotomist.

3. Shadowing and knowing the profession

Committees want proof your student understands what a PA does: shadowing in more than one setting, and a clear answer to "why PA."

4. Testing, for some programs

Some programs require the GRE or the PA-CAT; many have dropped testing. The school list decides what your student needs.

5. The CASPA application

One centralized application opens in late April. Most programs review on a rolling basis, so early and complete beats late and perfect.

6. The personal statement and supplemental essays

A 5,000-character essay that has to sound like your student, then school-specific essays. This is where strong applicants separate.

7. Interviews

Formats range from one-on-one to group and multiple mini interviews (MMI). Practice with feedback makes a measurable difference.

8. Decisions, and sometimes reapplying

Acceptances arrive on a rolling basis. Many excellent PAs did not get in on the first cycle;

The pre-PA timeline, year by year

WHEN	WHAT MATTERS
Freshman year	Protect the GPA. Start prerequisites. Explore healthcare so the choice is informed.
Sophomore year	Get certified (CNA, EMT, or medical assistant). Start patient care hours. Shadow a PA.
Junior year	Build hours steadily. Build relationships for recommendation letters. Research programs and build the school list.
Winter before applying	Write and edit the personal statement. It should be finished before CASPA opens, not during.
The spring CASPA opens	Submit early and complete. Verification takes weeks; rolling programs fill as they go.
The fall after applying	Interviews. Practice matters more than talent here.
The gap year	Normal, common, and often smart. Many accepted students use a year or two after college to build hours and a stronger story.

> **The takeaway:** applying is a two to four year project, not a two month one. A plan set early saves a year later.

The math that matters

1,000 patient care hours is about 20 hours a week for a full year. That is why hours cannot start the spring before applying, and why the families who have the easiest time are the ones who get a certification done the summer after freshman or sophomore year.

What the national data says

35,280

Students applied to PA school in the most recent cycle, the most ever (PAEA data)

3.48

Average applicant GPA

3.68

Average GPA of students who enrolled (science GPA 3.61)

Fewer than 4 in 10

Applicants who start PA school in a given year

Read the GPA lines again. The gap between "applied" and "got in" is only about 0.2 GPA points. Grades get your student in the door, but they rarely decide the outcome.

What separates accepted students from everyone else

- Enough quality patient care hours, at programs that count those hours fully
- A personal statement that sounds like a person, not a template
- A school list built on fit, not rankings (the average applicant applies to about 8 or 9 programs)
- Interview skills that were practiced, not hoped for
- Applying early in the cycle

Every one of those is learnable. None of them are taught in a biology class.

Patient care hours, explained

Programs separate **patient care experience** (hands-on: CNA, EMT, medical assistant, ER tech, phlebotomist) from **healthcare experience** (in a clinical setting but not hands-on: receptionist, pharmacy tech, many volunteer roles). They also define the categories differently, so the same 1,000 hours can look strong at one program and thin at another. That is a big reason the school list matters so much.

Where parents help most, and what to hand off

What helps

- **Make the hours possible.** Helping your student get certified as an EMT or CNA, or supporting a gap year in a patient care job, is one of the highest-return things a family can do.
- **Be the calendar.** Deadlines, prerequisite planning, and CASPA timing are where students slip. Gentle accountability on timing is a real gift.
- **Ask good questions.** "Why PA and not NP?" "Which programs fit your numbers?" Practicing those answers at the dinner table is interview prep.
- **Fund expert eyes, not just tuition.** Coaching costs a fraction of one semester and can decide whether they apply once or twice.
- **Normalize the long game.** Two application cycles is common. A parent who treats a rejection as information keeps a future PA in the game.

What to hand off

- **The personal statement.** Admissions readers can tell when a parent wrote or heavily edited it. Your student's voice has to carry it; let a professional editor coach them instead.
- **Contacting programs.** Calls or emails from parents to admissions offices hurt applicants. Programs want to see an independent adult.
- **Choosing the school list for them.** Fit and acceptance odds beat prestige.
- **Managing every detail.** The application is itself a test of whether your student can run a complex project. Support the structure, then let them own it.
- **Carrying the anxiety.** Students do better when at least one person at home is calm and steady.

Why students with good grades still get rejected

Every cycle we meet students with a 3.8 GPA who did not get a single acceptance. Here is what usually happened:

- **They applied late.** Most programs review on a rolling basis, and seats fill before the deadline.
- **The school list did not fit.** A missing prerequisite, hours that did not count at that program, or only reach schools.
- **The personal statement was generic.** Committees read thousands. "I've always wanted to help people" disappears.
- **The interview was not practiced.** Smart students freeze too, especially in group and situational formats.
- **The hours were thin.** Enough to apply, not enough to compete.

Notice what is missing from that list: intelligence. Every one of these is a strategy problem, and every one is fixable before your student hits submit. The hard part is that families usually do not find out until the rejections come in, and then it is a full year to reapply.

> **The cost of applying twice:** the median PA earns $135,880 a year. When a cycle does not work out, the whole career shifts back a year, plus another round of fees and a student who has to rebuild their confidence. When families weigh the cost of coaching, that is the number to compare it to.

What PA school coaching actually covers

At The PA Platform every coach is a practicing or licensed PA who has been through this process and has coached students through it for years. We work in four phases, and the packages carry a student through all of them with one team.

Phase 1, Explore

Confirm PA is the right fit. Assess where your student stands. Map prerequisites and gaps.

Phase 2, Build

A plan for patient care hours, shadowing, and service. Relationships for strong recommendation letters.

Phase 3, Prepare

A personalized school list built in a strategy session. A personal statement edited until it sounds like your student.

Phase 4, Apply

CASPA review, supplemental essays, and mock interviews before the real ones.

Three ways families work with us

Full Package ($2,000): every phase, one team, scheduled around your student's timeline. **Private Coaching:** twelve months with Savanna or a faculty coach, by application, limited spots each cycle. **Custom Package:** built around the stage your student is in. Single sessions are available too, for families who prefer to start small.

Start at thepaplatform.com/parents, or email savanna@thepaplatform.com and a PA will answer.

Frequently asked questions

My student is still in high school. Is it too early?

No. It is the ideal time to confirm PA is the right goal, choose a college and major with prerequisites in mind, and plan how patient care hours will fit around school.

Does my student need to major in biology?

No. Any major works if the prerequisites are done well.

Is PA school easier to get into than medical school?

Different, not easier. Fewer than 4 in 10 PA applicants start a program in a given year.

Can my student apply straight out of college?

Yes. Many accepted students take a gap year or two to build patient care hours, and it often makes the application stronger.

How many programs should they apply to?

The average applicant applies to about 8 or 9. The right number depends on your student's profile and how well each program fits.

Can I join the sessions?

For counseling and strategy sessions, many families have a parent listen in. Essay editing and mock interviews stay between the student and the coach so the results reflect the student alone. With the student's permission, parents can watch session recordings afterward.

When should we get help?

Ideally by sophomore year, when there is still time to shape hours and grades. The second-best time is now.

> Sources: PAEA applicant and matriculant data (most recent cycle), U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics Occupational Outlook (May 2025). Figures are updated each year; this edition is November 2026.