

The Blueprint
By Michael Hall (revised Sept. 2026)

I'm blessed to have two daughters who are exceptional, each in her own way. Both performed extraordinarily well throughout K–12. One graduated from BARD Queens with a 95+ average while simultaneously earning an Associate's degree, then received a full scholarship to Macaulay Honors College. The other graduated from Brooklyn Tech as school president with a 103 weighted average and is now attending NYU on a full scholarship.

Recently, someone asked me what the “blueprint” was. I gave a surface-level answer in the moment, but afterward I realized there was much more worth saying. I felt I owed the question a more thoughtful response. So I decided to put pen to paper, hoping that somewhere, someone might benefit from an idea or two drawn from my experience. What follows is the story of how my daughters, Alex and Brie, ended up on paths that led to full scholarships. Not by accident. Not simply by luck. And not because of some educational lottery. It was the result of an intentional, long-term approach. My kids will probably give me zero credit for any of it, and honestly, that's fine. But the truth is I executed something close to a 20-year plan, with specific principles, investments, decisions, and course corrections along the way. There was no single magic intervention. Success came from hundreds of small advantages, deliberately stacked over time. Here are 15 practices I intentionally used to give my girls the strongest possible foundation for success.

1. In the Beginning...

One of the earliest things we did was make books a natural part of everyday life. We were fortunate that both my wife and I loved to read. I gravitated more toward nonfiction, while she preferred fiction, but the important thing was that the girls grew up in a home where books were everywhere from Day One. We had floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, and eventually the girls developed their own shelves and collections. Books simply became part of the scenery, like the dining table or the couch. When children grow up seeing books everywhere, picking one up doesn't feel like an assignment. Reading feels normal. Learning feels normal. Curiosity becomes part of the environment.

The second early decision was being intentional about where we lived. When we moved back to New York from Texas, we moved into Cobble Hill, Brooklyn. At the time, we paid what felt like an obscene amount of rent for a 900-square-foot apartment. The rent was roughly twice the mortgage payment on the 3,000-square-foot house we had sold in Texas. Why? District 15. At the time, it had excellent schools, and we believed the sacrifice was worth it. The girls ultimately attended a fantastic and diverse middle school, which helped position them well for competitive high schools. I understand that not everyone can simply pick up and move. Being able to choose a neighborhood based partly on school quality is a privilege, especially in a city like New York. But if you have any flexibility at all, think seriously about the schools attached to where you live. Too often, school quality becomes a secondary consideration in housing decisions. I think that can be a major mistake. A strong elementary school helps prepare a child for a strong middle school. A strong middle school helps prepare them for a strong high school. It is a staircase. And the first step matters.

2. Zero Gaps Policy

Apart from the structural decisions, the first major academic principle was simple: **Zero gaps**. I meant that literally. When the girls were in elementary school, if I noticed either of them struggling with something foundational, whether multiplication, division, fractions, reading comprehension, or another core concept, I did not let it slide. In fact, I often paid more attention to what they got wrong on

a test than what they got right. The mistakes showed me where the gaps might be. If necessary, I would buy a workbook devoted entirely to one subject, such as long division, and we would work through it until the gap was closed. My thinking was straightforward: small gaps do not necessarily disappear. Sometimes they sit quietly in the background until the material becomes more complicated. Then suddenly the child appears to be struggling with algebra, when the real problem began years earlier with fractions. So my goal was to close those holes early and completely. That did two things. First, it created a stronger academic foundation. Second, it built confidence. I also made it a point not merely to prevent the “summer slide,” but to use summer as an opportunity to get ahead. I would buy books covering the fundamentals of the next grade and have the girls spend a little time each day working through them. By the time school started, they had already been introduced to much of the material. So when the teacher introduced a concept, it often wasn’t the first time they had seen it. It was the second. That familiarity matters. Instead of thinking, *What is this?*, the reaction becomes, *Oh, I’ve seen this before*. Confidence compounds too.

3. Pivotal Years

Another important part of the strategy was recognizing that not every school year carries the same weight. Certain transition points have an outsized effect on what comes afterward. The first is right at the beginning: kindergarten readiness. Before they started school, I wanted the girls to know the basics. They could count. They knew the alphabet, shapes, and colors. They could spell and read at an age-appropriate level. Starting school without those fundamentals can put a child in catch-up mode immediately. The next major milestone is around third grade. This is where children increasingly shift from **learning to read** to **reading to learn**. Once textbooks, science lessons, math problems, and social studies all begin depending more heavily on reading comprehension, weak reading skills can spill into nearly every other subject. So we paid close attention to that transition. Once a child can read well enough to learn independently, an enormous amount of the world opens up. The next pivotal period, in my view, is around fifth grade, especially in mathematics. Those years build many of the skills that later feed into algebra. Algebra then becomes a gateway to higher-level mathematics and much of STEM. So I paid very close attention to whether those foundational math concepts were truly solid. For us, three early pillars mattered enormously: **Kindergarten readiness. Third-grade reading. Fifth-grade math**. Get those right, and a lot of what comes later becomes easier.

4. Biology

Another part of the blueprint had nothing to do with textbooks. It was biology. Eyesight. Hearing. Sleep. Nutrition. Energy. Anxiety. Attention. All of it. Sometimes a child appears to have an academic problem when something physical is actually getting in the way. Maybe they cannot see the board clearly. Maybe they are straining their eyes. Maybe they are exhausted. Maybe they cannot hear something properly. Maybe they are not sleeping well. In my own childhood, I could never understand why reading for more than about 30 minutes became uncomfortable. Eventually, an eye doctor explained that although I technically had 20/20 vision, I was slightly squinting and straining to maintain it. Once I received very light “relaxer” lenses, I could read comfortably for hours. It opened a whole new world for me. That experience stayed with me. So check the basics. Can they see? Can they hear? Are they sleeping? Are they eating properly? Is something physiological making learning harder than it needs to be? Small things can have surprisingly large effects.

There is another biological and psychological factor parents should pay attention to: how their child performs under pressure. One of my daughters experienced significant anxiety around standardized tests. That created an entirely different challenge. She might know the material perfectly well but struggle to demonstrate it in a testing environment. Once you recognize that, you can address the actual

problem through things like timed practice, relaxation techniques, appropriate accommodations, and professional support when needed. Because ultimately, it isn't enough for a child to know something. They also need to be able to show what they know when it counts.

5. Stay in Touch

Stay in communication with teachers. Make the phone calls. Send the emails. And **never** skip parent-teacher conferences. My wife and I had essentially a 100% attendance record for parent-teacher conferences for both girls from K–12. Post-pandemic, with many conferences available through Zoom, staying involved is often easier than ever. I believe visible parental involvement matters. Teachers are managing many students. When parents are engaged, asking questions, following up, and paying attention, it creates another layer of accountability and support around the child. You also learn things earlier. A small issue discovered in October is much easier to fix than the same issue discovered in June. Stay connected. Make sure your child does not quietly fall through the cracks.

6. Trust but Verify

I never depended entirely on the school to tell me how well my children were doing. You simply do not know what you are going to get from year to year. Some teachers cover the required material thoroughly. Some may not. And some exceptional teachers go far beyond the curriculum. But as a parent, you cannot build your entire strategy around hoping every teacher will be exceptional. So I created my own checks. Throughout the school year, I used outside tutoring, practice exams, independent testing, and other benchmarks. Not necessarily because there was a problem. Sometimes it was simply verification. I wanted an independent view of where they actually stood. Parents are occasionally surprised when a child who earns A's in school struggles on an external exam. They say, "But my child gets A's." That may be completely true. But a grade tells you how well a child performed against what was taught and measured in that particular classroom. It does not always tell you whether every foundational skill has been mastered. Trust the school. Support the teachers. But verify.

7. Maintenance

That leads naturally to tutoring. I never viewed tutoring strictly as something you use when a child is failing. I thought of it as **maintenance**. Athletes work with trainers even when they are already performing well. Musicians practice even after they know how to play. Why should academics be completely different? Sometimes tutoring was there to fill a gap. Sometimes it reinforced what was being taught. Sometimes it allowed the girls to move ahead. And sometimes it simply kept them sharp. Tutoring can just be a training session, not a rescue mission. The framing matters. Instead of: "They need tutoring because they're struggling." The mindset becomes: "They're training." That feels very different to a child. It is positive. Forward-looking. Normal. You're not calling the repairman after something breaks. You're maintaining the machine.

8. Simplify, Don't Distort

Another principle I followed was to avoid teaching things that I knew they would later have to completely unlearn. Obviously, explanations have to be age-appropriate. You cannot explain quantum mechanics to a four-year-old (at least not yet I think). But there is a difference between **simplifying something** and teaching something that is fundamentally false because it is easier. I tried to give them the simplest version that was still true. For example, I never taught them to think reality was necessarily limited to exactly three dimensions or that human beings had only the traditional "five senses" as though those were complete scientific descriptions. Instead, I would introduce a basic version and gradually add complexity as they became capable of understanding more. The idea was simple:

Build upward. Don't teach something today that has to be demolished tomorrow. I think that approach encourages curiosity and critical thinking. Children learn that knowledge can deepen without having to feel that everything they previously learned was wrong.

9. Teach Concepts

One thing that has always fascinated me is how many people know the formula for the area of a triangle: $\frac{1}{2} \times \text{base} \times \text{height}$ but have never really thought about why it works. A triangle is essentially half of a rectangle or parallelogram with the same base and height. Once you understand the concept, the formula becomes obvious. That distinction mattered to me. I did not want my daughters only memorizing formulas. I wanted them understanding ideas. Even before they were ready for calculus, I introduced calculus-adjacent ideas conceptually. We could talk about slope. Change over time. Acceleration. How quickly something is increasing or decreasing. No complicated notation was necessary. The objective was familiarity. Then, when they eventually encountered those ideas formally, they were not completely foreign.

I also deliberately presented mathematics as another **language**. That put math into a different psychological category. For example, when the girls were very young, I might ask: "If you add three eggs to four eggs, how many eggs do you have?" "Seven eggs." "Okay. If you add three bananas to four bananas?" "Seven bananas." Then I said: "So if you add $3X^2$ to $4X^2$, what do you have?" " $7X^2$." They were around four years old. Obviously, they did not understand algebra in the formal sense. That wasn't the point. The point was that expressions involving variables didn't look frightening or mysterious. They were simply another way of talking. Math became emotionally neutral. And I believe that paid dividends later.

10. Strategic Investment

"Throw money at it" has gotten a bad reputation. But sometimes throwing money at the right problem is extremely effective. If I could afford a tool that removed an obstacle, I used it. A strong tutoring program? Pay for it. Good test preparation? Pay for it. Additional books or educational resources? Buy them. Even something as ordinary as paying for an Uber to make sure they arrived at school on time could be worthwhile. That was not about spoiling them. It was about removing friction. Money is a tool. If spending some of it eliminates a barrier, creates an opportunity, saves meaningful time, or increases the probability of success, then using it strategically can make sense. Obviously, every family has different resources. The point isn't that success requires spending large amounts of money. The point is to think intentionally about whatever resources you *do* have and deploy them where they create the most leverage.

So how much is too much? My answer was usually: OD. Why? Because you have no idea what everyone else is doing. I learned that lesson years ago at a school fair in Texas. There was a raffle for an iPad, and tickets were one dollar each. I figured I was being aggressive, so I bought ten tickets. Then, just before the drawing, I decided ten wasn't enough. I bought twenty more. Thirty tickets. I remember thinking, 'Okay, now I'm really going for it.' Then they drew the winner. It wasn't me. Another father won the iPad for his son. Later, I found out he had bought 100 tickets! I never forgot that. Here I was thinking thirty tickets was a lot. But compared with the person I was actually competing against, it wasn't. That taught me an important lesson: you may not really know what "a lot" is. You may think you're doing a lot. You may think you've invested enough. You may think you've prepared enough. Meanwhile, somebody else may be putting in two, three, or five times the effort, resources, preparation, or sacrifice. So when something truly matters, don't stop simply because your effort feels excessive. Within your means, use every legitimate advantage available to you. Invest the time. Invest the money. Use the tutor. Buy the

book. Take the extra class. Get the test prep. Remove the obstacle. Stack the advantages. Because sometimes what feels like overdoing it is simply what it takes to compete with people who are overdoing it too.

11. Sky High

I believed in setting very high expectations. Different families and communities develop different norms around academic performance. But regardless of the environment around you, every household ultimately establishes its own standards. Once number grades became part of school, our expectations were clear. In our house, 95+ was the target. Anything below 90 was something we were going to discuss, understand, and work to improve. That did not mean a lower grade was some catastrophe. It meant we paid attention. The standard itself mattered. Over time, excellence became normal rather than exceptional and the girls eventually became self-propelled setting that expectation for themselves. Children often calibrate themselves partly against what the people around them consider normal. If doing your best, studying, preparing, and improving are simply what the family does, those behaviors become part of the culture of the home. Set the bar high. Then give them the support necessary to reach it.

12. Play Games

Young children often do not distinguish very much between an “educational game” and a regular game. It is all just play. Use that. I taught my daughters chess when they were around four. To them, it was simply another game. They were not thinking: *I'm developing executive function, strategic planning, pattern recognition, and forward thinking*. They were trying to beat Daddy. Meanwhile, all of those other skills were developing in the background. Learning does not always need to look like school. Games can teach planning. Puzzles can teach persistence. Card games can teach probability and arithmetic. Strategy games teach consequences. When children are having fun, they may practice a skill far longer than they would if you called the same activity “studying.” Never waste play.

13. Flashcards: The Brute Force of Learning

Do not underestimate flashcards. They are old-school. They are simple. And they work. Repetition is one of the fundamental ingredients of memory. Flashcards allow you to retrieve information repeatedly until recall becomes automatic. Vocabulary. Multiplication tables. Historical dates. Scientific terminology. Foreign-language words. Anything involving rapid recall can benefit. You do not always need an expensive educational program. Sometimes a stack of index cards and a marker can produce enormous results. Low cost. High impact. Brute force learning still has its place.

14. It's a Bar Fight!

Have you ever seen one of those movie bar fights where somebody grabs whatever happens to be nearby? A chair. A bottle. A pool cue. A table. Whatever works. That is how I think about learning. Use every tool available. Do not artificially limit yourself to whatever textbook the school happens to assign. I used YouTube. Educational apps. Websites. Books. Tutors. Games. Practice tests. Videos. Whatever helped explain the concept. If one explanation did not work, we found another. If a teacher's explanation did not click, maybe somebody on YouTube could explain the exact same concept differently and suddenly it made perfect sense. There is no prize for learning something the hard way. Use the chair. Use that bottle. Use that pool cue. It's a bar fight.

And today, that includes tools like ChatGPT. I think completely avoiding AI would be a mistake. The better approach is teaching children how to use it intelligently. Used properly, ChatGPT can allow someone to iterate on thinking at extraordinary speed. It creates a fast, low-pressure feedback loop.

An idea does not need to be fully developed before you begin working with it. You can start with a rough thought. A half-written sentence. A question. An unfinished plan. Then get immediate feedback, identify gaps, test alternatives, and refine the idea step by step. Instead of repeatedly starting over, you continuously improve. In that sense, AI can function less like a static reference tool and more like a thinking partner. But there is an important distinction you must teach. **The ideas must begin with the person, not the tool.** Used passively, AI can replace thinking. Used actively, it can accelerate thinking. That distinction is something children need to really understand. The goal is not: "AI, think for me." The goal is: "Help me think better." If children learn that early, they can gain an incredibly powerful tool without surrendering the critical-thinking skills they will need more than ever.

15. Other Cultures

Be willing to learn from other cultures. No single culture, community, country, or family has a monopoly on the best way to do everything. Different groups develop strengths in different areas. Watch. Learn. Borrow. Adapt. If another culture has developed an approach that seems particularly effective in education, discipline, money, family structure, health, community, or another area, there is nothing wrong with learning from it. You do not have to abandon who you are. You add to who you are. Take the best ideas you encounter and make them part of your own toolbox. Growth requires enough humility to recognize that someone else may know something you don't. The source of a good idea matters far less than whether the idea is good.

Final Thoughts

I once heard a line in a movie that stayed with me: **"How you do anything is how you do everything."** That idea became a quiet rule in our household. More than grades, scholarships, awards, or accolades, what I ultimately wanted to instill in my daughters was a desire to excel. To care about doing things well. To prepare. To follow through. To take pride in their work even when no one was watching. The real goal was never simply the external rewards. Although, let's be honest, the scholarships don't hurt. The deeper goal was helping them develop an internal standard. Because once the motivation becomes internal, so many other things become easier. Learning. Discipline. Resilience. Persistence. Growth. You cannot control every teacher your child will have. You cannot control every opportunity. You cannot control the economy, admissions committees, standardized tests, good fortune, or life. But you can build a foundation. You can close gaps. You can create expectations. You can remove barriers. You can expose them to ideas. You can give them tools. You can teach them how to think. And, little by little, year after year, you can stack the odds in their favor. That, more than anything else, was the blueprint.