

The Ready Year: A Smoother Admissions Season

A back-to-school readiness guide for
international school admissions teams.

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The Before-Term Problem

Every admissions team knows the feeling. The new academic year is approaching, new families are arriving, re-enrolment for existing students overlaps with fresh intake, and the team that should be building relationships is instead chasing missing documents, re-keying data and answering the same five questions by email forty times a day.



Whether your school year starts in August, September or January, the readiness window is the same: the weeks before term, when the work either gets done in advance or piles up into the first days back. And the pressure is not imagined. [ISC Research](#) records 14,833 K-12 international schools worldwide as of January 2025, educating 7.4 million students. Enrolment across the sector grew by 13% over the five years to 2025. More schools, more families, more applications, and admissions teams largely the same size as before.

The nature of the applicant is shifting too. Across the sector, local and nationally based families now form the majority of enrolments rather than the traditional expatriate base, with expatriates making up only around a fifth of students. ([ISC Research, 2025 / ICEF Monitor](#)). That changes what families expect from the admissions process: more questions about curriculum and language provision, longer consideration, and a far lower tolerance for a clunky first impression.

The admissions experience is no longer just administration. It is the school's first and most important sales conversation, and the schools that start the year well are the ones that did the work before term arrived.

What "Ready" Actually Looks Like

A “ready” admissions season should look like:

- Families moving through a clear online portal at their own pace, uploading documents themselves, seeing exactly what stage their application has reached without needing to email anyone.
- Re-enrolment running in the background, with returning families confirmed early so the team can focus its energy on new intake.
- Every payment, deposit and consent collected cleanly.
- Every record flowing into the school's systems without manual re-entry.
- A single, honest view of the funnel so leadership can forecast intake rather than guess.

It also looks like a team that can stop searching for information and start using it. As Colin Docherty, Technology Manager at Oslo International School, puts it:

"Not having to dig through all the information from multiple different places. [Since implementing OpenApply] it's just been a breath of fresh air."

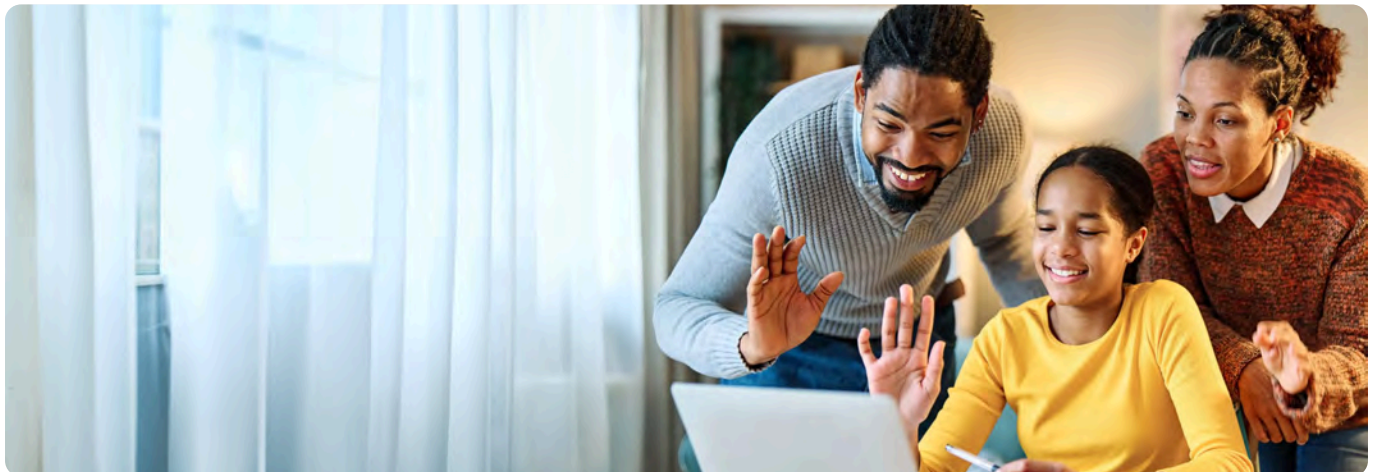
Colin Docherty

Technology Manager, Oslo International School



Most of all, it looks like an admissions team spending the run-up to term on the human part of the job: welcoming families, answering the questions that genuinely need a person, and making the first impression that turns an enquiry into an enrolled, committed family.

That picture is achievable. It just has to be built before the rush, not during it.



The Back-to-School Admissions Readiness Checklist

Work through this in the weeks before term. If you can tick every box, you are ready.

Re-Enrolment

- ☐ Re-enrolment window dates set and communicated to existing families
- ☐ Returning-family forms reviewed, updated for the new year, and kept light to avoid stalling parents
- ☐ Fee and deposit changes reflected accurately — straightforward for flat-rate fees, though sibling or scholarship discounts will need to be applied per student
- ☐ Non-responders identified early so the team can follow up before the window closes

Communication and Marketing

- ☐ Acknowledgement and next-step email templates ready
- ☐ Automated enquiry follow-up set up so no prospective family goes unanswered
- ☐ Lead scoring and source tracking switched on to prioritise the warmest enquiries
- ☐ Nurture campaigns scheduled for enquiries who haven't yet applied
- ☐ Open day and campus visit dates scheduled and bookable
- ☐ Multilingual communication prepared where your applicant base needs it

New Applications

- ☐ Application forms reviewed, simplified and localised where needed
- ☐ Required-document list confirmed and clearly explained to families
- ☐ Language and assessment entry points defined for applicants
- ☐ Application stages and status labels checked so families always know where they stand

Payments and Data

- ☐ Application fee, deposit and payment flows tested end to end
- ☐ Consent and data-protection steps confirmed
- ☐ Integration with your SIS and learning platform tested so enrolled-student data transfers without re-keying
- ☐ A single funnel view set up so admissions and leadership share one live picture of intake

☆ A Tip From the Field

When setting up re-enrolment, **Woodland Star International School** initially asked families for too much at once: *"We built out custom forms for medical information, passport bio pages, the rest of it. In hindsight, that slowed down our re-enrolment because some parents just thought: I haven't got time to do that right now."* Our advice would be: Keep re-enrolment light. Collect the essentials to confirm the place, then gather the rest once the family has committed.

Where It Tends to Go Wrong

Based on extensive research and conversations with our customers at OpenApply, here are the areas where schools most often fall short during admissions season.

Manual Document Chasing

When families post or email documents and a person has to track what is missing, things slip through the gaps between inboxes. Verification of records and English proficiency has become a more prominent expectation in admissions, and while a shared portal gives the team one place to see what's arrived and what's outstanding, someone still has to review each document and follow up with families directly. That work doesn't disappear; centralising it just stops it from getting lost in a scattered inbox.

Fragmented Communication

A family that gets a warm reply one day and silence the next receives inconsistent communication, and will therefore lose confidence. When enquiries are spread across personal inboxes, no one owns the relationship and no one sees the whole picture. Rory Parkinson, Head of School at Woodland Star, describes the pre-system state many schools will recognise: *"You're bouncing between emails which are separate, so you haven't got eyes on the communication in and out with the various stakeholders. You're relying on a lot of data entry, and the complexity of that spreadsheet increases over time."*

Last-minute Form Changes

Editing forms during the rush introduces errors, confuses families mid-application and creates rework that the team cannot afford in the first weeks of term.

No Single View of The Funnel

Without one clear picture of enquiries, applications, offers and confirmations, leadership cannot forecast intake and the team cannot see where families are stalling. As one school put it, the real value is knowing where things stand: *"If something gets dropped, we know where it's getting dropped."*

All four of these areas are not effort problems. They are, in fact, preparation problems - and they can only be solved in advance or not at all.

How OpenApply Makes It Easier

OpenApply was developed to turn the admissions season from a scramble into a process families actually enjoy - for both single schools and school groups.



It gives every family a self-service portal where they apply, upload documents and track their own progress, which removes the bulk of the chasing and the status emails before they start. Automated workflows move applications through your stages, prompt families for what is outstanding and keep the whole team working from the same record rather than scattered inboxes.

The time this returns is real. Customers often report that their admissions officers save up to **10 hours** a week, with senior leaders saving hours, too. At Reddam House Sydney, Head of Admissions Anna Feller describes the difference automation made at scale: "Previously, we had to generate and send offer letters one by one. OpenApply's automation, right through to digital signing, has been a game-changer."

Payments, deposits and consents are collected through the same system, tested and ready before intake begins. And a single funnel view gives admissions and leadership a shared, honest picture of where every family sits. For many schools whose identity depends on knowing each child, that visibility matters beyond efficiency.

The result is the calmer team described earlier: less manual work, a stronger first impression, and a smoother path from enquiry to enrollment. It is also, as one senior leader found, what lets a team stay personal even when volume rises: "Whether it's a current parent or a new enquiry, I pride myself on making time for each family."

Already using OpenApply?

The new year is the moment to make sure you are using all of it. Three things are worth checking before term.

1. Is your re-enrolment workflow automated, rather than run by hand?
2. Does your enrolled-student data flow directly into ManageBac+, so the handover from admissions to teaching is seamless?
3. And is your funnel reporting giving leadership an accurate, live view?

That last one depends as much on clean, consistently updated status data as it does on the tool itself. It is also worth asking what you are not yet using. Many schools run OpenApply for admissions without tapping its marketing and CRM tools to nurture prospective families, or its advancement features to keep alumni connected and giving.

As Anna Feller's team at Reddam House found, the value compounds as you adopt more: they "gradually adopted more of OpenApply's robust features, finding new ways to enhance productivity and communication." Back to school is the natural point to close that gap.

Ready for a Smoother Admissions Season?

The best time to get your admissions operation ready is before the season starts. If you would like to see how OpenApply could help your team spend less time chasing and more time welcoming families, we would be glad to show you.

OpenApply is trusted by more than **800 leading international and independent schools worldwide**. Schedule a demo with our team and we will walk you through how it works for a school like yours.

Schedule your demo of OpenApply today.

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