

Introduction

With our long-term program model, SEA member programs need to recruit students who are interested in all aspects of the program (squash, academics, and community) and who can meet the program's criteria (attendance, grades, behavior, etc.). Across SEA, programs expect to keep approximately one in two or one in three students from the time they join through high school graduation. Having a big pool of candidates enables programs to find the best-fit students, and to keep those students involved over the long-term.

Overview

This guide shares idea about how to recruit the most promising applicants.

- Set high standards
- Recruit from a big pool of candidates
- Build strong school partnerships
- Reduce transportation barriers
- Decide the best method for recruitment
- Prepare staff to lead a great presentation
- Share permissions slips and plan for tryouts
- Follow up with teachers
- Call families to explain the program
- Re-recruit as needed

Set High Standards

Set high standards and be clear about your criteria - among your staff, with school partners, with families, and with students. Here are some factors to consider including in your criteria.

- Attendance:** Our programs are not drop-in programs; we expect students to make a commitment to us, and we make a big commitment to them. Showing up is mandatory. Programs should expect students to demonstrate strong attendance at school and during tryouts. SEA recommends expecting 100% attendance during the first couple months of tryouts, with exceptions made only in special cases, and checking the students' school attendance records to look for red flags.
- Academic Interest/Ability:** SEA programs are geared toward helping students graduate from high school and pursue post-secondary education, so programs should recruit students who show that they care about education. Many programs will cut students who have D's or F's, and some programs set minimum GPA

standards. Some programs also have students complete a writing sample to evaluate academic ability and responsibility (in returning the sample to the program). If your program chooses to serve students who are struggling in school, you should also be intentional how you will provide the intensive academic support they need to graduate high school and succeed in post-secondary education.

- ❑ **“Character” Traits:** SEA programs seek to build a strong community where participants work hard and encourage and respect one another. Select students who will help build, not break down, this strong community.
- ❑ **Squash Interest/Ability:** Squash is a core part of our model. While we may be tempted to accept students who don’t love squash but still want the academic support, we must recognize that it is not realistic to expect a student who doesn’t love squash to stay in our program for years. Only accept students who genuinely enjoy the sport. Some programs will additionally consider athletic ability, knowing that ability often connects to enjoyment and achievement, and thus increases student success and retention in the program.

Recruit from a Big Pool of Candidates

To be able to be selective in who you accept into the program, you must recruit from a large pool of candidates. SEA recommends a **minimum 8-to-1 ratio** of students exposed to the program to students who actually join the team. If you want to have 20 students on your team, you need to sell the program to at least 160 students. The more students you talk to, the more interest you will get.

Build Strong School Partnerships

Strong school partners are key to your recruitment. (See the SEA Best Practice Guide on [School Partnerships](#) for more details on selecting and building strong school partnerships.)

Below are some quick notes specifically related to recruiting.

- ❑ **Leadership:** Ensure that the school leadership is fully supportive of the program and expresses this support openly to the school staff.
- ❑ **School staff:** Find and develop relationships with a few key staff members on the ground to help you recruit the best-fit students. Students often need a nudge and some follow-up from someone they know and trust to join the program.
- ❑ **Criteria:** Be clear with the school about the type of students you are looking for so that they can help identify them. Common indicators include strong school attendance, positive peer and teacher relationships, and no/limited failing grades.
- ❑ **Pool of students:** Ensure that there is a large enough pool of students to recruit from, either by having a large school partner or by having multiple school partners.

Reduce Transportation Barriers

Ensure that there is a solid transportation plan for students to get from school to the program and home again. If students can't safely and easily make it from school to your program and then home again, they will not attend despite your best recruitment efforts. For at least the try-out period, staff members should pick students up everyday after-school to bring them to the program. After the try-outs, you may need to continue with this plan.

Decide Method for School Recruitment

Once you have identified solid school partners, there are several ways to recruit students at those schools.

- ❑ **School field trip to your site:** If you have an inspiring practice space (on a college campus or in your own building), invite schools to come on a field trip with their students to your program. This enables students to really see what squash is, and mini-tours of the space can help drive home the message that your program is also about academic support, college, and community.
- ❑ **Gym clinics at schools:** Visit students' gym classes and let them play squash. This enables you to break students into smaller groups where they can connect personally with staff and have fun while swinging a racquet and getting an idea for what it might feel like to play squash.
- ❑ **Class presentations at schools:** Class presentations are often the least effective way to sell your program, but if they are your only option, make them as engaging and fun as possible.

Note that these methods work best for elementary, middle school, and 9th grade students. Once you get higher than 9th grade, you might need to consider more targeted recruiting through individual referrals from teachers, students currently in the program, and other community partners.

Prepare Staff to Lead a Great Presentation

You have one chance to make a first impression. Staff need to knock this presentation out of the park. They need to be master salespeople - engaging, articulate, and relatable. Students need to think, "I want to hang out more with them." Here are some ways to prepare staff.

- ❑ **All hands on deck:** To see all the students you need to see, you need extra support. All staff should be prepared to help with recruiting visits. Bring in academic staff, the Program Director, the Executive Director (depending on organization size), volunteers, alumni, and older students. Everyone should understand that recruiting a strong class of students is critical to the future of the organization.
- ❑ **Older students and alumni:** Ask dynamic older students and alumni in the area to join the presentations. New students will be more likely to join if they hear from

others like them who joined and loved the program.

- ❑ **Talking points:** Give staff and volunteers a clear script and talking points. Staff don't need to stick exactly to the script, but they should know what they're expected to say and what sells (a fun new sport, opportunities to travel, college support, etc.). Staff who can speak languages that the students speak should have an opportunity to do so in front of the students so they know that you literally can "speak their language."
- ❑ **Rehearse:** Think of the visit as a performance, and rehearse your performance together in advance. Everyone should know what they are going to say and do, and have great delivery.
- ❑ **Coach staff:** If some staff members are not natural presenters, either don't use them to present to the group, or coach them to improve. If helpful, record group or individual rehearsals so staff members can watch themselves and see in what ways they can improve. Keep doing it until it's great!

Share Permission Slips and Plan for Tryouts

You can have an awesome recruitment visit, but if your plan for following up isn't clear, all that energy will dissipate quickly. At the end of the visit, give students permission slips and flyers to get parents' permission to attend tryouts. A few tips on this are below.

- ❑ **Have great flyers:** Have one-page flyers in multiple languages that highlight your key messages about why students should join (an exciting new sport, great friends, homework help, college support, travel opportunities, etc.), have great photos of smiling students and squash, and have staff contact info. If you can afford it, this is the time to splurge on color printing.
- ❑ **Have a designated person at the school collect the permission slips.** In the directions on the permission slip and in your verbal instructions to students, be clear about to whom they should hand in their permission slips (their homeroom teacher, their gym teacher, etc.). Make sure the designated school staff know and are on board to collect them for you.
- ❑ **Give them to everyone.** Do not ask, "Who wants a permission slip?". Even if kids loved your visit, very few kids will raise their hand for a permission slip. Just hand them out, as if you assume all students will want one.
- ❑ **Talk to individual students.** Staff members who had students in their groups who they think would be a good fit should say something to those students individually. A little comment such as, "You did great today. You should tryout. I'd love to see you there." can go a long way.
- ❑ **Have permission slips due 3-5 days after the recruitment visit.** Then send staff to the school everyday or every other day to remind students and follow up with

teachers.

- ❑ **Start tryouts one-two weeks later.** Do not let too much time pass between the recruitment visit and the first tryout date or the enthusiasm will fade. Aim for starting the tryout one to two weeks after the recruitment visit. Tell the students the plan at the end of the recruitment visit.

Follow-up with Teachers

After your recruitment visit, you will need to rely primarily on teachers to help make sure students turn in permission slips and show up for tryouts.

- ❑ Go to the school everyday to check in with teachers about any permission slips they've received. Be super friendly and warm. Your visits will show your commitment and will help keep the permission slips on teachers' radars.
- ❑ Give teachers extra slips to keep in their classrooms for students who need them.
- ❑ Solicit teachers' help in identifying and following up with strong students. Teachers who are willing to say to a student, "Hey, I think you'd like this program and could make the team. You should give it a try," can make a big difference.

Call Families to Explain the Program

As soon as you receive a permission slip, call the family to follow up. Share with them:

- ❑ You are an afterschool and summer program that partners with their child's school to provide sports and academic support to students
- ❑ You teach students the sport of squash, which is like a mix of tennis and handball, but played indoors and with racquets. It's a really healthy and safe sport that is played in some of the best colleges and universities in the country.
- ❑ You also provide homework help and academic enrichment to the students, and stay with them all the way through high school and into college. One of your major goals is to help your students get to and succeed in college if that's the path they want to pursue.
- ❑ Students have to tryout for the program, but their athletic ability isn't what we care most about. We look at their attendance, effort, and character, at school and at the program. We are selective; not everyone makes the team. We want the most committed and hard-working students.
- ❑ The first day of tryouts is _____. Students will get to your program by _____. Students will get home by _____. (Confirm transportation plans.)
- ❑ Parents are welcome to stop by and see the program. You will hold a mandatory meeting for all parents of students who make the team, but you would be happy to see them sooner if they want to come by.
- ❑ Your contact information is on the flyer. They can call, text, or email you questions.

- ❑ You look forward to seeing their child the following week!

If this initial call occurs more than 4-5 days before the tryout, call again a night or two before the tryouts to remind the parents and confirm that their child will be there.

At the tryouts, just like the recruitment visit, you need to knock it out of the park again. The students may be there to try out for your program, but they are also trying you out to see if they want to join.

Re-Recruit as Needed

On average, SEA programs retain about 87% of their students from year to year. Over the course of a seven-year program, this results in losing about one of every two students from your initial recruitment class. Given this turn-over, you will likely need to fill open spaces in your program. Here are some tips to consider in this process.

- ❑ Identify the best times, based on your city, to recruit new students. For example, do students all move to new schools in high school? If so, 9th grade could be a good time to refill your team, as some students may no longer be able to commute to your program, and some other students might be joining school partners close to you.
- ❑ Plan for how you will orient new recruits into the program. How will they learn the routines, expectations, and the sport of squash so they don't feel left behind?
- ❑ Recruiting older students is often not as easy as recruiting young students. Here are some additional factors to take into consideration.
 - ❑ High school students are less likely to change to meet your expectations, so you need to be more selective. Focus on students who really enjoy and buy into what your program offers, and who contribute positively to the team.
 - ❑ Referrals from current students who are in good standing in your program can be effective. Encourage referrals and create opportunities for participants to bring friends to see the program.
 - ❑ Find a high school partner near you who can refer strong students to you, and who you can funnel your middle school students into as they move to high school.

SEA Shared Drive Resources

- ❑ [Squash Haven selection variables](#)
- ❑ [CitySquash tryout rubric](#)
- ❑ [SquashBusters recruitment flyer](#)
- ❑ [Capitol Squash recruitment flyer](#)
- ❑ [SquashBusters tryout permission slip](#)
- ❑ [Capitol Squash tryout permission slip](#)

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