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# What Happens to Students Who Back Out of Early Decision Offers

Accepted students may wonder if there's a way to escape a binding offer without repercussion. The answer: It depends.

By [Alexandra Pannoni](#)


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Students admitted to schools under early decision who want to back out just because they don't want to go to the school anymore could risk losing their other college acceptances.  (JETTA PRODUCTIONS/GETTY IMAGES)

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Students accepted to [college](#) via early decision are able to nail down their postgraduation plans well ahead of their peers and enjoy the remainder of [high school](#) stress-free.

But teens generally must attend a school if they get in via early decision. Students, their parents or guardians and their high school counselor typically sign an agreement outlining the binding nature of a potential admissions offer before the student even applies.

Students can only apply to one school for [early decision](#). Generally students are allowed to concurrently apply to other schools under less-restrictive early action and regular decision programs.

[ **READ:** [What to Know About Early Action, Early Decision in College Admissions.](#) ]

While students can't be forced to attend any school they are accepted to via early decision, the consequences they will face, if any, when backing out of these agreements will depend on the school and the student's situation, experts say.

Most colleges will release students from early decision offers without penalty if applicants receive a financial aid package that doesn't make it feasible economically for the student to attend.

There may be other compelling reasons that would sway an admissions officer to release an accepted student from an early decision offer without consequence – a sick parent, for instance – admissions officers say.

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Occasionally, students back out of early decision agreements without a good reason, says Richard Nesbitt, director of admission at [Williams College](#) in Massachusetts. "It would be a big ethical issue," he says.

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The early decision agreement is not legally binding and the school wouldn't go after the student for tuition, but there could be other consequences.

If, for instance, they found out a student somehow had applied to two different places early decision, or even another early action and the student had broken the early decision agreement, Nesbitt says they'd call the other schools and the student would risk losing both acceptances.



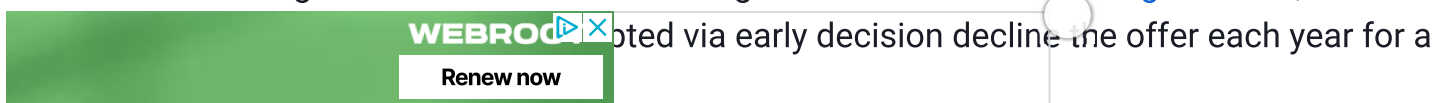
It may not be that difficult for schools to determine if students are playing the system. A student's high school guidance counselor may be aware of what the student has done and contact the school, says Nesbitt.

Katharine Fretwell, dean of admission and financial aid at [Amherst College](#), another Massachusetts institution, says her school and about 30 other colleges share lists of students admitted through early decision. And Fretwell says she'd likely also share the names of students who were admitted via early decision, but who are not attending for financial aid and other reasons.

Plus, high school counselors may stop sending transcripts, letters of recommendation and other necessary admissions materials if a student has applied to a school via early decision until they know the outcome, like Craig Meister, director of college counseling at Oxbridge Academy in Florida and founder of [Admissions Intel](#), a college consulting firm.

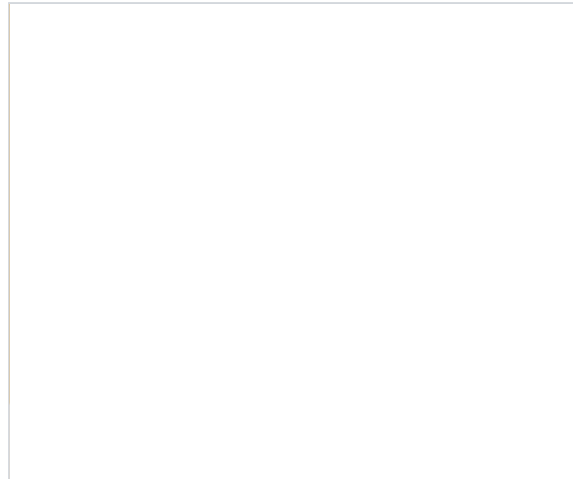
Students trying to get out of early decision offers elsewhere may face less pushback.

"We're not going to come after them," says Mildred Johnson, associate vice provost for enrollment management and director of undergraduate admissions at [Virginia Tech](#), where



variety of reasons. "It's just kind of an honor thing, you said you were going to do this. But no, we are not chasing them down."

"I'm disappointed because the reality is they should have just applied regular decision," says Johnson. At Virginia Tech, admissions standards are pretty much the same for regular and early decision, she says.



However, there may be an admissions advantage to applying early decision at other schools. Colleges admitted 62 percent of early decision applicants compared with 51 percent of all applicants in 2015, [according to a report from the National Association for College Admission Counseling](#).

[ **ASK** [these four questions before applying early decision.](#) ]

In some ways, early decision is a gentleman's agreement, says Dave Tobias, vice president of enrollment for [Ursinus College](#) in Pennsylvania. "We don't have a lot of ability to do anything on our end to the student."

Rod Oto, associate dean of admissions at [Carleton College](#) in Minnesota, says if a student wanted to withdraw from an early decision offer because they no longer want to go to the school, he'd first try to figure out what's going on. Whether he'd call other schools the student applied to or the student's high school counselor would be handled on a case-by-case basis, but he would make sure the student knew Carleton wasn't pleased.

"I don't think our intention is to create a situation where the student doesn't have any place to go," he says.

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ant to spend a lot of time investigating every case.

"Here's the bottom line: We are not going to make a kid come here who doesn't want to come here."

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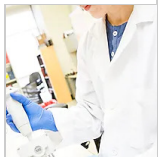
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