THE ACADEMY STANDARD

A FIELD GUIDE FOR MARTIAL ARTS SCHOOL OWNERS

The Student Retention Blueprint

Why students quit, when they really decide to, and the six systems that keep them on the mat for years.

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TheAcademyStandard.com

BEFORE YOU START

Students don’t quit on the day they cancel.

By the time a parent sends the email, the decision is weeks old. The child stopped talking about class in the car. Attendance slipped from three nights to two, then one. A stripe didn’t come. Nobody called.

Most schools treat retention as a rescue. The cancellation lands, and someone tries to talk the family out of it. That conversation rarely works, because it is happening at the end of the story.

Retention is built at the beginning and in the middle. It is a standard, not a save.

One truth before anything else: no follow up system rescues a class students don’t enjoy. If they don’t enjoy it, they quit. Everything in this blueprint assumes your floor is doing its job. What these systems do is make sure a good school stops losing students it should have kept.

The villain is the same one behind most problems in our industry: improvisation. When retention depends on whether an instructor happens to notice a student drifting, some weeks they notice and some weeks they don’t. A standard notices every time, no matter who is working that night.

Read this as a checklist, not an essay. Score yourself honestly on page 10. Then pick one system and install it this month.

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THE MATH

Retention is the cheapest growth you will ever buy.

Every student you keep is one you don't have to replace. Here is what monthly cancellations do to a school with 150 active students paying $200 a month. These are illustrative numbers; run your own below.

MONTHLY CANCELLATION RATE	STUDENTS LOST PER YEAR	AVERAGE STAY	TUITION PER STUDENT, LIFETIME
2%	36	50 months	**$10,000**
4%	72	25 months	**$5,000**
6%	108	About 17 months	**$3,333**

Moving from 6% to 4% means 36 fewer students to replace every year.

That is 36 intro lessons you don't have to win just to stay the same size. And a family who stays four years has seen enough growth in their child that your tuition stops being a question.

YOUR NUMBERS

Active students today

Cancellations in the last 12 months

Monthly rate: cancellations ÷ 12 ÷ active students

Average stay: 1 ÷ monthly rate, in months

WHERE THEY QUIT

Students leave at predictable moments.

Cancellations are not random. Pull every cancellation from the last two years. Note how many months each student was enrolled and the month they left. The pattern shows up fast. These are the five danger zones most schools find.

1

The first 90 days
Novelty wears off and class becomes routine. If the family hasn't built the habit and the child hasn't felt real progress, the trial mindset never ends.

2

The long middle between belts
The gap between ranks is where students feel stuck. Weeks without visible progress read to a child as "I'm not getting better."

3

The end of summer and the end of the school year
Schedules reset, and families reconsider every commitment at once. Yours has to already feel essential before the calendar turns.

4

A competing season
A new sport, a new school schedule, a sibling's activity. Martial arts loses when it looks like one more thing on the calendar instead of the thing that holds the week together.

5

Right after a big milestone
A new belt, black belt above all, can feel like a finish line. If the next goal isn't set before the new belt is tied, families may treat it as the place to stop.

From our own floor: at Ko Martial Arts, head instructors send personal milestone videos timed to the exact points where our data shows students drifting. Find your points first. Then aim every system in this blueprint at them.

THE BLUEPRINT

Six systems. Each one owned by a person and run on a calendar.

Retention is not a personality trait of your best instructor. It is a set of systems that run whether or not anyone feels like running them that week.

01

The First 90 Days

Turn a new enrollment into a habit and a win before the novelty wears off.

02

The Absence Rule

A fixed response to every missed week, so no student fades out quietly.

03

Visible Progress

Every student can point to something they earned this month, and every parent can see it.

04

The Parent Conference

A real conversation with every family before every belt assessment.

05

Birthdays and Milestones

Make every child feel known, and recognize what they have built over years, not prizes.

06

The Monthly Audit

Enjoyment, attendance, progress, and cancellations, measured every month and acted on.

WHERE THIS FITS

Retention is pillar 10 of the 15 pillars inside The Academy Standard, part of the Enrollment Standard. It leans on the Experience Standard underneath it: the class has to be worth coming back to.

SYSTEM 01

The First 90 Days

The goal of the first 90 days is a habit and a win. A child with a regular class night who has earned something real is far harder to lose.

- ☐ **A welcome call within 24 hours** of enrollment, from the instructor the child will see most.
- ☐ **Set class nights agreed at enrollment.** Specific nights, not “twice a week.”
- ☐ **A first stripe or recognition in the first weeks,** earned for something real.
- ☐ **A short parent education sequence:** what to expect, how to talk about class at home, and what to do on the night the child doesn’t want to go.
- ☐ **Check in calls at day 30 and day 60** with one question: what has your child said about class? Then set the goal for the next rank before day 90.

SYSTEM 02

The Absence Rule

Decide in advance what happens when a student misses, then do it every time. Here is a cadence to start from.

AFTER	WHAT HAPPENS	WHO OWNS IT
1 missed week	A warm text letting the family know their child was missed.	Front desk
2 missed weeks	A phone call from the student’s own instructor.	Instructor
3 missed weeks	A call from the head instructor, with a specific class to come back to.	Head instructor
30 days	On the monthly audit list, with a personal invitation to return.	Owner

The message is never “you owe us attendance.” It is “we noticed, and we want them back.” Not following up tells a family you weren’t paying attention.

SYSTEM 03

Visible Progress

Children stay where they feel themselves getting better. Parents stay where they can see it.

- ☐ **Track stripes for every student.** Anyone without a new stripe in a set number of weeks gets flagged to their instructor.
- ☐ **Show parents progress between tests,** with a short note or video after a stripe, not only on assessment day.
- ☐ **Tie every rank to objectives a child can name.** “What are you working on?” should always have an answer.
- ☐ **Keep belt assessments on a steady rhythm.** At Ko Martial Arts, cycles run about 13 weeks apart, so the next goal is always in sight.

SYSTEM 04

The Parent Conference

Before every belt assessment, sit down with each family. At Ko Martial Arts this is one of our top priorities every cycle, and each location’s team owns the scheduling. Keep it short and keep it to three questions.

1	2	3
What we see	**What’s next**	**What we need from home**
Specific growth in skill and character since the last conference.	The goals for the coming rank and what it will take to reach them.	One thing the parent can reinforce before the next conference.

The conference is where retention and enrollment meet. Families who hear a clear plan for their child’s next year rarely leave before they get there, and it is the natural place to talk about the next program.

SYSTEM 05

Birthdays and Milestones

Retention driven by prizes and promotions stops when the prizes do. What keeps a family is a child who feels known. Mark the days that matter to them, and the work they have put in over years.

On their birthday

A birthday video message
A short, personal video from their instructor, sent to the family that morning.

A birthday card
Handwritten and signed by the team. Children keep cards; they don't keep texts.

A black belt for the day
Every student wears a black belt in class on their birthday, whatever their rank. It shows them where the path leads.

Lunch at their school
Their instructor joins them for lunch at their school. Nothing says "you matter" like showing up in front of their friends.

On their milestones

Milestone video messages
From their head instructor, timed to the points in the journey where students tend to drift.

Milestone shirts
Shirts with a metallic logo earned by lifetime classes attended. At Ko Martial Arts they mark 500, 750, and 1,000 classes.

Celebrate in front of the class
The student who earned it and the students watching both remember it. Today's audience is next year's milestone.

Keep the bar real, and keep it on a calendar.

A milestone a student didn't earn teaches nothing and means nothing. And a birthday you remember some years but not others is worse than none. Build the birthday and milestone list at least a week ahead, and give every name an owner.

SYSTEM 06

The Monthly Audit

Once a month, one hour, the same numbers every time. The audit is what keeps the other five systems honest. Bring these five to the table.

1	**The core numbers**	Active students, new enrollments, cancellations, and your monthly cancellation rate.
2	**The absence list**	Every student flagged by the Absence Rule, and what was done about each one.
3	**The progress list**	Every student without a stripe inside your set window, and who is working with them.
4	**Enjoyment**	At Ko Martial Arts, a simple daily token survey tells us how much students enjoyed class. If they don't enjoy it, they quit, so we measure it.
5	**Exit interviews**	One short call with every family that leaves. Write down the real reason, not the polite one, and look for the pattern across months.

WHO IS IN THE ROOM

The owner and every head instructor. The people who can act on a name should hear it.

WHAT LEAVES THE ROOM

A short list of names, each with an owner and a date. Numbers without names change nothing.

Then pick the single biggest leak, and assign one person to fix it before next month's audit.

SCORE YOURSELF

The Retention Scorecard

Circle a score for each line: 1 means not at all, 5 means every time, without you. Be honest. The last two words matter most.

1	Every new family gets a welcome call within 24 hours.	1	2	3	4	5
2	New students have set class nights from day one.	1	2	3	4	5
3	Every missed week gets the same response, no matter who is working.	1	2	3	4	5
4	We know which students haven't earned progress recently.	1	2	3	4	5
5	Parents see their child's progress between belt assessments.	1	2	3	4	5
6	Every family has a conference before each belt assessment.	1	2	3	4	5
7	Every birthday and attendance milestone is recognized personally.	1	2	3	4	5
8	We know our monthly cancellation rate without looking it up.	1	2	3	4	5
9	We call every family that leaves and record the real reason.	1	2	3	4	5
10	We know where in the student journey our cancellations cluster.	1	2	3	4	5

Your total, out of 50 ☐

40 to 50

You have a standard. Protect it as you grow, and write it down for the next location.

25 to 39

The systems exist but depend on people remembering. Write them down and give each one an owner.

10 to 24

Retention is being improvised. Start with the Absence Rule this month. It is the fastest win.

WHAT'S NEXT

Retention is one pillar. There are fifteen.

A school keeps students when the whole experience holds together: the class, the parent experience, the follow up, and the operating layer underneath it all. The Academy Standard organizes that work into three standards, taken in order.

I The Experience Standard

What a family actually meets: the class, the curriculum, the room, the front desk, the events.

II The Enrollment Standard

How families find you, decide, and stay. Retention lives here.

III The Execution Standard

Your staff, schedule, numbers, and systems, written down well enough that the experience holds no matter who is teaching.

Take the Academy Standard assessment to see where your school stands today, and which standard to build first.

Take the assessment TheAcademyStandard.com/assessment

Rather talk it through? Book a call with me at TheAcademyStandard.com/call.

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