

PRIVATE SCHOOL ADMISSION TESTING:

The Ins and
Outs of the
SSAT, ISEE,
and HSPT



Presented by



**Educational
Connections Inc.**

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The early fall is the best time to prepare for and schedule testing. Most schools will require some type of standardized assessment to determine academic potential or current ability. Scores are an easy way to compare one student to another. But more importantly, this data is used to determine if the child is a good fit for the school. Although testing data is helpful, admission committees also realize that the numbers don't fully predict a student's level of success. That's why grades, the interview, recommendations, and extracurriculars are important. Testing is just one part of the equation.

Nonetheless, standardized tests are an important element and it's helpful to know what to expect. Most independent schools will require those applying to third grade through eleventh grade to take the Secondary School Admissions Test (SSAT) or the Independent School Entrance Examination (ISEE). Catholic schools will require the High School Placement Test (HSPT) for incoming ninth graders and many schools administer special in-house testing as well. There are also cognitive evaluations for younger students, such as the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC-IV) and the Wechsler Preschool and Primary Scale of Intelligence (WPPSI). In this section, you'll find information on these tests and how to help your child prepare.

The SSAT

In the DC area, the SSAT is the most widely used assessment for independent school admission. For the last nine years my company has administered the SSAT to hundreds of students throughout the Mid-Atlantic region. There's no doubt that this assessment produces a tremendous amount of anxiety. Kids place a lot of pressure on themselves. They are well aware that the most competitive schools want to see strong scores. But in some cases, the adage "a parent's stress is a child's stress" is true. Although this test and other assessments play a role in acceptance, it's vital to keep testing in perspective. There are many other factors that are more important.





The SSAT offers a national test once a month at local independent schools and testing centers from September through June. Parents can expect to pay \$80 for the lower level test and \$120 for the middle and upper level test. It's also possible to schedule a Flex test with a certified testing center for an additional fee. A Flex test is scored the same as the nationally administered SSAT, but it's given at a private testing location at the convenience of your schedule. The problem is that due to a new policy, there are very few Flex centers available, so finding a location to administer the test can be difficult. I now encourage parents to schedule a Flex or national test date a few months out because the centers get booked quickly. Although the national test can be taken as many times as the student wishes, the Flex test can only be administered to a student once per school year.

The most popular test date is in December, but students can actually take the test as late as early January and still be on time with their applications. Scores are sent directly from the SSAT and do not accompany the student's application. Parents can designate schools for their student's scores to be sent to during the registration process. Be sure to check the website (www.ssat.org) and sign up just as soon as registration opens.

The Nuts and Bolts of the SSAT

The upper and middle-level SSAT is a long test. It's a three-hour-and-15-minute academic assessment that begins with a 25-minute essay. Although the essay isn't graded, it is reviewed by the admission team so that they can get a sense of the child's writing ability. The writing sample is followed by five multiple choice sections. In order, the five sections are Quantitative, Critical Reading, Vocabulary, a second Quantitative portion, and an Experimental section (not graded). Critical Reading is 40 minutes, the Verbal section and each Quantitative section are 30 minutes, and the Experimental section is 15 minutes. There is a 5-minute break after the essay and a 10-minute break after the Critical Reading section.

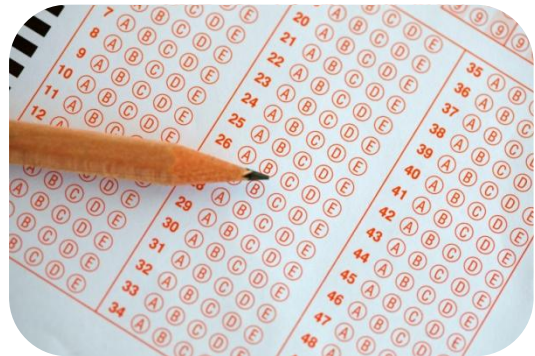
There are three levels of the test: elementary for third and fourth grade, middle for fifth through seventh grade, and upper for eighth through eleventh grade. Students with special needs who normally have accommodations through their school, such as extra time on tests, can apply for accommodations on the SSAT. These requests must be made ahead of time through the SSAT website and proper documentation is required. This typically takes two to three weeks, so be sure to plan ahead.



How It Is Scored

The SSAT is a strategy-based test, which is often very different from what a student is used to in the classroom. For correct answers, students gain one point. For incorrect answers, students lose one-fourth of a point. For answers left blank, there is no positive or negative effect, simply a zero towards the raw score. The fact that students are penalized for wrong answers greatly affects test-taking strategy on the SSAT. Students are not necessarily expected to answer every question, and many sink their score by rushing to finish questions they may not answer correctly.

The educated guessing strategy is a best practice for students. Here's how it works: if you know the answer, fill it in and move on. If you don't know the answer, but can eliminate two of the answer choices, take a guess. This puts your odds of getting the question right at one-out-of-three (five possible answers with two eliminated). A one-out-of-three chance is worth risking one fourth of a point



since, statistically, you will gain points in the long run. If you do not know the answer to the question and cannot eliminate any choices, leave the answer blank. The ultimate goal of the guessing strategy is to answer all of the questions that you have the best chance at getting right while avoiding the questions that are likely to drag your score down. It takes some practice, but if a student can master this scoring strategy, she will maximize her score on the SSAT.

The total amount of points gained and lost creates a raw score for the test, which is then converted to a range between 200 and 800 points (similar to how the SAT is scored). When you receive the score report, you will see an SSAT percentile that tells you how well your student fared against the other test takers in the *same grade* and of the *same gender*. Scoring in the 80th percentile means that the student was in the top 20 percent of his or her demographic.

In addition to the SSAT percentile, students in fifth through ninth grade receive an estimated *national* percentile, which is a comparison to other students across the country, not just to those applying to an independent school. As you can imagine, the national percentile score is higher than the SSAT percentile score, since test takers are compared to a wider pool of students from varying backgrounds. For example, a student can have a verbal score in the 53rd percentile on the SSAT scale and in the 87th percentile on the national scale. This creates a lot of confusion. Parents panic when they see that their child, who earns mostly As and Bs as report card grades, scores at a level not consistent



with their classroom performance. Take these SSAT scores with a grain of salt; your child is compared *only* to others taking the SSAT. By nature, students applying to a private school are going to be academically advanced when compared to a national sample of students coming from different upbringings. Although schools only look at the SSAT score, as a parent, consider both scores to get a better indicator of your child's ability.

What Schools Are Looking For



Schools will accept a wide range of scores, with the most selective schools looking for SSAT percentile scores in the 80th or 90th percentile. Many top-flight schools, however, will accept students in the 50th to 60th percentile range on any one subtest if they think the student is a good fit due to other strengths of the application. I've had many students earn fantastic verbal and reading

scores and average math scores. I've seen others score well on the math and reading, but much lower on the verbal section. As schools review paperwork and notice a difference in scores, they may dig a little deeper. For example, the student with high reading and math abilities, but substantially weaker verbal skills, may not speak English at home. Committees consider the reasons behind scores and take them into account.

Although you would expect that highly selective schools would consider only those with off-the-chart scores in each domain, that's not the case. They may select a student who has outstanding grades and only mediocre math scores because she is an exceptional writer and musician. There's no doubt that strong test scores open the door, but they do not entirely define the student.

Parents often ask, "How many times should the test be taken?" Once is usually sufficient, but if your child believes she can do better another time around, it's worth a shot. Schools will see both sets of scores unless you do not report them. Scores are only sent to the schools that are listed on the form when you register through the SSAT and are not made public. Some savvy parents will have their child take the test in October or November. If they aren't satisfied with the scores, the student can prepare some more and take it again in December or early January at the latest. Remember that the national date tests can be taken an unlimited number of times, but a Flex test can only be taken once.



The ISEE



The Independent School Entrance Examination (ISEE) is not as popular as the SSAT among independent schools in this area, but most will accept an ISEE score in its place. The cost to take the test begins at \$98 for online registration. The ISEE has three levels: lower (fifth and sixth grade), middle (seventh and eighth grade), and upper (ninth through eleventh grade). For each level, the test consists of five sections: Verbal Reasoning, Quantitative Reasoning, Reading Comprehension, Mathematics Achievement, and a 30-minute essay.

Students are given 20 minutes to complete the Verbal Reasoning section, which covers synonyms and sentence completions. The Quantitative Reasoning section is a 35-minute math segment that covers algebra, geometry, number operations, problem solving, data analysis, and probability. The Reading Comprehension section is 25 minutes at the lower level and 35 minutes at the middle and upper levels. It contains short reading passages (from literature to history to science) followed by comprehension questions. The Mathematics Achievement section is 30 minutes at the lower level and 40 minutes at the middle and upper levels, and covers questions similar to the Quantitative Reasoning portion. The 30-minute essay is based on a random prompt and is not graded; however, like the SSAT, the essay is sent to schools as a writing sample.

The HSPT

The High School Placement Test (HSPT) is the main entrance test used by schools tied to a Catholic diocese. The cost is typically rolled into the school's application fee. It is a two-and-a-half hour, multiple choice test divided into five sections: Verbal, Quantitative Skills, Reading, Math, and Language. Test takers are not penalized for wrong answers, meaning that even if time is running low, every answer should be filled in to have a chance at more points. The HSPT mainly consists of math problems, reading passages followed by questions, and vocabulary. Test scores range from 200 to 800, and standards vary from school to school.

Some schools will have a minimum score requirement while others are flexible. Since the scoring is more straightforward than the SSAT, students don't have to master a complex guessing strategy, but it's a challenging test nonetheless.



It's important to know that a student currently enrolled in a diocesan Catholic school can apply only to two schools in the state or district in which he or she takes the test. For example, if your son attends St. Mark Catholic School in Vienna and wishes to apply to Paul VI and Bishop O'Connell, it's not a problem. He can also apply to one other school in Maryland, or DC, such as Gonzaga, but he is not permitted to apply for additional schools in Virginia, Maryland, or DC. Catholic schools have this policy to prevent students from applying to too many schools in which they're not fully invested. It forces students to research and tour schools of interest in order to narrow down the list to serious contenders. Boys and girls applying from independent or public schools are not limited by this policy.

The WISC-IV



The Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC-IV) is an intelligence test that can be given to children ages 6-16, and it does not require any reading or writing. The test is administered by an examiner, typically a psychologist, for 65-80 minutes. After the test, an IQ score is generated which is used as a broad representation of a child's cognitive ability. The WISC-IV is divided into fifteen subtests, but it tests four core abilities: Verbal Comprehension, Perceptual Reasoning, Processing Speed, and Working Memory.

The format of the test includes everything from asking direct questions ("Define this word") to questions about visual stimuli ("Which pictures go together?"). Children are asked to describe how two things are similar, answer general knowledge questions, use clues to discover a word, complete missing pictures, and provide letters and numbers in particular orders. The result is an IQ score that schools can use as a marker for general cognitive ability.

Costs vary and can range from \$350 to \$450. The school to which your child is applying can provide you with a list of experienced local testers.

The WPPSI-IV

The Wechsler Preschool and Primary Scale of Intelligence (WPPSI-IV) is similar to the WISC-IV, but intended for children between two-and-a-half years old and seven years and three months old. Like the WISC-IV, the test assesses developmentally appropriate skills and results in a Full Scale IQ score as well as an evaluation of five core abilities: Verbal Comprehension, Visual Spatial, Working



Memory, Fluid Reasoning, and Processing Speed. It typically takes 60-75 minutes to complete. Children are asked to recreate color patterns, match symbols, solve matrices, put puzzle pieces together, and answer general knowledge questions.

As with the WISC-IV, fees for administration also vary but may be slightly lower because of the shorter duration of the test. Parents can expect to pay between \$325 and \$425. Ask the school for recommendations in your area.

Preparing for the WISC-IV and WPPSI-IV

According to Diana Dahlgren, Ph.D., a licensed clinical psychologist who specializes in testing and evaluations, IQ preparation is not advisable. "Unlike group standardized tests such as the SSAT, there is no preparation for an individually administered IQ test such as the WISC-IV or WPPSI-IV. It is helpful for parents to tell a child one or two days before the appointment that he will be meeting with a person who is similar to a teacher who will have him do puzzles, look at pictures, and answer questions. By definition, an IQ test consists of questions and tasks a child has not seen or practiced before. The WISC-IV and WPPSI-IV materials are copyrighted to protect the validity of the test results and are not available for review either before or after the test. Details about a child's intellectual skills, strengths and weaknesses, and learning style are given to parents in a feedback session, but the specific questions are not released. Parents should know that experienced psychologists help a child feel at ease during a warm-up session and give all of the proper directions to a child during the test with the goal of getting an accurate assessment of a child's cognitive abilities. Thus, there is no preparation for an IQ test except the classic admonition that a child should get a good night's sleep and have a good breakfast before taking any test."

In-House Testing

Some schools will require special in-house testing in addition to (or in place of) a standardized test. By giving candidates their own test while they're on campus, usually during the shadow visit, admission personnel can quickly compare potential new students to their current students who may have already taken the same test. They can see where the child might fit in the school. In-house testing is also beneficial because the test's questions and problems are in line with what the school believes students should know at any given grade. It's hard to prepare for these tests since there are no study guides or tips, but the good news is that every other student is in the same boat. Besides good test-taking strategies (get plenty of sleep, eat breakfast, cross off bad answers), there's often not much more you can do, and that's okay.



Other Testing

There are other tests that a student can take, and if a student is past his freshman year in high school, schools will often take his PSAT score in lieu of other testing. When in doubt, feel free to ask the school. There is more flexibility in testing than you would think, so don't assume that your student's ERB or other test scores won't count. Ultimately, all of these tests are examining the same thing—general subject knowledge (math, reading comprehension, and writing).

Would My Child Benefit from Test Prep?

Students need to be prepared for what they will encounter on test day on the SSAT, ISEE, and HSPT. At a minimum, your child should know the types of questions he will see, the correct test-taking strategies to use, how the test is scored, and how to pace himself throughout the test. You can order a prep manual for your child to work through, but most students do not have the discipline to study independently. A tutor experienced with the ins and outs of standardized testing can help students perform up to their potential. According to Dr. Diana Dahlgren, “The SSAT is similar to a mini-SAT so it is good practice for the tests students will take in high school, and very few students walk in and take the SAT or ACT without practice.”

Most students perform best when preparation is threefold and includes: content review, strategy practice, and simulated practice tests. A good tutor will review your child's practice test scores to see where he can improve and structure sessions to maximize gains.



SSAT, SAT, and ACT

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- All tutors are subject matter experts.
- Instruction is individually tailored.
- Tutors come to you.
- Our curriculum is innovative and proven.



What are the advantages of 1-to-1 tutoring vs. group classes?

- Group classes take a one-size-fits-all approach to test prep; 1-to-1 tutoring does not.
- All of our tutors customize every lesson to make sure they are focusing on the specific areas you need help in.
- You can have every question answered and explained, while working at your own pace.

What package is ideal for me?

8 Session Package	16 Session Package	22 Session Package
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Ideal for students who are close to their score goal or have limited time to prepare.	Our most popular package, right for most students.	Designed for students who need comprehensive preparation and plan to take the test twice.
\$1620 \$135/hr	\$2760 \$115/hr	\$3465 \$105/hr

About Educational Connections

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Educational Connections has more than 185 highly qualified tutors who provide one-to-one and group tutoring in all subjects, from kindergarten to college level.

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