

Which Admissions Test Should My Student Take: ISEE v SSAT?

If your child is applying to an independent school, they will likely be required to submit scores from either the ISEE (Independent School Entrance Exam) or the SSAT (Secondary School Admission Test). Both tests are similar in that they offer different levels (based on elementary, middle or upper grades) and are aptitude-based as opposed to achievement-based (Aptitude tests assess both what a student knows and how a student thinks.).

Before embarking on this journey, it is important to realize that scores on the ISEE and SSAT do not necessarily correlate with class performance because the ISEE and SSAT also measure how students compare to the top students around the country. Because your student's initial scores may not be as strong as you anticipate, it is important to start early and provide your student a meaningful timeline to prepare for these high-stakes exams.

Differences between the ISEE and the SSAT

The SSAT and ISEE are similar in many ways: they are both composed of 5 sections that test students' verbal, reading, quantitative, and writing skills. See infographic on [the differences between the two](#).

- **Score report:**
 - The ISEE score report presents **four** section scores: verbal, reading, quantitative reasoning, and mathematics achievement. The SSAT score report presents **three** section scores: verbal, reading, and quantitative (a score which combines the two quantitative sections).
 - On both, the raw score is converted into a scaled score to account for variations in difficulty between different tests.
- **Guessing strategy:** The Middle and Upper Level SSAT students receive 1 point for each correct answer, 0 points for questions left blank, and lose $\frac{1}{4}$ point for each wrong answer. The ISEE does not have a "guessing penalty." Students receive 1 point for each correct answer and 0 points for incorrect answers or questions left blank.
- **Verbal section:** Both the ISEE and SSAT ask students to answer synonym questions. The ISEE also features sentence completions in the verbal section, while the SSAT provides analogy questions.
- **Reading section:** The ISEE and SSAT reading passages cover a variety of subjects. However, the SSAT includes poetry and older-style literature while the ISEE generally focuses on more contemporary nonfiction passages.
- **Math sections:** Both have two math sections.
 - The ISEE has a quantitative reasoning section, which focuses on problem solving and critical thinking questions, and a mathematics achievement section, which has primarily knowledge-based questions. Each are reported separately.
 - The SSAT has two quantitative sections that are composed of a mix of critical thinking and knowledge-based questions. These scores are combined to provide one math score.
- **Writing sample:** Both require students to complete an unscored writing sample.

How often can your student sit for the exams

Practically, the ISEE can be taken once (maybe twice) in an application season: once during each testing season. The ISEE seasons are fall (August–November), winter (December–March), and spring/summer (April–July). The SSAT can be taken up to eight times. The SSAT at Home, offered every Saturday and one Sunday each month, can be taken up to five times. Additionally, the SSAT can be taken twice at a Prometric Site and once at a Flex Site.

So how to decide? Most important consideration is School Preference

The first step in deciding which test your child should take is to check which exam the schools your child is applying to require or prefer. Many schools will consider either the SSAT or ISEE without any preference for one over the other. Most schools in the Atlanta area require (or prefer) the SSAT. Traditionally, New England boarding schools have required or preferred the SSAT, whereas New York City prep schools have required or preferred the ISEE, although that is changing.

Critical Differences

If not dictated by your targeted schools, and you have a choice of which test to take, there are two major issues to consider. The first is whether your child tends to perform better in verbal or quantitative work, and the second is their level of testing anxiety.

If your child usually performs better in English and reading than in math, the SSAT might be a better choice. If math is your child's strong point, on the other hand, then the ISEE might be better for her. The verbal section of the SSAT is more difficult than that of the ISEE, whereas the math section of the ISEE is more difficult than that of the SSAT.

What's more difficult about SSAT verbal? The vocabulary tested tends to be more advanced on the SSAT. Vocabulary is partly tested through the use of analogies, which are much more reasoning intensive and difficult than the "sentence completion"-question format the ISEE uses to test vocabulary.

SSAT verbal isn't only more difficult than ISEE verbal—it also makes up much more of the total exam score. Even though the SSAT features two math sections and two verbal sections, two-thirds of the cumulative SSAT score is devoted to the sections testing verbal ability: there is a "reading," "verbal" and "quantitative" score. The ISEE, on the other hand, breaks scores down evenly into two verbal ("verbal reasoning" and "reading comprehension") and two quantitative scores ("quantitative reasoning" and "mathematics achievement").

What's more difficult about the ISEE math? Mathematics is also more difficult on the ISEE than on the SSAT. The ISEE tests some math that is often a few years more advanced than what a typical high school applicant will have been exposed to. This includes some 10th and 11th grade Algebra II and pre-calculus, such as matrices and vectors, as well as Trigonometry. These topics aren't tested in a very challenging way and they can be learned, but they do pose an added hurdle for a student preparing for the ISEE.

ISEE math questions also are often more complex and require more extensive critical reasoning. There is also significantly less time provided to solve each of these questions: either 57 or 51 seconds, depending on the section, whereas the SSAT provides 72 seconds per math question.

Testing Anxiety and Retakes

The second major difference to consider when choosing between the ISEE and SSAT is your child's level of testing anxiety. Students can only take the ISEE *once per testing season (Fall, Winter, Spring)* whereas there is no number of times they can take the SSAT.

Some students will have no problem (and will probably welcome!) sitting for the test only once. For other students, however, the one-shot, make-or-break nature of the ISEE can create a burdensome amount of anxiety that can hinder performance on the actual exam. This can happen even among students who aren't generally prone to testing anxiety. While this anxiety can be mitigated through taking multiple timed practice tests and by techniques aimed at relieving anxiety, it is something that must be considered before electing to take the ISEE.

The ability to retake the SSAT offers other benefits beyond simply mitigating test day anxiety. A student can take the test more than once and then choose which scores to send to schools, opting to report only their highest scores. Many schools will even “superscore” SSAT results, combining the highest individual section scores from across testing dates. Because students have more chances to take the exam, and because scores tend to fall within a range on any given sitting, taking the test more than once can help students earn higher scores than they might otherwise achieve sitting for the exam only once.

On the other hand, the SSAT is more difficult to guess on than the ISEE. The SSAT has 5 answer options per question and the student is penalized for wrong answers. This requires the student to be more strategic in how they answer the questions. The ISEE provides only 4 answer options with no guessing penalty.

Still Not Sure Which To Take?

If you are still not sure which test would be best for your child, ask them to take an official practice test for each. This will allow you to both compare their scores on two exams and find out which exam your child feels more comfortable taking.

What About Taking Both?

While the ISEE and SSAT are separate tests with a few critical differences, they are also very similar in many ways. Both test vocabulary, reading comprehension and general mathematics and feature many similar question types. The work done to prepare for one test will absolutely help a student on the other test. It is generally best to focus on one exam, but because the tests are so similar there is little harm in letting your child sit for both tests. If the schools to which your child is applying will accept either exam and your child is motivated to sit for both, she could do so and then submit the higher of the two scores. It’s important, however, to make sure your child is thoroughly prepared for at least one of the two exams. There is no generally need to sit for both unless your child is motivated to do so.

Recap

For many students, the decision of which test to take will already be made for them by the schools to which they are applying. If that is not the case, then carefully consider how the critical differences between the ISEE and SSAT might play to your child’s own strengths and weaknesses.