



Common questions about the ISEE and SSAT

What are the differences in content between the ISEE and the SSAT?

The verbal section of the ISEE has sentence completions, while the verbal SSAT has analogies. One of the ISEE math sections (middle and upper level ISEE only) will have quantitative comparison questions. There is no guessing penalty on the ISEE test, while the SSAT has a guessing very similar to the SAT test (1/4 point deduction for incorrect answers).

Which test is more difficult? Does a certain type of learner typically do better on one test?

The ISEE is less difficult and more straightforward than the SSAT because there is no guessing penalty. However, the second math section of the ISEE test poses problems for students because they have roughly 40 minutes to do 45 questions (that's less than one minute per question!). I find that students who are not good test takers do better on the ISEE because then they don't have to worry about the guessing penalty. Lately I find that the SSAT has been a more coachable test. Analogy questions are easy to master.

What do the different levels of the test mean?

The ISEE lower level test is for student currently in 4th or 5th grade. The ISEE middle level is for students in 6th or 7th. And the ISEE upper level test is for students now in 8th-11th grade. The SSAT elementary level is for students currently in 3rd and 4th grade. The SSAT middle level is for students currently in 5th-7th grade, and the SSAT upper level is for students in 8th-11th grade.

Why does a student need to prepare for the test? My child gets good grades, will they need extra skills to do well on the test?

Students who are applying to private school or boarding school usually need to take either the SSAT or ISEE test as part of the admission process. Students who receive good grades in school may do better on the SSAT/ISEE than do students who receive poor grades. However, after more than ten years of coaching, I find that students who know what to expect on test day have the edge over students who go into the ISEE/SSAT cold.

What is a good score of the ISEE? The SSAT? What types of schools take each test?

Schools look at the percentiles more than the actual scores. An 8th grader who gets about a 750 on the Upper Level SSAT is about an 80th percentile. This is a very solid score, and this student will probably get accepted next Fall into Philips Andover Academy in Andover, MA.

What's your advice for test taking strategy when taking one of these tests?

My advice for students planning to take the ISEE or SSAT is to find an experienced private tutor who will teach you strategies and pacing for all components of the test. If you know exactly what to expect on test day, then you will feel much more confident.

Alexis Avila is founder of Prepped & Polished a tutoring and test prep company that helps elementary, secondary and college level students improve their grades and test scores. He holds a master's degree in counseling psychology, is a certified guidance counselor and has been counseling students about college for over 15 years.

