

De-mystifying exam school admissions

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Guest Columnist

In the coming months, many parents of sixth and eighth graders will be anxiously peering into their mailboxes waiting for letters that will tell them if their son or daughter will be admitted to a Boston Exam School, or a private middle or high school.

What most parents don't realize is the amount of preparation required in order to ensure that the letters bring good news to their homes, and not disappointment.

Many parents have a lot of questions about the admissions process, what they can do to help their child, and what their child needs to do. As a parent of a student attending a Boston Exam School, and a tutor that has worked with hundreds of students helping them prepare for the exam, I would like to share with you some things that you need to know in order to make the process as smooth and stress free as possible for both you and your child.

The admissions formula: For the Boston Exam Schools (Boston Latin, Boston Latin Academy and the John D. O'Bryant School) the admissions formula is 50 percent grades and 50 percent test scores - that's it. It does not matter where you go to school now, what part of the city you live in, your ethnicity or gender, or whether or not your parents went to the Exam Schools. An "A" in a private school counts equally to an "A" or a "Four" in a Boston Public School. Grades are not adjusted to account for honors course work, or any other factor. If you are also applying to private schools, it is important to understand their specific admissions requirements, as many schools have unique requirements that must be met by specific dates in order to be eligible for admission.

The test: The Independent Schools Entrance Exam (ISEE) is the test given for admission to the Boston Exam Schools, and many area private schools. The test is a three-hour timed exam that measures students on vocabulary, reading comprehension and mathematics. The material is advanced. Students are expected to know how to solve algebra and geometry problems, and are challenged in vocabulary with words such as "miscreant" and "bellicose." Most fifth graders have had little or no exposure to these math concepts by the time they take the test, and most do not have a vocabulary advanced enough to understand these words.

Grades: As I said before, grades count 50 percent towards the admissions formula for the Boston Exam Schools. For students seeking admission to seventh grade, the math and English grades from all of fifth grade and the first half of sixth grade are used in the admissions formula. Many parents do not realize that the entirety of fifth grade math and English marks count towards the formula. It is imperative if students are looking to gain admission to these schools that they keep their fifth and sixth grade math and English grades as close to the top as possible. Sometimes a "B" average can make all the difference in knocking the child out of contention for admissions to Boston Latin School and Boston Latin Academy.

Preparation: I have heard many parents remark that they have a child who is smart and gets all "As," so they are not going to do anything to prepare them for the exam. This mindset does a real disservice to the child. The fact is that the majority of students taking the ISEE have done some sort of preparation for the test, whether it was studying on their own using an ISEE prep book, or taking a prep class. The students who have the advantage

of preparation for the exam tend to do better than those who have no preparation. Admission is limited to less than 25 percent of the students taking the test each year; it is tough to "compete" against someone who has had test prep when you have not. Test prep can also increase a child's confidence, and give them the self-assurance to relax and do their best on the exam. Finally, the extra exposure to the materials covered during a test prep curriculum often pays benefits to the students, long after the test itself, both by "filling holes" from past schooling, and the familiarization and confidence gained from learning advanced material.

What parents can do: This is a stressful process for both parents and children, but there are steps that can be taken to minimize the stress:

Begin test preparation early and make the process manageable for you and your child. Runners do not start preparing for a marathon eight weeks before the race, and your child should not start preparing for the test that late as well. Starting preparation six to eight months prior to the test is ideal, with a game plan for regular weekly sessions focusing on the areas your child needs to address in order to feel comfortable with the material. Most bookstores carry ISEE prep books for about \$25 that provide practice exams, timed tests, answer keys and lesson plans. Dedicating time regularly to work on the material will provide the best results.

Talk with your child about what they want to achieve. Think about your child's temperament and personality. Will your child do well in a big school? Is your child comfortable taking a bus across the city to school? Will your child know others in the school? Can your child commit to doing three hours of homework a night?

Visit several schools to get a sense of what they have to offer, and how your child might fit into that environment.

Have a backup plan. The old adage of "don't put all your eggs in one basket" really applies here. Have several choices that both you and your child will be happy with if your first choice does not pan out.

Keep things in perspective. No school is the be-all-end-all for all children. Future success in life depends not just on the school a child attends, but also on the work the child does in that school, and the child's attitude, drive and motivation.

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This column is a new bi-monthly feature in the Bulletin, designed to address issues related to education. Future columns will cover study skills, encouraging a love of reading, homework help tips, etc. If you have an idea for a topic you would like to see addressed in a future column, feel free to contact Anne by email at bostontutoringcenter@rcn.com.