



De-Mystifying the Exam School Admissions Process

This month many parents of 6th and 8th 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.

1. **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% grades and 50% 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 a 4 in a Boston Public School. Grades are not adjusted to account for honors course work or any other factor.
2. **The Test** – The ISEE (Independent Schools Entrance Exam) is the test given for admission to the Boston Exam Schools, and many area private schools. The test is a 3 hour timed exam that measures students on vocabulary, reading comprehension and mathematics. The material is considered to be advanced. Students are expected to know how to solve pre-Algebra and Geometry problems, and are challenged in vocabulary with words such as "miscreant" and "bellicose". Most 5th graders have had little to no exposure to these math concepts by the time they take the test, and do not have a vocabulary advanced enough to understand these words.
3. **Grades** – As I said before, grades count 50% towards the admissions formula for the Boston Exam Schools. For students seeking admission for 7th grade the math and English grades from all of 5th grade, and the first half of 6th grade are used in the admissions formula. Many parents do not realize that the entire 5th 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 5th and 6th 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.

4. **Preparation** – I have heard many parents remark that they have a child who is smart and gets all A's, 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% 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.
5. **What Parents Can Do** – Parents should recognize that 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 6 weeks before the race, and your child should not start preparing for the test that late as well. Starting preparation 6-8 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. 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? How does your child adjust to new situations? Can your child commit to doing 3 hours of homework a night? The Boston Exam Schools are not for everyone. Sometimes keeping a child in the school is harder than getting them into the school. The Exam Schools may be very different academically, socially and emotionally than what your child has been used to in their current school. It is important to take all of this into account.
 - 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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