

## ISEE GUIDELINES FOR THE USE OF SCORES IN THE ADMISSION PROCESS

### Value

The Independent School Entrance Exam (ISEE) is an admission test that has four levels: a Primary Level, Lower Level, Middle Level, and Upper Level. The Primary Level is for students currently in Grades 1, 2, and 3 who are candidates for admission to Grades 2, 3, and 4. The Lower Level is for students currently in Grades 4 and 5 who are candidates for admission to Grades 5 and 6. The Middle Level is for students in Grades 6 and 7 who are candidates for admission to Grades 7 and 8. The Upper Level is for students in Grades 8 through 11 who are candidates for admission to Grades 9 through 12.

The ISEE 3rd edition is aligned with national content standards (International Reading Association—IRA, National Council of Teachers of English—NCTE, and National Council of Teachers of Mathematics—NCTM) and national standards for educational testing (*Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing*)<sup>1</sup>. It measures the types of skills that schools deem important.

Schools receive many different pieces of information from students (and families) applying for admission to selective K–12 schools. Many factors used in selection, such as grades, teacher recommendations, and interviews, tend not to be standardized across the entire population of candidates. ISEE scores provide a consistent measure for all candidates. Every test taker takes an ISEE form written to highly detailed test specifications, that is reviewed for technical content and any threat of bias or sensitivity, and assembled using statistically screened test questions. ISEE scores are equated to a common score scale and the information contained in ISEE score reports provides insights into applicants' reasoning skills and achievement that can be used by selective schools to make admission decisions. Recently conducted research has demonstrated the predictive power of ISEE tests is on par with that of other well-known admission tests such as the SAT, ACT, and GRE<sup>2</sup>.

### Achievement and Reasoning

The ISEE Primary Level has three sections, which includes a Reading section, Mathematics section and a short writing sample. The Reading and Mathematics sections are designed to measure student achievement in reading and mathematics. The ISEE Lower, Middle, and Upper Levels measure Verbal Reasoning, Quantitative Reasoning, Mathematics Achievement, and Reading Comprehension. All ISEE tests are objectively scored, meaning every test question has a single, unambiguous best answer—even if answer options are sometimes very close in meaning. The test also provides students with an opportunity to demonstrate their writing skills through an unscored writing prompt. The four scored subtests represent two categories of skills: achievement and reasoning. The achievement subtests (Mathematics Achievement and Reading Comprehension) provide information about what a student knows and can do at the time of testing, while the reasoning subtests (Verbal Reasoning and Quantitative Reasoning) provide information about what a student is capable of achieving or learning.

<sup>1</sup> American Education Research Association (AERA), American Psychological Association (APA), & National Council on Measurement in Education (NCME). (2014). *Standards for educational and psychological testing*. Washington, DC: Authors.

<sup>2</sup> Educational Records Bureau (2017). *The Independent School Entrance Exam (ISEE) Validation Study*. NY, NY: ERB.

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### Scoring

ISEE scores are based on the number of correct answers. For several reasons, no points are deducted for incorrect answers. Students generally find that a penalty for guessing is 'tricky' and stressful. Test publishers sometimes find that guessing penalties introduce irrelevant information into test scores, such as how well a student employs a guessing strategy. ERB extracts maximum information from scores without employing such penalties on students.

ISEE scores are reported in four ways, in order to provide a comprehensive picture of the student's performance: scaled scores, percentile ranks, stanines, and stanine analysis. The percentile ranks are based on a norm group of students who were administered the ISEE during the past three years, who were applying to the same grade. The norm group for this test is a very competitive group of students who are applying to selective schools. Given that this is a competitive group of students, a student's performance on ISEE tests may be less than what it has been on other tests where the comparison group is less selective.

Small differences in percentile ranks on different tests may not represent significant differences in performance on those sections. For this reason, ISEE scores are also reported as stanines. A stanine is a score from 1 to 9, with 5 as the midpoint. Stanines are derived by dividing the entire range of students' scores into 9 segments.

### Weight of Section

Each score on the ISEE—Reading and Mathematics (ISEE Primary Level), Verbal Reasoning, Quantitative Reasoning, Reading Comprehension, Mathematics Achievement (ISEE Lower, Middle, and Upper Levels)—measures a unique aspect of a student's preparation for independent school. When considered as a profile of separate performance indicators, receiving schools can understand each applicant's relative strengths and weaknesses in relation to a broader independent school norm group. Schools that emphasize certain skills over others can apply different weights to section scores when making admission decisions. For example, schools that are language arts heavy might double-weight Verbal Reasoning and Reading Comprehension scores whereas schools that specialize in science, technology, engineering, and math might double-weight Quantitative Reasoning and Mathematics Achievement scores. The weights themselves can be based on the relative predictive strength of ISEE scores as observed in local validity studies. The bottom line is that having a profile of separate scores in achievement and reasoning domains allows for a richer understanding of applicants that receiving schools can use as they wish based on what their curriculum emphasizes.

### Use of the ISEE in the Admission Process

ISEE scores have an important role in the admission process because they serve as a common, objective measure to compare students with different educational experiences. However, no single test or source of information can provide all the information that a receiving school would like to know about an applicant. Therefore, it is important to use ISEE scores along with multiple sources of information during the decision-making process to ensure fairness and to balance the limitations of any single measure of knowledge, skills, or abilities. Students' coursework and grades, letters of recommendation from teachers, personal statements, interviews, and observations during school visits also have an important role in the admission process because they can be sources to learn about other desired applicant attributes.

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### Use of Multiple Test Scores

Whenever the stakes are high for testing, it is important to give students more than one opportunity to test. Students may register to take the ISEE, at most, one time per testing season. The ISEE testing seasons are defined as Fall (August – November), Winter (December – March), and Spring/Summer (April – July). In some cases, applicants will take the ISEE for admissions more than once. Of course, it's important to conduct local studies to understand whether there are different predictive relationships between first or last test taken, highest or lowest score, and so on, but recent research in the college admission setting supports the practice of 'super scoring;' that is, taking the best score from each section across multiple testing events. Although it may seem that super scoring should inflate scores across retakes, this inflation seems to be real in the sense that it accounts for the positive effects of retaking for predicting successful outcomes<sup>3</sup>. While super scoring is a research-supported practice, the important thing to note is that whatever admission policy or practice is implemented, it should be used consistently across applicants.

### Value of a Validity Study

Admission offices often face difficult questions such as, what application data are predictive of success at my school? When an applicant has discrepant grades and test scores, what can I use to guide admission decision-making? How should the academic rigor of a student's coursework be factored into admission decisions? Validity studies can help answer these questions and in doing so support setting basic guidelines for admission within your school.

Like most professional organizations, ERB views the process of validating test scores as the joint responsibility of the test maker and test user. As test maker, ERB's role is to establish the rationale in support of test score use and provide evidence in support of this rationale. ERB members as test users, in turn, evaluate this rationale and evidence, collect local data and conduct their own studies, and practice responsible uses of test scores. To support the continual accumulation of validity evidence over time, ERB partners with member schools to support joint research studies. For more information, or to express your interest in joining ERB in these joint research efforts, please contact [ISEEResearch@erblearn.org](mailto:ISEEResearch@erblearn.org).

<sup>3</sup> Mattern, K., Rudunzel, J., Bertling, M. & Ho, A. D. (2018). How Should Colleges Treat Multiple Admissions Test Scores? *Educational Measurement: Issues and Practice*, 37, (3).