



A FAMILY GUIDE

# Building the Right Plan, *Together*

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How families decide whether, and how, to apply beyond their assigned school,  
and how to prepare a student who can carry the plan.



## WHERE THIS STARTS

# The Question Every Family Asks

“What if my child could go to a different school than the one they’re assigned to now?”

It doesn’t matter whether the current school is public, private, or parochial... and it doesn’t matter whether the school being considered is public, magnet, parochial, or private. The question is the same, and it comes up almost everywhere.

## THE HONEST ANSWER

*It usually comes from a wish to open the door a little wider — more choices, more room to grow into whoever a child is going to become.*

## When There Isn't a Choice

*For some families, applying beyond the assigned school isn't a preference — it's a necessity, because there is no public high school in their town.*



**Magnet high school.** A specialized public program, often with its own competitive admission process.



**A public school in another town.** Enrollment arranged through tuition, sending/receiving agreements, or family relocation.



**Parochial school.** A faith-based option, often with a more accessible admission path.



**Private school.** A tuition-based option chosen deliberately, not by default.

# Many Valid Reasons to Look Beyond

*For most families, this is a choice, and every reason below carries real weight for a child between the ages of thirteen and eighteen. None of them is wrong.*



**Open the door wider.** Simply wanting more choices on the table for the next step.



**A specific, talented interest.** A program built around STEM, the arts, music, or athletics that fits a real talent.



**Grow at their own pace.** Avoiding challenges that aren't necessary yet, so a child can grow on their own timeline.



**Grow into real rigor. The opposite instinct:** a boarding or magnet school with enough challenge to push necessary growth.



**A fresh start.** A new place, simply to begin again.

# The Fears Parents Bring With Them

*When a family comes to me about a multiple-school application, often BCA alongside one or more private schools — there's almost always real fear underneath the excitement.*



**“What if the whole plan turns out to be a failure?”**



**“Is this going to be a wasted effort?”**



**“What if my child burns out while we're in the middle of prep?”**



**“If we kick this off and it doesn't reach the level we hoped for... what happens then?”**

*These are fair questions, and they deserve real answers, not just reassurance. My consultation works through five directions, and it always starts with the student.*



# The Same Reasons Can Work in Reverse

*Every force that makes a new school attractive can also work against a child once they're there.*



## Common in BCA, but Not Unique to It

This happens most often with students admitted somewhat suddenly, without the chance to build the mindset that real rigor requires before they arrive. Many selective private schools carry the same risk.



## The Question This Raises

**How do we avoid this? It starts with an honest look at a child's readiness — not just their talent — before the plan launches. That's exactly what a real consultation is for.**



# Five Consultation Directions

*Suggestions for building a plan the student can own and carry.*

# Five Directions for Building the Plan

*Suggestions I bring to every multiple-school consultation, in the order a family works through them.*

1

## The Student Is the Core

The student knows why the plan exists, where they're applying, and how each school helps them.

2

## Know Where the Student Stands

Testing skills, academic skills, and study scope, honestly assessed before the plan launches.

3

## A Reasonable School List

Fit over ranking, sized to what the family and student can realistically manage well.

4

## Understand the Exams

What each test covers, and how similar and different BCA/BT, HSPT, SSAT, and ISEE are.

5

## A 3-4 Month Working Timeline

Run the plan as a project: test dates, deadlines, and weekly checkpoints mapped in advance.

*Each direction builds on the one before it: a plan the student owns, sized to where they stand, aimed at the right schools and tests, on a calendar the family can keep.*

## Whose Plan Is This, Really?

1

Although the plan is almost always initiated by a parent, the student has to know why the plan exists, where they're applying, and how each school actually helps them.



***Remember: the student is the core of the application.***

They need to be fond of the plan — not just aware of it.

A plan the student hasn't made their own, whatever its origin, is standing on a weak foundation. The reasoning for each school has to make sense to the person who will actually sit for the tests, write the essays, and walk into the interviews.

## DIRECTION 2

# Where Does the Student Stand Right Now?

*Three lenses, looked at together — current status is what makes a realistic plan possible.*



### Testing Skills

Stamina, pacing, and the ability to take a score or to recognize wrong answer and to keep going. Built through trial and error, never in a single study session.



### Academic Skills

Where the student is in reading, writing, and math, subject by subject, as a range from Needs Help to Superb, not a single overall grade.



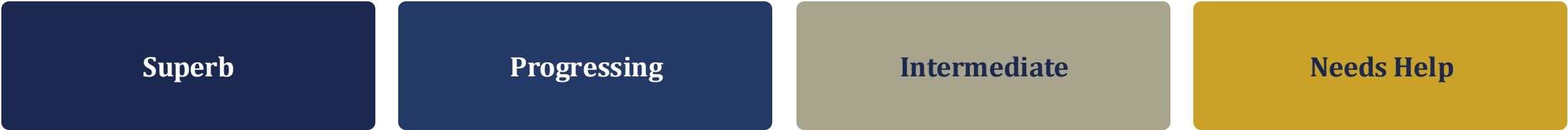
### Study Scope

How many hours after school already go to assignments, and how much room is left for prep without burnout.

*The launch question: are these skills ready to grow into a 3-4 month timeline now, or do they need more time first?*

# Academic Skills, Subject by Subject

*The plan turns next to an honest look at where the student stands academically right now, subject by subject. That current status is what makes a realistic plan possible.*



*a range across every subject, not a single overall grade*



## The “Hours After School” Diagnostic

Some students use every free hour on assignments to land in the B range. Others use about a fifth of that time to earn an A — and spend the rest building character and interests outside the classroom. Every student’s learning path is different, and that difference should shape which high school is truly the better fit.

# Testing Skill Is Built, Not Born

*It doesn't settle into place in a single study session; it takes trial and error to build the stamina to handle a score, or a wrong answer. Testing skill connects to more than content review.*



**Tolerance for feedback and criticism.** Grades, scores, and comments are some of the most important learning tools a student has, and one of the hardest things to take in easily.



**Inference, comprehension, and executive function.** Reading closely, seeing the whole picture, and managing time: genuine study skills, not just speed under pressure.



**A real desire to achieve the outcome.** Without that desire, the skill has nothing to attach to. It has to want to earn the result.

*The key question: are these skills progressing but need more time, or ready to grow into the timeline ahead? That answer decides whether the plan should launch now or wait.*

## What Each Kind of School Is Looking For



### Private School

Student character: well-rounded, matching the school's own character. Multiple essays and a character description, plus a student interview and often a parent interview.



### Parochial School

Mostly academics and discipline. Essays tend to be short; Regis is a notable exception.



### BCA / BT

An obvious STEM character. Why this school? The interview is where they assess a student's readiness, not just talent.

*Once a family understands what a school is looking for, the next question becomes personal: how does my child match this, and which school do they feel drawn to?*

DIRECTION 3

# Building a Reasonable School List

Every school on the list adds essays, interviews, and often another test.

-  **Fit, not ranking.** Each school should match who the student is and who they want to become.
-  **Sized to real capacity.** A list the family and student can manage well beats a long list managed poorly.
-  **The student can explain every choice.** If they can't say why a school is on the list, it isn't ready to be there.
-  **Tests stack. Choose with the test load in view.** Overlapping tests let one prep season carry several applications.

| Each school type brings its own test |                                                           |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|
| BCA / BT                             | BCA/BT Admission Test<br>3rd week of Nov                  |
| Parochial                            | HSPT<br>First Friday of Nov                               |
| Private day                          | ISEE or SSAT<br>Multiple dates · scores due mid-Jan       |
| Boarding                             | SSAT (most common)<br>Multiple dates · scores due mid-Jan |



# Direction 4: Understanding the High School Exams

*What each test covers, and how similar and different BCA/BT, HSPT, SSAT, and ISEE are.*

# BCA / BT Admission Test

A fully digital, computer-based exam with two sections.

| SECTION | WHAT IT COVERS                                                                                                                                              | TIME   |
|---------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------|
| English | A literary response essay written in response to a reading passage.                                                                                         | 45 min |
| Math    | 40 questions spanning elementary geometry, arithmetic, and algebra — assessing number sense and problem-solving across word problems of varying difficulty. | 60 min |



## Why the English Section Matters Beyond BCA/BT

This section leans on advanced reading skill more than most families expect. Because BCA/BT prep builds that skill directly, it also gives students a head start on the reading and verbal sections of every other test on the calendar.

*Exam date: third week of November. Total testing time: about 1 hour, 45 minutes — administered on-screen at the school’s testing center.*

# At a Glance: Who, What, How Long

SSAT and ISEE shown at Upper Level (applying to grades 9–12).

|                  | BCA / BT<br>Admission Test                            | HSPT<br>Placement Test                                  | SSAT<br>Upper Level                                        | ISEE<br>Upper Level                                                                  |
|------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Used for         | Bergen County Academies / Bergen Tech (county magnet) | Catholic & parochial high schools                       | Independent & boarding schools; widely accepted nationally | Independent day schools; many accept ISEE or SSAT                                    |
| Who takes it     | 8th graders living in Bergen County                   | 8th graders (for 9th-grade entry)                       | Grades 8-11 (Middle Level: 5-7)                            | Applying to grades 9-12 (Middle: 7-8; Lower: 5-6)                                    |
| Test format      | Digital, on site at the school’s testing center       | Paper, at the high school                               | Paper, at-home digital, or Prometric test center           | Paper or online; test center, school, or at home                                     |
| Scored sections  | 2: English (essay) + Math                             | 5: Verbal, Quantitative, Reading, Mathematics, Language | 3: Verbal, Quantitative (2 parts), Reading                 | 4: Verbal Reasoning, Quantitative Reasoning, Reading Comprehension, Math Achievement |
| Scored questions | 1 essay + 40 math questions                           | 298                                                     | 150 (+16 unscored experimental)                            | 160                                                                                  |
| Testing time     | English 45 min + Math 60 min (about 1 h 45 min)       | 2 h 30 min time limit for all 298 questions             | 3 h 10 min incl. writing, experimental & two 10-min breaks | 2 h 40 min incl. essay, plus two breaks                                              |
| Test date        | Third week of November                                | First Friday of November                                | Multiple dates; scores due to schools by mid-January       | Multiple dates; scores due to schools by mid-January                                 |

# At a Glance: Scoring and Test-Day Rules

*The wrong-answer penalty is the single biggest strategy difference.*

|                      | BCA / BT<br>Admission Test                                    | HSPT<br>Placement Test                                                           | SSAT<br>Upper Level                                                                  | ISEE<br>Upper Level                                                                |
|----------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Essay / writing      | Literary response essay to a reading passage (45 min)         | None (grammar tested in Language section)                                        | 25-min writing sample — unscored, sent to schools                                    | 30-min essay — unscored, sent to schools                                           |
| Calculator           | Not permitted                                                 | Not permitted                                                                    | Not permitted                                                                        | Not permitted                                                                      |
| Wrong-answer penalty | No                                                            | No                                                                               | Yes — $-\frac{1}{4}$ point; omitted questions score 0                                | No                                                                                 |
| Scores reported as   | Used with grades as part of admission review; no score report | Standard scores 200–800; national & local percentiles; Cognitive Skills Quotient | Scaled 500–800 per section (total 1500–2400); percentiles vs. same-grade test takers | Scaled 760–940 per section; percentile and stanine (1–9) vs. same-grade applicants |
| Retakes              | One sitting per admissions cycle                              | Typically one official sitting; set by each school                               | Multiple dates per year; limits vary by format                                       | Once per season (fall, winter, spring/summer) — up to 3 per year                   |

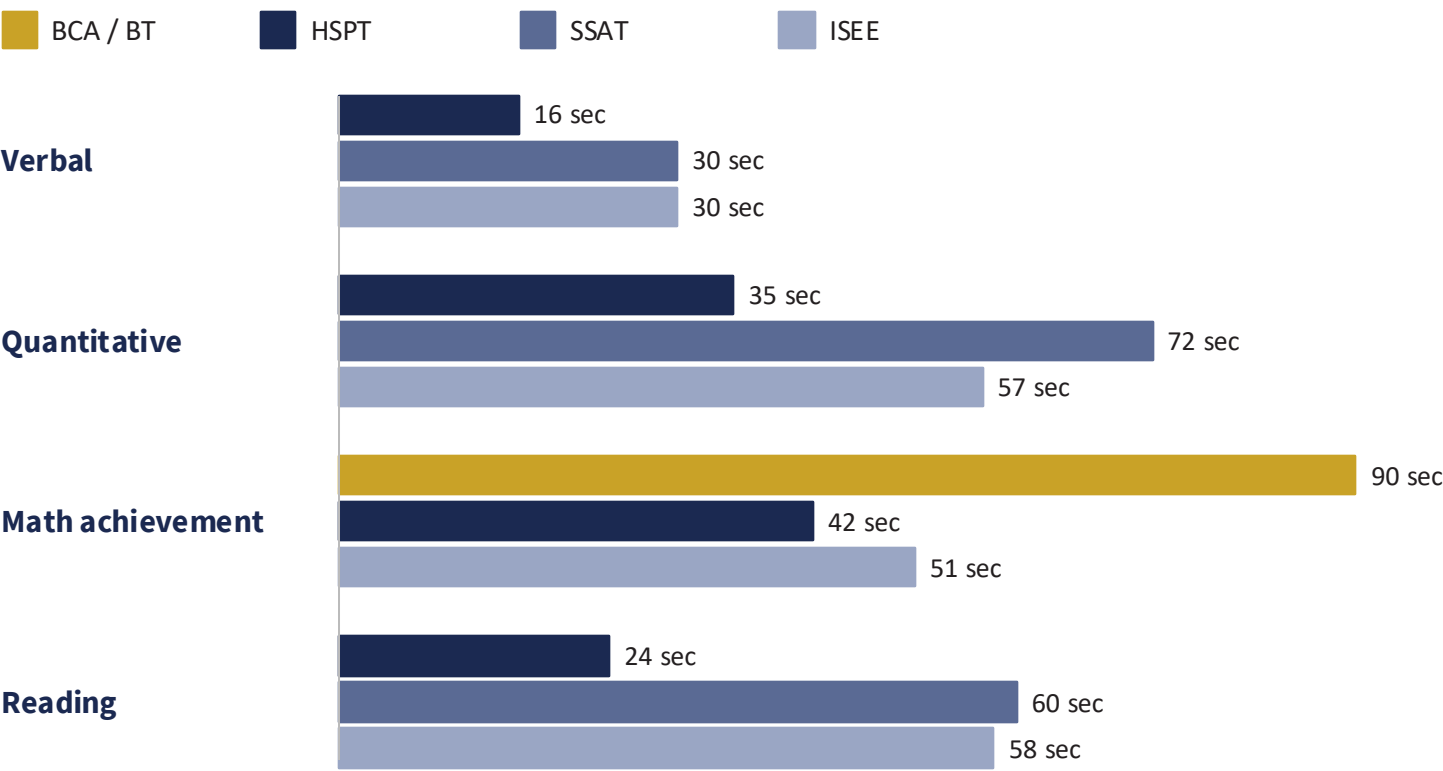
# Section by Section

Rows group sections that measure the same skill, so the overlap is visible.

| Skill Area                               | BCA / BT<br>Admission Test                                                                                 | HSPT<br>Placement Test                                                                  | SSAT<br>Upper Level                                                                          | ISEE<br>Upper Level                                                                     |
|------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Vocabulary &amp; verbal reasoning</b> | Not tested as a section                                                                                    | 60 q / 16 min: synonyms, antonyms, analogies, logic, verbal classification              | 60 q / 30 min: 30 synonyms, 30 analogies                                                     | 40 q / 20 min: synonyms and sentence completion                                         |
| <b>Quantitative reasoning</b>            | Not tested as a section                                                                                    | 52 q / 30 min: number series, geometric & non-geometric comparison, number manipulation | 50 q / 60 min (two 25-q sections): arithmetic, algebra, geometry; not split from achievement | 37 q / 35 min: word problems and quantitative comparisons                               |
| <b>Math achievement</b>                  | 40 q / 60 min: advanced arithmetic problem solving with elementary algebra & geometry; scaled easy to hard | 64 q / 45 min: math concepts and problem solving                                        | (included in Quantitative above)                                                             | 47 q / 40 min: numbers & operations, algebra, geometry, measurement, data & probability |
| <b>Reading comprehension</b>             | Built into the English essay: analyze a passage and argue a clear opinion                                  | 62 q / 25 min: comprehension plus vocabulary-in-context                                 | 40 q / 40 min: 250–350-word narrative & argument passages                                    | 36 q / 35 min: 6 passages × 6 questions                                                 |
| <b>Grammar &amp; mechanics</b>           | Not tested as a section                                                                                    | 60 q / 25 min: punctuation, capitalization, usage, spelling, composition                | Not tested directly                                                                          | Not tested directly                                                                     |
| <b>Writing</b>                           | 1 literary response essay / 45 min: scored                                                                 | None                                                                                    | 1 prompt / 25 min: unscored                                                                  | 1 prompt / 30 min: unscored                                                             |

# How Fast Students Have to Work

Seconds available per question, by section.



BCA/BT English is a 45-minute essay and isn't charted. SSAT has no separate Math Achievement section.

**90 sec**

per BCA/BT math question — the most demanding math of the four. Questions scale from easy to hard, so time allocation across the 60 minutes has to be strategic.

**16 sec**

per HSPT verbal question — about half the time SSAT or ISEE gives.

# What They Share, Where They Split

## Common ground

**Same core skills.** HSPT, SSAT, and ISEE draw on reading, vocabulary, and math through elementary algebra. BCA/BT covers the same scope, with far deeper solving.

**No calculators.** Mental math and clean arithmetic matter everywhere.

**Advanced reading pays off everywhere.** BCA/BT's literary response essay — analyzing a passage and arguing a clear opinion — builds the reading every other test rewards.

**Similar passages.** Reading draws on literature, history, science, and everyday topics.

**Writing gets read.** Where there's an essay, schools see it — even when it isn't scored.

## Key differences

**Guessing.** Only the SSAT deducts  $\frac{1}{4}$  point for a wrong answer.

**Essay weight.** Only BCA/BT scores the essay; SSAT and ISEE send theirs unscored; HSPT has none.

**Verbal format.** SSAT uses analogies; ISEE uses sentence completion; HSPT mixes both plus logic.

**Math depth.** BCA/BT gives the fewest, hardest math questions, scaled easy to hard; ISEE splits reasoning from achievement.

**Grammar.** Only the HSPT has a dedicated language and mechanics section.

**Pace.** HSPT is built for speed — 16 seconds per verbal question.

# One Foundation, Then Test-Specific Polish

*BCA/BT prep builds the base; each other test needs a short, targeted layer on top.*



## BCA / BT

The foundation. Literary response essays that argue a clear opinion in 45 minutes, and calibrated, multi-step math with a time plan for easy-to-hard questions.

*Hardest math and the only scored essay*



## HSPT

Speed drills and the Language section — punctuation, usage, spelling, composition. Always fill in every answer.

*Most distinct timing of the four*



## SSAT

Analogies and synonyms, plus a guessing plan: eliminate choices before answering, otherwise skip.

*Only test with a wrong-answer penalty*



## ISEE

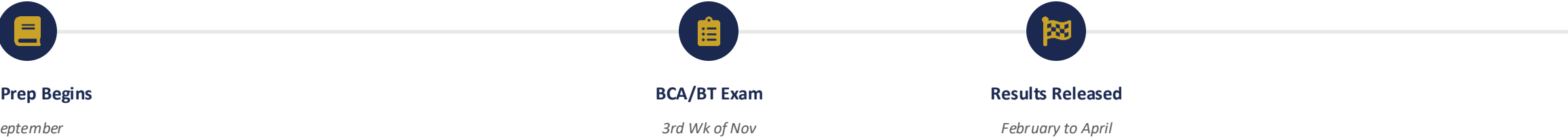
Quantitative comparisons, sentence completions, and passage stamina. Answer every question.

*Up to 3 attempts a year*

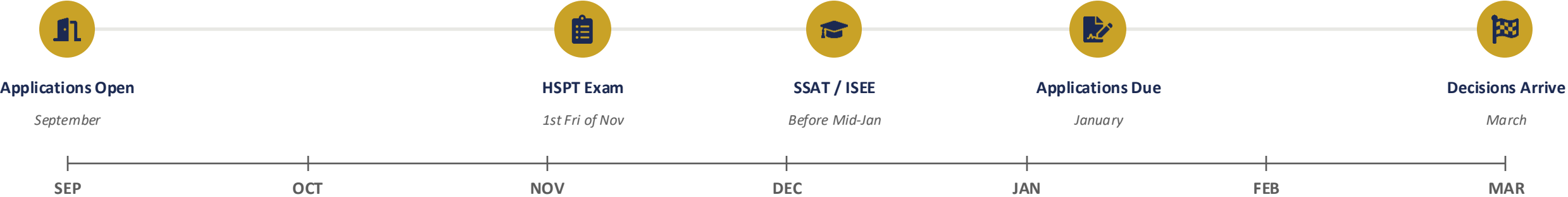
# The Timeline Map

BCA/BT and private-school tracks run on their own calendars — testing dates, application deadlines, and interviews all have to be seen side by side.

## BCA / BT TRACK



## PRIVATE & PAROCHIAL TRACK



Because BCA/BT prep builds the same high-level reading skill that HSPT, SSAT, and ISEE all reward, this sequence lets one prep season carry a student through every test on the calendar.

## DIRECTION 5

# A 3–4 Month Working Timeline

*Treat the plan as a project with a start, milestones, and weekly checkpoints — not an open-ended effort.*

### MONTH 1 · SEP

#### Set the Foundation

- Diagnostic tests and a baseline
- Confirm the school list
- Register for HSPT and SSAT/ISEE
- Begin BCA/BT prep

### MONTH 2 · OCT

#### Build Core Skills

- Literary-response essay practice
- Math depth and word problems
- HSPT Language practice
- Draft private-school essays

### MONTH 3 · NOV

#### Test Season

- HSPT - first Friday of November
- BCA/BT - third week of November
- Full-length timed practice
- Interview preparation

### MONTH 4 · DEC

#### Finish Strong

- Complete SSAT/ISEE; scores due by mid-January
- Finalize essays and activities
- Applications ready for January
- Review and rest before deadlines

**Every week:** scores, feedback, and hours reviewed together — student, parent, and counselor. **After:** BCA/BT results in January · private decisions in March.

## Three Things to Avoid

 **“Let’s just try; it’s fine if nothing comes of it.”** Trial and error has real value, but that isn’t the same as treating a serious commitment carelessly. Given what’s at stake, that mindset is genuinely irresponsible.

 **“Enough time invested guarantees results.”** It doesn’t. Time only pays off when it has the right depth and direction behind it.

 **“Years of the same activities are what impresses admissions.”** They aren’t, on their own. What actually stands out is a student’s mature, ongoing ownership of their own process.



# Ownership Is What Admissions Rewards

*Not the years logged. Not the hours invested. The way a student manages the process as their own.*

MEK's academic counselors help families assess readiness, build the school list, map the calendar, and prepare a student to own every step.

*Every school on your list runs on its own test, its own calendar, and its own definition of fit — MEK maps all three around your family.*

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