

CPS Selective Enrollment High School Admissions Test (HSAT) Overview

The **Chicago Public Schools (CPS) High School Admissions Test (HSAT)** is a standardized achievement exam used for admission into CPS selective enrollment high schools, such as Whitney M. Young, Walter Payton College Prep, Lane Tech, and others ¹. This test is administered to all CPS 8th graders (and other applicants) and is a key component of the selective high school admissions process, carrying significant weight alongside 7th grade report card grades ². Below is a detailed overview of who designs the test, the subjects and topics it covers, its relationship to other tests, and resources to help students prepare.

Test Design and Development

- **Test Provider:** The HSAT was developed by the CPS Office of Access and Enrollment (OAE) and is administered in partnership with an external testing vendor. In fact, CPS contracts with **Riverside Assessments** (an Itasca-based testing company) to provide and manage the exam ³. Riverside is known for producing nationally normed achievement tests (such as the Iowa Assessments), indicating that the CPS HSAT is built in line with standard academic testing frameworks. In other words, while the HSAT is custom-designed for CPS, it resembles other well-known achievement tests in format and content ⁴.
- **Evolution:** Prior to 2021, CPS used the NWEA MAP test scores for admissions eligibility and administered a separate **Selective Enrollment Exam** to qualified students. Starting with the 2021–22 admissions cycle, CPS eliminated the MAP requirement and introduced the HSAT as a **universal exam** taken by all 8th graders during school, to promote equitable access ⁵ ⁶. The HSAT initially mirrored the old selective enrollment test's content (with multiple sections in reading, math, vocabulary, and language skills), but it has since been **streamlined in its latest version**.
- **Recent Changes:** As of the 2023-24 testing cycle, the HSAT was **shortened from a 2.5-hour exam to roughly 1 hour** total ⁷. Previously, the exam included four sections – **Math, Reading Comprehension, Language (grammar/usage), and Vocabulary** – with roughly 40–56 questions per section ⁴. In the most recent version, it consists of **two main 30-minute sections: one in Math and one in Reading** ⁷ ⁸. This reduction in length was intended to reduce student anxiety and improve accessibility, according to CPS ⁷. (Notably, the test is offered in multiple languages beyond English – including Spanish, Arabic, Mandarin, Polish, and Urdu – to accommodate English Learners ⁷.) The content focus remains an assessment of core 8th-grade skills in math and reading.
- **Administration:** The HSAT is typically administered on a computer (online platform) during the fall of 8th grade. All CPS students take it at school on a designated date, and non-CPS students can register for weekend test dates ⁹. **No calculators are allowed**, and all questions are multiple-choice ¹⁰. There is **no guessing penalty**, meaning students are not deducted additional points for wrong answers (only correct answers contribute to the score) ⁴. Each student may take the exam

only once; retakes are not permitted (except in rare cases of testing irregularities). After the exam, scores are made available before the high school application deadline so that students can make informed school ranking decisions ¹¹ .

Subjects and Content Areas Assessed

The HSAT is an achievement skills test covering two subject areas: **Math and Reading** ¹² . These sections are designed to evaluate whether students have mastered the essential knowledge and skills expected by the end of middle school. Below is a breakdown of each subject section and the topics/skills it assesses:

Reading Section

- **Reading Comprehension:** Students must read and understand complex passages (which may include fiction, nonfiction, or informational texts). They are tested on identifying the **main idea and theme** of passages and recognizing supporting details ¹³ .
- **Inference and Analysis:** Questions require students to make **inferences** and draw conclusions from context, as well as interpret the meaning of phrases or sentences within the passage. They may also analyze the author's purpose or tone.
- **Vocabulary in Context:** The test assesses understanding of vocabulary by asking students to determine the meaning of words or phrases **in context** of the passage ¹³ . Rather than a separate vocabulary list section in the newest format, vocabulary knowledge is integrated into reading comprehension (e.g. finding synonyms or meanings from context clues).
- **Literary Devices & Text Analysis:** Students may be asked to recognize or interpret **literary devices** (for example, metaphors, similes, or other figurative language) and other elements of craft in a passage ¹³ . This tests deeper critical reading skills, such as understanding an analogy or identifying the effect of an author's word choice.
- **English Language Arts Skills:** In past versions of the exam, there was a distinct **Language** section targeting grammar, punctuation, and writing mechanics. Those skills are still relevant – students should have a strong grasp of **standard English conventions** (sentence structure, grammar, usage, etc.), which can indirectly be assessed through reading and answering questions correctly. Some prep resources note that **grammar and language usage** remain important areas to study, even if they are not presented as a standalone test section ¹⁴ .

Math Section

- **Numerical Skills and Pre-Algebra:** The math portion covers key pre-algebra skills appropriate for 8th grade. Students will encounter problems involving **integer operations, fractions, decimals, ratios and proportions**, and percent – foundational arithmetic skills that feed into algebraic thinking.
- **Algebraic Concepts:** A significant part of the test focuses on **algebra readiness**. This includes understanding **algebraic principles** such as evaluating expressions, solving one-variable equations/inequalities, interpreting linear relationships, and working with simple algebraic word problems ¹⁵ . Concepts like the distributive property, combining like terms, or basic quadratic concepts could appear at a level an advanced 8th grader can handle.
- **Geometry and Measurement:** Students are expected to know fundamental geometry concepts. Questions may cover **area, perimeter, and volume** of shapes, properties of triangles and other

polygons, the Pythagorean theorem, and possibly basic coordinate geometry ¹⁴. They should be comfortable with measuring units and geometric problem-solving at a middle-school level.

- **Data Analysis and Probability:** The test can include interpretation of data from charts or graphs, basic statistics (mean, median, probability), and **problem-solving with data** ¹⁴. Students might be asked to analyze tables or solve word problems involving data trends.
- **Problem-Solving:** Math questions are often word problems requiring logical reasoning. The exam assesses the ability to **apply math concepts to solve problems**, not just rote computation ¹⁵. Since calculators aren't allowed, students should practice doing calculations by hand and managing time on multi-step problems.

Format: All questions in both sections are multiple-choice. Given the time constraint (~30 minutes per section), students must work efficiently. Typically, the Reading section may include several passages with a set of questions each, and the Math section will have a range of discrete questions. **Time management** and familiarity with question types are crucial, as the entire test has to be completed in about an hour ⁷ ¹⁶.

Basis and Uniqueness of the HSAT

The CPS HSAT is essentially a custom **achievement test** – it measures learned academic skills aligned with school curricula (not an IQ or cognitive abilities test). In terms of structure and content, it is **similar to other well-known standardized tests** for middle schoolers, though not officially branded as one of them. For example, the HSAT's subject matter and format closely resemble parts of exams like the TerraNova or Iowa Assessments (which also have reading comprehension, language, and math sections) ⁴. This is not surprising, given that CPS's test vendor, Riverside, is the publisher of the Iowa tests ³. However, the HSAT is unique to Chicago – it's **designed specifically for CPS's selective enrollment admissions** criteria. It replaced the combination of NWEA MAP and the old selective enrollment exam with one unified assessment ⁵, and CPS keeps the exact content confidential.

Note: The **exact questions and scoring of the HSAT are not public**. CPS treats the test content as secure – past students and tutors note that the test items have **“always been kept secret”** ¹⁷. Unlike college entrance exams (SAT/ACT) or some private school tests (HSPT/ISEE) that release practice booklets, there are no official released HSAT question sets. We only know the general skills covered (as outlined above) and the scoring system used for admissions. For selective enrollment high schools, CPS converts the HSAT results into a point score (typically up to 450 points, which combines with 450 points from 7th grade grades for a total of 900) ². Because there's **no penalty for guessing** and only correct answers count ⁴, students should answer every question even if unsure.

Study Resources and Preparation Tips

Preparing for the HSAT should involve a comprehensive review of reading and math skills, plus practice with test-taking strategies. Below are resources and tips for a roughly **30-week study plan**, covering both **local (Chicago-based)** and **third-party** preparation options:

- **Official CPS Guidance:** CPS does *not* provide any official study guides or sample questions for the HSAT. In fact, the district explicitly states that it **“does NOT recommend, endorse, or provide”** test prep courses or sample tests/questions for this exam ¹⁸. The rationale is to keep the playing field level and avoid encouraging excessive test prep. That said, CPS sometimes releases a *Parent Guide* or

information packet each year with details about the testing process (e.g. logistics, dates, accommodations) – but this does **not** include practice items. Families should be aware that any preparation is done through outside resources.

- **Start Early and Make a Plan:** Because of the breadth of material (essentially reviewing several years' worth of reading and math skills), it's wise to begin studying well in advance. Experts recommend starting **at least six months (about 24–30 weeks) before the exam** ¹⁹ . For a 30-week study plan, a student might dedicate each week to specific sub-topics. For example: spend a few weeks intensively on algebraic equations and word problems, another few weeks on geometry and measurement, and similarly allocate time for reading skills (like one week for main idea and inference practice, another for vocabulary in context, another for grammar review, etc.). Consistent daily or weekly study habits over a long period help reinforce skills ¹⁹ .
- **Free and Local Resources:** Look for free tutoring programs or school-based initiatives in Chicago. One example is **Evergreen Learning Chicago**, a local organization that offers **free tutoring** to CPS students preparing for selective enrollment tests ²⁰ . They provide guidance on test content and study strategies, which can be especially helpful for families who might not pursue private test prep. Additionally, some Chicago public libraries or community centers occasionally host test prep workshops. Checking with your school counselor or the Office of Access and Enrollment for any recommended (or at least known) resources is a good step.
- **Practice Tests:** Since CPS doesn't release official questions, taking **practice exams from third-party sources** is crucial for building stamina and familiarity. Several Chicago-based tutoring companies have developed *proprietary practice HSAT tests* that simulate the real exam. For instance, BEC Tutoring offers **full-length practice HSAT exams** (with two different versions) for students to gauge their performance before the real test ²¹ . These practice tests usually come with score reports and sometimes an item analysis, which can help identify areas of weakness. Taking a timed practice test every few weeks towards the latter half of your study plan can greatly improve time management skills and reduce test-day anxiety.
- **Third-Party Study Guides:** In the absence of official CPS materials, many students use study guides for similar exams. While there may not be a CPS-specific published book widely available, materials for tests like the **High School Placement Test (HSPT)** or **Independent School Entrance Exam (ISEE)** can be useful because they cover reading, language, and math skills at a middle school level. The question formats are not identical, but the content overlap is high. Websites like TestingMom.com and books from companies like Kaplan or Barron's for HSPT/ISEE can provide practice questions on vocabulary, grammar, reading comprehension, and math that mirror the HSAT's scope. (Always remember that the HSAT does **not** include an essay, nor does it have the science section that some other tests do – so focus on the relevant subjects.)
- **Tutoring and Prep Courses:** **Chicago has a robust test-prep market** for the selective enrollment exam. For example, **Test Prep Chicago** and **SelectivePrep** have offered classes and one-on-one tutoring for the SEHS exam for many years ²² . These courses typically teach test-taking strategies, review key math and reading concepts, and provide homework problems or quizzes. Similarly, companies like Academic Approach, Nurturing Wisdom, or MyGuru also provide CPS HSAT-focused prep or at least guidance (sometimes alongside other exams like ISEE/HSPT). When choosing a prep course or tutor, ensure they are familiar with the *most recent format* of the HSAT (as of 2023, only

reading and math sections). Many providers have updated their curricula to reflect the new 1-hour format, concentrating prep time on those two areas. Testimonials and track records (how their students scored/gained admission) can be helpful in evaluating a program, but keep in mind no program has access to actual test questions – they are teaching underlying skills and simulated questions.

- **Online Communities and Forums:** Parents and students often share insights on forums like **Chicago School Options** (a local school discussion board) or even Reddit. These can be places to find recommendations for resources or hear about others' experiences with the test. For example, some forum posts summarize what the exam covers and confirm details like "the exam is broken into math, reading comprehension, language, and vocabulary" from past years ⁴. Engaging with such communities can provide moral support and practical tips (like how to juggle the HSAT prep with schoolwork, or how to help an easily anxious student).
- **Study Techniques:** In your 30-week study timeline, incorporate a variety of techniques:
 - **Focused Skill Practice:** Each week, tackle specific skill areas. For reading, you might practice with sample passages and questions to improve on finding main ideas or making inferences. For math, you could drill one topic (e.g., one week on fractions/proportions, another on solving equations, etc.) while circling back to mix topics later for cumulative practice.
 - **Vocabulary Building:** Even though there isn't a separate vocabulary test section now, having a strong vocabulary will aid reading comprehension. Make flashcards of high-frequency words or Latin/Greek roots. Some test prep books or websites list vocabulary commonly encountered in 8th-9th grade level tests – these can be studied over the weeks (learn a few words each day).
 - **Grammar and Writing Practice:** Dedicate some time to reviewing grammar rules (subject-verb agreement, punctuation, usage). Resources like Khan Academy or grammar workbooks can be helpful. You can practice by editing sentences or identifying errors, which was a component of older exams and still valuable knowledge.
 - **Timed Sections:** Once you have reviewed a lot of content, begin taking **timed mini-sections**. For example, give yourself 15 minutes to answer a set of reading questions, or 15 minutes for a batch of math problems, to simulate the pacing needed (roughly one minute or less per question on the real test).
 - **Full-Length Practice:** As test day approaches (perhaps in the last 4–6 weeks of your plan), take a couple of full-length practice tests in one sitting (as mentioned earlier). Review your answers thoroughly – going over every mistake to understand the error. If you consistently get certain types of questions wrong (e.g. inference questions, or geometry problems about circles), revisit those topics in your study materials.
 - **Stress Management:** Remember that the selective enrollment process is **competitive** and can be stressful for an 8th grader. Encourage regular breaks and maintain a healthy study-life balance. Techniques such as mindfulness or positive visualization on test day can help. The goal of a 30-week study plan is to **spread out the preparation** so the student feels confident and prepared without last-minute cramming ¹⁹.

In summary, the CPS HSAT is a critical exam covering middle-school Reading and Math skills, designed by CPS and Riverside to identify students ready for Chicago's top high schools. It is **not based on any single**

national test but aligns with common standards in reading comprehension, language arts, and math for that grade level. Students should be well-versed in reading analytically and solving a wide range of math problems without a calculator. Because CPS does not release official test items, utilizing third-party practice materials and courses is the primary way to prepare. With a **structured study plan (~30 weeks)** that covers all tested subjects and skills, and by taking advantage of both local free resources and reputable test-prep offerings, students can greatly improve their mastery and confidence before test day. Good luck with the study plan and the exam!

Sources:

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