You’ve made the decision to invest in an independent education for your child.

Paying for an independent education can be expensive. But did you know that tens of thousands of students in independent schools across the country receive more than a billion dollars to reduce tuition and other costs of schooling?

Thousands of schools provide financial assistance to ensure that the students they’ve admitted have a realistic chance to enroll, regardless of their financial circumstances. With the right planning and information, families can identify available financial aid options, and take the necessary steps to make an independent education for their children more affordable.

This resource, The SSS Family Guide to Financial Aid, will help you become familiar with the financial aid process. It defines terms you need to know and walks you through the process of applying for financial aid. It offers sample financial aid package calculations. And it provides you with questions to ask schools. All the information you need to ask the right questions and make informed decisions about your financial aid options is right here.
Your first question:  
Is my family eligible for financial aid?

Financial aid is monetary assistance that schools provide to reduce educational costs for families. Most financial aid is provided directly from the schools and is most commonly provided on the basis of financial need. Need is defined as the difference between educational expenses and the family’s ability to pay those expenses.

Many families mistakenly believe they do not qualify for financial aid. However, there is no specific income level at which a family is no longer eligible for aid. Eligibility is based on many factors, so you should always investigate the possibility of receiving financial aid if you feel you cannot pay all of the costs yourself.

Start with the schools. Find out if the schools you are interested in offer financial aid. Visit their websites or call their admission or financial aid offices. Each school can send you forms and any other information you need to apply for financial aid. Then ask each school questions about:

- **Deadlines for admission and financial aid (they may be different):** Schools may not consider your child for financial aid or may provide reduced grants if you miss their deadlines. Each school sets its own deadlines.

- **Approach:** Most schools believe that families have the primary responsibility for financing their child’s education to the extent they can. NAIS’s Principles of Good Practice for Financial Aid Administration supports this approach. Some schools expect every family to pay a minimum amount even if the family is awarded financial aid.

- **Costs:** Knowing the true cost of a full year of education will help you plan your finances. Beyond tuition, additional costs may include uniforms, fees, meal plans, books, supplies, trips, transportation, clubs and sports.
Other questions:

Throughout the financial aid process, talk with the financial aid administrators at every school you are applying to. Ask questions, explain your situation and discuss your concerns. Because schools have different financial aid policies and budgets, answers will vary from school to school. The financial aid administrators can help you understand how the process works and the possible options for your family.

- What is the application deadline for financial aid consideration?
- Are the admission and financial aid processes at this school combined or independent of one another?
- What types of financial assistance does the school offer? Does the school offer tuition payment plans or loan programs?
- Do I need to submit an income tax return or other forms as part of the financial aid process?
- Are there additional forms that I need to fill out if I own a business or farm?
- How are my financial status and my ability to pay evaluated if I am separated or divorced?
- What is the school’s policy regarding meeting full financial need?
- Does the school require a minimum contribution from families, or can financial aid cover all school costs?
- If my child receives financial aid for one year, what is the school’s policy for granting aid in the following years?
- What costs beyond tuition might families expect?
The Options:

What types of financial aid are available?

There are basically four ways to make it easier to meet independent school costs:

1. **Need-based financial assistance**
   The vast majority of financial assistance given by schools comes in the form of need-based grants. Schools typically require families to complete an application to determine the family’s ability to contribute to educational expenses. Schools that subscribe to the School and Student Services By NAIS (SSS) program use the Parents’ Financial Statement (PFS) to help make that determination. Families who demonstrate need may be provided with a grant to lower the amount they must pay to the school. These grants offset tuition and other expenses. They do not need to be repaid. The money comes directly from the school’s financial aid budget. Grant amounts may vary considerably, based on the size of the school’s financial aid budget, its tuition costs and its philosophy for awarding aid.

2. **Merit awards**
   Some schools offer special awards or scholarships based on criteria other than economic circumstances. The most familiar example of a non-need-based award is the merit award. Merit awards recognize outstanding talent in areas such as athletics, art, music and academics. Terms for eligibility and renewal are different from those for need-based aid. Also, funding is more limited, making competition to receive merit awards more difficult. If the school offers merit programs, ask about the specifics. Don’t be surprised if a school does not offer merit-based awards.

3. **Tuition payment plans**
   Payment plans are typically coordinated between a financial services company and the school. With a payment plan, you can participate in a monthly payment schedule, which may be easier to manage than the standard one or two lump sum payments typically required by schools.

4. **Tuition loan programs**
   Loan programs are usually coordinated between the family and a lender. These programs can make tuition payments more affordable by spreading payments over a longer period of time than tuition payment plans allow.

Many families require assistance beyond what a school can offer through need-based grants and merit-based awards. They might seek other financial planning options, such as tuition payment plans and tuition loan programs. Go to [sss.nais.org](http://sss.nais.org) to find a list of companies that offer tuition payment plans and tuition loan programs. Contact them for additional information, including current fees and rates. Talk to the schools. They may recommend certain plans and providers.
A Few Scenarios:

Sample Financial Aid Packages

To offset the difference between the educational costs and your family’s ability to contribute (as determined by the PFS), a school may offer you a financial aid package. This package may contain one or more elements to meet all or a portion of your demonstrated financial need. Each school has its own budget and policies. The examples below will give you an idea of two financial aid offers the same family might receive from two different schools.

Consider this example:

**Summary of Need**

| $15,000 | Tuition and other costs |
| $5,000 | Amount the family can contribute |
| **$10,000** | Financial need/aid eligibility |

**Scenario A**

The school determined that your family can afford $5,000 of its $15,000 tuition. A financial aid package may represent a single source of financial assistance (one $10,000 grant), or it may be assembled from a number of sources. For example:

| $7,000 | Grant from school |
| + $3,000 | Merit scholarship |
| **$10,000** |

**Scenario B**

Sometimes an aid package still does not meet the full need you’ve demonstrated. Using the same sample in which a family has demonstrated it can pay $5,000 of the total $15,000 due, a family applying to a school that has limited financial aid funding may see a package that looks like this:

| $6,000 | Grant from school |
| + $1,000 | Scholarship |
| **$7,000** | Total aid ($3,000 in unmet aid) |

The family must find $3,000 in addition to the $5,000 the school determines that the family can pay. And, remembering that the family bears primary responsibility to pay for private school, it must plan its resources accordingly. Many families find options such as tuition loan programs helpful in meeting gaps the school cannot fill.
The Process:

**Apply for financial aid through SSS by NAIS**

1. Beginning November 1st, go to sss.nais.org/parents to begin your PFS online.

2. On the PFS, indicate which schools should receive your information. This way, you only have to fill out one form to apply to any number of schools.

3. Submit the PFS online and your payment of $41.00. You’ll then have access to a section called “Manage Documents.” If schools require additional documents like tax returns, you can upload them there.

4. SSS analyzes the information on the PFS to estimate your ability to contribute to educational expenses.

5. Schools receive the results of the analysis as soon as the PFS is completed online. You can see the results in the Report of Family Contribution within the PFS.

**Final Thoughts**

- Applying for financial aid does not guarantee that you will be eligible for financial aid. Nor does being eligible guarantee that there will be financial aid available.

- To make their final decisions, schools use the information from the PFS as a starting point. School-specific policies, practices, and available budgets also impact their determination of your eligibility.

- SSS by NAIS does not determine the amount of financial aid you receive. Each school will communicate its financial aid decision to you directly.

While independent schools may seem expensive, taking the right steps and asking the right questions go a long way towards turning a child’s opportunity to access a private school education into a reality.