



The Home Education Foundation

"Home Educators' Voice at the Capitol"

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The National Merit Scholarship program is a very home school friendly program. It requires a bit of initiative on the part of the parent in seeing that the child takes the proper test at the proper time, and beyond that everything is handled by the National Merit Corporation.

The first and most important thing that must occur for any child to be considered for a National Merit Scholarship is for the child to take the PSAT, which also serves as the qualifying test for the National Merit Scholarship, in the child's junior year. The child may take this test in earlier grades, but the junior year score is the one that will count for the scholarship program. It is helpful for a student to take this test as a sophomore as a means of previewing the structure of the exam.

The PSAT is given nationwide on both a Saturday and a Tuesday in mid-October each year. The actual test date is chosen by the school or school system that is administering the test. Some private schools, if given enough advance notice, will purchase an extra copy of the PSAT and will accommodate a home schooler. The purchase order is sometimes sent to the test publisher in the spring prior to test administration, so early contact with the private school is necessary. Many public schools will open up their tests to children outside of their school populations as well. A parent interested in this approach should contact the guidance department of the local public school in early September to find out how to take advantage of this option. There is a fee for the test administration of approximately \$12.

Home schoolers who sit for the PSAT often make a mistake that, if not corrected, can disqualify them from the scholarship competition. A question on the student information section asks if the student is regularly enrolled in a school. The National Merit Corporation considers home schooling to be a legitimate educational option, so the student should answer "yes". Non-students are not considered for the scholarship program. There is also a home school code that the proctors will have in the test administration information that should be entered in the area designated for school code. This ensures that the score report will go to the parent and not to the school at which the test is administered.

Scores are generally returned to the schools and to the parents of home schooled students in mid-December. From the PSAT score, a National Merit selection index score is derived. National Merit Commended Students and Semifinalists are selected based on this selection index. In other words, students have a one-time opportunity to be qualifiers for the program.

The National Merit Corporation will notify the parent in the spring of his child's junior year if his child is selected to be a Commended Student and in the fall of his senior

year if he is selected as a Semifinalist. Those selected as semifinalists are sent a packet of information with an application to be completed and returned. Home schooled students are sent a letter specifically for home schoolers which explains the further steps that they need to take, the steps involved in becoming a finalist, and includes a telephone number to call for further questions.

The form that must be completed is intended for regularly schooled students and is somewhat confusing for a home school parent to complete. However, there are detailed instructions included. If the parent has difficulty in knowing how to handle a particular area, the contact person at National Merit Corporation is extremely helpful in walking that parent through the process. The student must write an essay on a given topic. Also, there is a section in which a teacher is to write a recommendation. This proves to be a bit of a challenge for a home schooler whose only teacher has been his parents, as parents are not permitted to write the recommendation/evaluation. The National Merit contact advised that anyone who has acted in a teaching role of any sort with the child may write this recommendation. She suggested a music teacher, a coach, a teacher from a correspondence, online, or dual enrollment course, or another type of instructional figure. The purpose of this portion of the application is to reveal something more about the student that is not shown by his grades, course list, and test scores, which are requested in another area of the form. Actually, most of these recommendations for traditionally schooled students are written by the school guidance counselor, who may have only a passing knowledge of the student. In this regard, a home schooled student may be given an advantage as he is able to choose a person who knows him well and who may be able to help him stand out from the crowd.

Included in the semifinalist's packet is a card on which the student is to indicate his first choice of a college. It is most important that this is filled out prior to the middle of March, and that it be correct. It can be amended if a college choice is changed if filled out early in the process. It is also important that the student applies to colleges and makes a timely college decision, as many colleges offer generous scholarships to those who indicate their institution as their first choice and who are accepted at that school by the spring of their senior year.

There are two additional ways to obtain scholarship money through this program. Some companies offer scholarship money, usually for students who indicate a specific major or, more often, for qualifying children of employees of the corporation. Also, the National Merit Corporation itself awards scholarship money to a small number of qualifying students who do not get college or corporate awards. All three types of entities that award scholarships through this program choose from the pool of semifinalists.

Once the application has been submitted, the semifinalist simply waits until the spring of his senior year to hear whether he will become a finalist. Finalist status merely means that the National Merit Corporation, the student's first choice college, or a corporation has chosen to give the student a monetary award.

HEF wishes to acknowledge that this information was submitted by Karen Code. Karen has 3 children in college: One qualified for the National Merit Scholarship and the other two qualified for high Bright Future Scholarships.