



The Home Education Foundation

"Home Educators' Voice at the Capitol"

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What You Need to Know About the National Merit Scholarship

3 types:

1. One-time \$2500 Scholarship
2. College Sponsored scholarship packages that can be as high as \$8,000 to \$10,000 a year, renewable for up to 4 years (for the 2000-2001 school year, FSU offers \$8,000 a year and UF offers \$4,000 a year.) All national merit recipients in Florida are, also, eligible for A Bright futures Scholarship. The highest category of Bright Futures pays 100% of tuition and books, but also requires that the student do 75 Hours of community service with a non-profit organization.
3. Corporate Sponsored scholarships-some are for one year and some are renewable.

How do you qualify?

- By taking the PSAT/NMSQT in October of the 11th grade
- By achieving semifinalists status by being in the top 1% of all students in your state that year (In Florida this year that requires a PSAT score of around 213).
- By proving your PSAT scores with a score of 1300 or better on the SAT taken the following fall.
- And by having a 3.5 GPA in high school work and good recommendation letters from a teacher other than the parents.

How difficult is it to Qualify?

- Over the past few years, about 25% of home schoolers in Florida who have taken their SAT in the 11th or 12th grade have scored close to or above 1300. With a very little work, these students could have received a National Merit Scholarship, BUT NONE OF THEM TOOK THE PSAT, SO NONE OF THEM QUALIFIED FOR A NATIONAL MERIT SCHOLARSHIP!
- In order to be ready for the PSAT by 11th Grade, a student needs to finish Algebra I and Geometry before the test.
- The more test preparation the better. With test preparation, my son raised his SAT score by 190 points in about one year of review, working 2 hours a day and taking one practice test each week for about 5 months.

What is the PSAT?

- A 2 hour and 10 minute standardized test with 4 (25 minute sections) and 1(30 minute section)
 - 2 verbal sections (25 minutes each)
 - 2 math sections (25 minutes each)
 - 1 writing section (30 Minutes)

- Given in the fall of the 11th grade, but you may practice it in the 10th grade.

How do I Prepare?

- National Merit Competition Time line: ["http://www.collegeboard.org"](http://www.collegeboard.org)
["http://www.nationalmerit.org"](http://www.nationalmerit.org)

Prior to 6th Grade:

- Review information about the National Merit Competition
- Begin collecting PSAT and SAT practice books from local public school guidance counselors or from the national Merit Corporation and The College Board.

By 6th grade:

- Begin regular use of a computer program (for 1/2 to one hour each weekday) that includes SAT and PSAT review, or use a PSAT review book if a computer is not available (begin by studying the English sections--especially vocabulary, the writing section, and the basic math section). **DO NOT ATTEMPT TO TAKE A DIAGNOSTIC TEST UNTIL YOUR CHILD HAS COMPLETED ALGEBRA I AND GEOMETRY.**
- Plan your child's math course work around the requirements for the PSAT-- for sixth grade, look at the basic math problems in the PSAT review material. Be sure that your child has mastered the concepts required and is comfortable with the way problems are presented--such as reading problems, not just standard numeral problems (in some instances the PSAT will require a little more reasoning than some math curriculum).
- Continue to use the PSAT math review alongside your regular math curriculum.

By 7th grade:

- Continue collecting practice SAT and PSAT tests from a guidance counselor.
- If your child has mastered basic math concepts, begin Algebra I when your child seems ready. After completing Algebra I, add PSAT algebra review to your daily PSAT review.
- Continue your review of English, vocabulary, and grammar. Make sure that you understand the proper way to do a research paper and teach this skill to your child.
- Continue to develop his/her research skills using such curriculum as "Information Please". See to it that your child does at least one large research paper each year from now on.

By 8th grade:

- Continue collecting practice SAT and PSAT tests from a guidance counselor.
- Begin geometry if your student is ready. After completing geometry, add PSAT geometry review to your daily PSAT review.
- Take the first diagnostic test before the ninth grade. **DON'T EXPECT THEM TO DO WELL!** (This test is MUCH harder than the actual PSAT!) This test simply helps you to decide what you need to concentrate on in your study program.
- Begin studying the test taking strategies.
- Do not be anxious to declare your student a high school student. Wait a year if your student is deficient in some important area, and he will do better on the PSAT and in dual enrollment.

By 9th grade:

- Continue collecting practice SAT and PSAT tests from a guidance counselor.
- Begin Algebra II if your student is ready.
- Continue reviewing all parts of the PSAT and test taking strategies.
- Take one Non-standardized** PSAT at least once a month. Make Xerox copies of the tests and answer sheets. Do not write on your review book tests or answer sheets. Your student can take them again months later, or another sibling can use the tests. Take at least 1/2 of the test at one setting.

**A non-standardized test is the type included in the PSAT practice booklets and software that are not from The College Board. These test are usually HARDER than the standardized actual PSAT test and the ones included in the Student Bulletins that you have been diligently collecting from the guidance counselors each year which are actually old PSAT tests from previous years.

- Save most of your "Standardized" Practice tests for the few months just before your child takes the PSAT in the 11th grade.
- Purchase new software and/or new review books for both the SAT and the PSAT (as well as a SAT II writing booklet to review the writing portion of the PSAT). When you complete one the books and/or software you have, you will be introduced to a variety of review approaches, and you will have plenty of practice tests to take. Retake practice tests if you run completely out of books or software to buy. (You can get an educators discount of 20% at Barnes and Noble)

By 10th grade: The review year.

- Take just one of your official practice tests in the late summer before your 10th grade year. Take the whole test at once under strict testing conditions as near to the actual test conditions as possible.
- Sign up and take the PSAT in October of the 10th grade for practice.
- If possible, spend this year mastering the skills needed for the PSAT. Consider using the SAT and PSAT booklets and software for your math and English curriculum (other than whatever literature and research paper your student does). Try to spend at least 2 hours a day on the English, writing, and math review in addition to completing other high school subjects.

Your child should be exploring career options and college choices. Each college has prerequisites that must be met before entry, such as a given number of math, science, or English credits, a particular foreign language, etc. If you know the careers and colleges that your student is considering, he can be sure to complete the prerequisites in his High school program utilizing the online high school program or dual enrollment for subjects you feel unequipped to teach.

By 11th grade:

- Be sure to sign up with some public or private school in time to take the PSAT in October of the 11th grade. **DON'T MISS THIS TEST!!** It is your **ONE CHANCE TO QUALIFY** for a National Merit Scholarship. You probably should check with the school at the end of the previous spring to find out when you need to let them know that you wish to take the PSAT at their school. Most public schools will let you take the test with them, but you must get registration papers and fees to them in a timely manner (usually in September of that year.) This time will vary because some schools make provisions for a number of additional students and some have just enough for their own students.

- If an emergency or illness prevents you from taking the test and you still want to enter the competition, you must contact National Merit by March 1 to see if they will consider you for some alternate testing.

Important Note:

At the test, the student is asked to fill out "Student information" on the test. One of the Questions asks "if the student is regularly enrolled in a school". A home schooled student must answer "YES" to this question. Home school is considered by National Merit to be a viable school program. A student who answers "NO" to this question will be DISQUALIFIED from the National Merit Competition because a student must be "in school" to participate. Further, there is a HOME SCHOOL CODE that must be entered in the area designated for "School Code" on the test form in order for the home schooler to receive his/her scores directly rather than through the school where the test was taken.

- Continue your carefully planned high school program, taking advantage of dual enrollment, the Florida online high school and any other plans to complete necessary high school credits.
- Continue daily SAT practice, because if your student's PSAT scores are in the selection index range for Florida which is around 213-215 (determined by the addition of the math+verbal+writing scores), your student will become a Semifinalists and will have to take the SAT the following November and score at least 1300 in order to become a Finalist! Semifinalists will represent the upper 1% of all graduating seniors in that state for that year.
- Purchase 10 Real SATs from Barnes and Noble and continue taking practice SAT tests at least twice a month (once a week is even better). Alternate between non-standardized tests from the review books and the collected "real SAT" tests that you have been collecting and/or have purchased from Barnes and Noble.

Early December: National Merit mails score reports to high school principals. If your child scores in 99th percentile or if they have a selection index better than 213, be sure to keep working on the SAT practice materials.

March 1: postmark deadline for students who missed taking the PSAT/NMSQT to request consideration for alternate entry into the Merit program.

Late August: schools are notified of the students who are semifinalists and students are given Merit Scholarship applications which must be carefully filled out and returned by the deadline with a carefully written essay and good recommendation letters written by a teacher other than a parent. (a Sunday school teacher, a music or dance teacher, a college professor if the student is dually enrolled, a Florida Online High school teacher, etc.). These applications must include a first, second, and third choice of college or university. Before filling out this part of the application, the student or parent should contact the colleges that the student is considering and ask what scholarship packages that they offer National Merit Finalists. Begin sending applications to these colleges. If possible, consider choosing a college for your first choice that offers scholarships to all Merit Finalists who choose it as the first choice. Your child will then be assured a National Merit College Sponsored Scholarship. Presently, FSU offers National Merit Finalists, who choose it as their first choice, \$8,000 a year, renewable for 4 years.

BY 12th Grade:

- Continue curriculum program leading to high school graduation by spring or summer of the 12th grade. Important Note: If you are working for an AA degree as a dually enrolled student, be sure to finish the AA degree BEFORE graduating from High School. Otherwise, wait until you enter the college where you have received your College Sponsored National Merit Scholarship in the fall BEFORE COMPLETING the AA degree.

Mid-September to early October: Fully completed National Merit applications must be returned.

Mid-October, early November, or early December on specific dates:

Semifinalists must take Authorized SAT to qualify for Finalist status. (a student must make at least a 1300 on the SAT in order to qualify. They must, also, have a GPA of 3.5 on High School work and receive good recommendation letters).

Early February: Students receive word that they are Finalists.

Mid-March through mid-July: National Merit continues to send word to students of scholarships that they will receive.

By Fall after graduation:

- You must enter college FULL TIME at the college where you received a college sponsored National Merit Scholarship in order to keep the scholarship. **YOU MAY NOT POSTPONE COLLEGE OR GO PART TIME.**

HEF would like to acknowledge Becky Subrahmanyam for writing this excellent article for us.