

# One Day Matters

By Ginny Riley

## A mom's journey – Son, National Merit Semi-Finalist, Conifer High School

In October every year, many juniors in Jefferson County, and across Colorado, take the Preliminary Standardize Achievement Test (PSAT). At our school, many freshmen and sophomores take the exam rather than PLAN or EXPLORE. At our school, the parents think of it as another standardized test. At our school, and at other high schools across our district, we need to refocus our thinking.

If you have a gifted learner, why should you pay more attention to the PSAT? Let's walk through the path many of our children have taken. The experience in many high schools is that the more a student accelerates their academic pathway, particularly in math, the higher the likelihood that the math scores will decline on the PSAT from freshman to sophomore to junior year. Why? How can that happen if our children are strong math students? Many of these students are taking Algebra II/Trig, Calculus and AP Calculus. So, why aren't they doing better on the PSAT as they progress: because they are taking Algebra II/Trig, Calculus and AP Calculus, and PSAT tests on Algebra and Geometry. Remember those math classes they took in 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, and/or 9<sup>th</sup> grade? They are now in the rearview mirror, but those skills are critical to strong scores on the PSAT. The further they are from those basic skills, the more likely they are to see a decline in PSAT math scores.

So what's the big deal? Why should we care? Well, [The National Merit Scholarship Program \(NMSP\)](#) is a competition to recognize and honor academically talented students. The PSAT is taken in a student's junior year and serves as the initial screening for the NMSP competition. Each year, the Corporation recognizes, approximately, 50,000 students as scholars. Of those 50,000, 34,000 students will be Commended Students. The remaining 16,000 students (or less than 1% of students taking the test) become Semi-Finalists and are eligible to compete for NMSP scholarships.

Why does this matter? When your student takes the PSAT, they are asked if they would like to make their information available to colleges. Colleges regularly use the College Board, which administers the PSAT and SAT, to screen students that score well to identify potential applicants. Whether students are Commended Students, Semi-Finalists, or Finalists, colleges take these awards into consideration for admission, scholarship and Honors Program acceptance. For example, *Texas A&M provides full-ride financial support for all Finalists choosing Texas A&M as their first choice school.* They are not alone. Oklahoma University touts the highest number of National Merit Finalists of any public university in the country, and the money follows those students. However, keep in mind not all schools will give financial support based on National Merit qualifications. Make sure you and your child work with the school counselor to research your options carefully to ensure you are able to leverage this academic scholarship to its full potential.

So how should your student prepare? You have options. The best way to improve your student's score is to take directed training. We have seen students, with preparation, increase

their score 15% from freshman to junior year. If your student is self-directed or wants additional practice, the College Board offers online preparation through your student's web access. The website provides online practice tests specific to your student for areas in which they were weak. There are also companies that provide a tuition-based review class. Our school brings a company in every year now to help the students prepare. If your school doesn't offer the program, talk to your counseling department.

One day matters. That one day, this year, October 18, the day your junior sits down to take the PSAT, could help determine into which college they are admitted, and their level of financial support. Help your student do their best...plan to prepare for the PSAT.

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