

# National Merit Awards

National exam yields prestige for students.



Josh Sloane was named a National Merit Scholarship finalist.



Jillian Chavis was a 2008 semi-finalist.

Each year, area schools receive notification that students are designated as commended, similar to an honorable mention notification, and a small few are semifinalists.

"It always looks nice on an application and says something if a student is nationally ranked on test scores," says Tanya Scott, guidance department chairman at Franklin High School. "It could open some doors."

However, by no means do the kudos indicate that those who are not recognized are lesser students.

"It is not a measure of the most brilliant kids in the country," notes Ms. Ginsberg. "It identifies many of the most logical thinkers, those who understand how to take the PSAT test. There are students of equal intelligence who may score a point lower than the cut-off score and are, therefore, not considered. It's a fine line to walk."

Ms. Ginsberg further explains that the results reflect ability, but are not necessarily an indicator of future college success.

College admissions officers vouch for the academic notoriety of the designations.

"Students named National Merit scholarship recipients, finalists and honorees represent stellar students and are highly sought after," says Yvette Mozie-Ross, assistant provost for enrollment management at UMBC. Colleges reach out to students cited by the organization through targeted mailings, inviting them to visit and encouraging them to apply to the university, and even offer to waive the application fee.

Although students are well into the search process, the university still reaches out to them, she adds.

Still, universities refuse to label the National Merit designation a "be all-end all" in the college application process.

"It's never the sole reason why students would be admitted," says Jameel Freeman, associate director of admissions for Johns Hopkins University. "It's simply one part acknowledging a student's success in meeting the criteria. It's great to see that in the (applicant) pool."

The recognition is just part of the overall admissions package, he adds. This includes an evaluation of how the student will fit into the student body, why he wants to be at the school, letters of recommendation, as well as activities including sports, clubs and part-time jobs.

"The student could have had a bad day, not test well, or the essay is not what colleges are looking for," says Mr. Freeman. "No student would be denied if (he or she) weren't one, and they're definitely not accepted because they are one." □

Linda L. Esterson is a free-lance writer in Owings Mills.

**Linda L. Esterson**  
Special to the Jewish Times

Each fall, nearly 1.5 million high school juniors in 21,000 American high schools take the Preliminary SAT/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test (PSAT/NMST/QT/E). For most, they receive their scores in the mail in the spring and move on to apply to college.

The highest scoring entrants in each state, comprising about one percent of the total, are notified of their designation as semifinalists and thus are evaluated by the National Merit Scholarship Corporation for several awards. Among considerations are the student's high school academic record, endorsement by the school principal and scores on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), which serve to reinforce the earlier successful performance on the PSAT. In addition, a high school official, like the guidance counselor, must submit a detailed scholarship application, which includes a self-descriptive essay and information about the student's participation and leadership in school and community activities. Approximately 15,000 semifinalists advance to the finalist level nationally.

So what does this all mean to the local kid who takes the PSAT and applies to college? For most, not a thing. But for a few, it can mean financial assistance and prestige.

Finalists can earn one of three different financial benefits.

"I was really excited that I was one of very few people to be honored this way."

— Josh Sloane



Some earn the National Merit Scholarship, an award of up to \$2,500 distributed based on residency. Two other scholarship levels are awarded including those offered by participating corporations and those financed directly by colleges and universities to their applicants who become finalists.

"I was really excited that I was one of very few people to be honored this way," says Josh Sloane, 18, a 2009 graduate of Beth Tfiloh School. "I realized that all of the hard work throughout high school helped get me this far... I'm looking forward to seeing how well I do in classes compared to other students in college."

Mr. Sloane was able to include being a semifinalist on his college applications and those schools were notified of his finalist status thereafter. One of those schools was the

University of Maryland, College Park, which awarded him \$1,000-\$2,000 per year, dependent upon his grades. He enters the Gemstone Honors Program in the A. James Clark School of Engineering.

Jillian Chavis, a 2008 graduate of Franklin High School, also received notification that she was a semifinalist in spring of her junior year. She would end up ranked first in her class and valedictorian with a 3.95 un-weighted grade point average. The University of Maryland also awarded Chavis \$1,000 per year.

She is enrolled in Maryland's business school.

Despite its national prominence, Mr. Sloane feels the award had no bearing on the college application process.

"Colleges are more concerned with SAT scores, grades and the caliber of classes taken at the time," says Sloane, who completed five Advanced Placement (AP) classes in high school. What may have also contributed to his award was his essay about his Jewish upbringing and attending a Jewish day school and how they shaped his values, and work related to tikkun olam.

"Students who qualify and are named finalists tend to be high achievers in a variety of fields, not simply academics," says Jean Ginsberg, director of college guidance at Beth Tfiloh. "The potential for academic success as measured by this test is clearly there in all of the finalists."

Out with the old...

RELIGIOUS SCHOOL

...in with the new.



Progressive. Dynamic. Diverse.

Call 410-764-2197 or visit us on the web at [www.bhcong.org](http://www.bhcong.org) for more info!

**Astro Events** — The easiest party you will ever have. From start to finish, we provide modern, clean, & affordable equipment; we pledge to make your party experience safe, enjoyable & pain free.

**We do baby naming, Purim & Passover Parties.**



**800-244-5867**

[www.astrojump.com](http://www.astrojump.com)  
[astronebaltimore@astrojump.com](mailto:astronebaltimore@astrojump.com)

Astro Events® of Northeast Baltimore  
Serving Baltimore City, Harford, Howard,  
Cecil, Carroll & Baltimore Counties.