

National Merit Scholars by Design, Not by Chance

The number of Merit Semifinalists in Jacksonville, Florida, has doubled since 1982, but this is just one of many dramatic gains attributed to a multifaceted program designed to foster academic excellence in the district.

In 1982, the Duval County Public Schools in Jacksonville, Florida,¹ launched the Potential National Merit Scholars Program because Superintendent Herb Sang believed that National Merit Scholars could be a product of intent, not accident. In 1981, when 15 Jacksonville students were named Merit Semifinalists, Sang asked high school principals and teachers to describe what it takes to be named a National Merit Scholar; not one could answer. Sang asserted strongly that if 15 students could make the cut without guidance and support from the school, then many more would benefit from a program designed to foster academic excellence.

Students in grades 5-11 who show academic promise, as measured by various criteria, are selected to participate in Jacksonville's Potential National Merit Scholars (PNMS) program. At each grade level the criteria become progressively more demanding, requiring the students to maintain an exemplary grade point average, achieve scores at or above the 90th percentile on standardized tests, and enroll in at least two advanced courses annually—one each in language arts and mathematics (see fig. 1). For those students who make the grade, rewards are forthcoming. Special recognition, enrichment, and motivational activities are woven into the school year; and summer school offers experiences like "Think Camp."

Exceptionally Talented Students

At the completion of 5th grade, Exceptionally Talented Students are recognized at a districtwide ceremony that lauds their successes before family and friends. In addition, every student receives a personal letter of congratulations from the superintendent, and each elementary school offers its own style of awards program for Exceptionally Talented Students.

Throughout 6th and 7th grades, Exceptionally Talented Students are tracked by a central coordinator. Teachers cooperatively plan the students' individual instructional programs as they enter the next grade level and volunteer as advisors to offer frequent one-to-one counseling. The district's counseling department staff have developed a manual for these voluntary advisors and annually con-

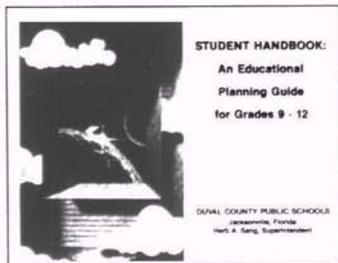
duct a workshop to prepare these teachers-turned-advisors to help the Exceptionally Talented Students plan their course schedules, prepare for exams, and identify academic areas of weakness, and to match each student with an appropriate faculty member for further assistance.

Potential National Merit Scholars

The search for Exceptionally Talented Students, however, does not begin and end at the 5th grade. At every grade level principals nominate students who become eligible, and new students to the district who meet the academic criteria are also tapped.

Stanford Achievement Test scores and grade point averages are the criteria used to identify 8th graders to be inducted formally into the PNMS program. Students who are nominated as 8th graders must be scheduled into advanced language arts and mathematics classes; guidance counselors help develop personal academic programs to move each student into the more difficult subject areas through the 9th grade.

As students enter high school, they receive a handbook that provides step-by-step planning procedures to prepare for academic requirements, upcoming tests, and application deadlines. The information in this guide for the high school years is helpful whether a student plans to enter col-



lege, pursue technical training, join the military, or seek employment.

Superintendent's 100 Super Scholars

At the completion of the 9th grade, students who continue to maintain the standards of the PNMS program are identified as Scholastically Talented Sophomores and become candidates for the Superintendent's 100 Super Scholars Program. As sophomores, these students are assigned faculty advisors and take the Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test. The 100 students scoring highest on the PSAT and who maintain their grade point averages become the Superintendent's 100 Super Scholars. Again, recognition plays

a key role in motivating students to excel. At assemblies and socials, these "Super 100" are introduced as role models to the younger Exceptionally Talented Students. It's among these 100 students that Duval County's National Merit Semifinalists are usually found later.

Local School Scholars Program

While districtwide attention is focused on the 100 Super Scholars, each of the district's 15 high schools concentrates on designing PSAT/SAT/ACT preparation activities for all college-bound students, including the Scholastically Talented Sophomores. The Local School Scholars Program challenges

each faculty to develop high-caliber activities to prepare students for the rigors of standardized tests. At inservice meetings teachers review the kinds of critical thinking skills measured by the tests, then identify ways to include these skills in daily lessons. Similarly, a workshop to review the PSAT summary of answers gives each teacher an insightful look at the performance of his or her students in specific skill areas as compared to performance in the school, the district, and the nation. The result has been a strengthening of the curriculum to directly address the needs of the students at that school.

Parent workshops, socials, and after-school test review sessions for stu-

	Grade Point Average	Stanford Achievement Test Scores		Courses Required (Minimum)
		Total Reading (5) Reading Comprehension (8-12)	Total Mathematics	
Grade 5 (Exceptionally Talented Students)	3.0+	90%+	90%+	
Grade 6	ongoing monitoring process			
Grade 7	3.0+	90%+	90%+	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 Advanced Language Arts • 2 Advanced Mathematics
Grade 8 (Potential National Merit Scholars)	3.0+ Language Arts Mathematics Science Social Studies	90%+	90%+	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 Advanced Language Arts • Algebra I
Grade 9	3.0+	90%+	90%+	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • English Honors I • Geometry
Grade 10 (Scholastically Talented Sophomores)	3.0+	(PSAT)	(PSAT)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • English Honors II • Algebra II Honors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student takes Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test (PSAT). • Student becomes eligible for the Superintendent's 100 Scholars Program by scoring among the top 100 students in the district on the PSAT. 				
Grade 11	3.0+	(PSAT)	(PSAT)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • English Honors III • Mathematics Analysis
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student takes PSAT. • Student qualifies as a National Merit Semifinalist by making a Selection Index score of 194 or above. Selection Index score is subject to change each year. 				
Grade 12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student takes Scholastic Aptitude Test. • Student serves as peer advisor. 			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advanced Placement English Language and Composition or Literature and Composition • Advanced Placement Calculus AB

Fig. 1. Progression Plan
Potential National Merit Scholar Program

dents are also parts of the Local School Scholars Program. From evening barbecues to workshops on financial aid, students and parents are recognized, motivated, and informed about enrichment program opportunities, financial assistance/grant resources available, and important test dates. Faculty advisors use the events to become more personally attuned to students' interests and needs and to encourage parental support.

Junior University and Think Camps

Summertime offers rising 6th and 7th grade Exceptionally Talented Students an opportunity to attend the Superintendent's Junior University—six weeks of intensive study filled with critical thinking exercises, beginning Latin studies, and fun. The local university opens its doors to acquaint students with computer research services, student life facilities, and faculty mentors. Each year a spectrum of activities from guest speakers to research and field trips are organized around a selected theme. For example, "On the Street Where You Live" involved students in an investigation of their own neighborhoods, exploring their history and cultures, growth patterns, economic status, and ecological concerns. "The Jacksonville Story" linked the city's past—location, people, growth, and architecture—with the study of ancient civilizations, highlighted by a tour of the visiting Ramses II exhibit. "The Olympics: Classical to Contemporary" provided a timely look into the past, heightening student awareness of ancient cultures, world geography, and sports.

Students also select an area of interest for break-out sessions, ranging from marine biology to business, drama to computers, and architectural math to journalism and communications. The result is a publication planned, compiled, and edited by the students, recapping their summer discoveries. Nearly half of all Exceptionally Talented Students voluntarily spend their summer learning. For example, in 1988, 412 students participated.

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Sophomores and juniors may also elect to take PSAT/SAT test preparation courses during the summer rather than during the school year. This intensive language arts and mathematics instruction keeps the students academically active during the summer while concentrating on skills to be tested later in the year.

The Results Are In

In just five years, the number of National Merit Semifinalists selected from among Jacksonville's students doubled, in spite of an increased selection index score. But success is not measured only in terms of the number of Merit Semifinalists. Hundreds more students now take the PSAT and SAT than voluntarily applied just a few years ago. Also, Scholastic Aptitude Test scores by the district's juniors in

1987 averaged a 20.5 point increase over scores of just 10 years ago. District white and black students now top national averages for white and black students respectively.

Altogether, more than 2,500 students have participated directly in the PNMS programs each year, and the positive impact of the district's emphasis on critical thinking skills and motivation is evidenced throughout the county. Stanford Achievement Test Merit scores are at the highest levels ever recorded in the district—above the 60th percentile in reading and math combined. Enrollment in advanced placement courses has tripled from 1,100 to 3,318 students in five years, with nearly three times more students per high school taking AP exams than found in the national average.

Black students in particular have benefited from our planned efforts. Black student enrollment in advanced courses has jumped. One-third of the district's AP students are black, up 3,000 percent in one predominantly black high school since the PNMS program began. Scholastic Aptitude Test scores of black students topped the national average for black students by 31 points—43 points above the state average for black students.

The College Board has cited Jacksonville's Potential National Merit Scholars program as a model program serving elementary and secondary students. At a time when school districts often stake their reputations on the few students who distinguish themselves each year, students and staff in our district believe that National Merit Scholars are products not of chance but design. □

1. Duval County Public Schools, Jacksonville, Florida, is the the 17th largest school district in the nation, encompassing 145 schools and 104,000 students.

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