

# 15 MSMS students named National Merit Scholarship Semifinalists

Iris Xue , Staff Writer

Fifteen MSMS seniors were named National Merit Scholarship Semifinalists in September based on their Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test scores: Daniel Caton, Chloe Dobbins, Andra Dusin, Madison Echols, Nathané George, John Hagood, David Johnson, Danielle McConnell, Vivek Nagarajan, Ryan Neal, Elsa Pfrenger, Dylan Randall, Mandy Sun, Lauren Varner and Richard Zheng.

Every year at MSMS, juniors are required to take the PSAT, or National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test, which covers three subject areas: reading, writing and mathematics. The assessment automatically submits juniors with qualifying scores in the National Merit Scholarship Program.

Students receive their PSAT scores in December, but their standing in the scholarship program is not determined until the following year. To qualify as a semifinalist, a student needs to score above the cutoff line for their state, which depends on what the National Merit Scholarship Corporation designates as each state's top percentile.

Many of the recognized seniors said they are proud of themselves and excited about their distinction.

Both Varner and George said they were happy with their results but not surprised about qualifying.

"When I received my index score last December, I looked up the previous qualifying index score for Mississippi, and my score was 4 points higher than the qualifying score," Varner said.

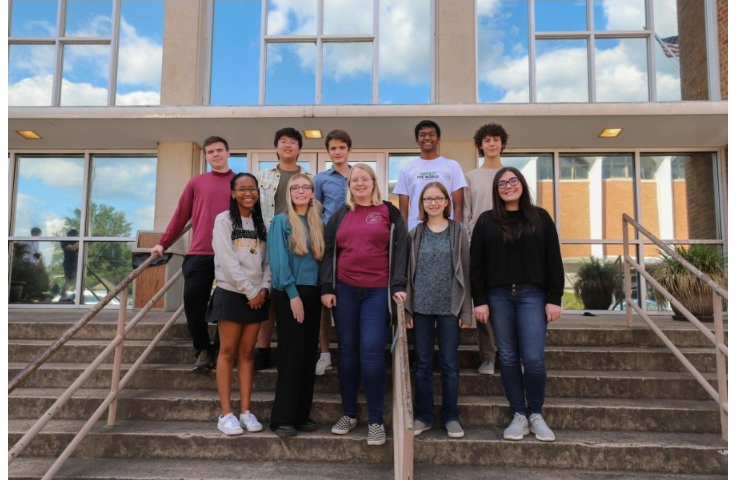
"I expected to be selected, but I'm still really proud of ... all the teachers who have gotten me here, as well as how MSMS prepared me for [the PSAT]," George added.

Each semifinalist prepared for the PSAT in different ways, but most said they reviewed online resources, including Randall.

"I studied for the PSAT primarily by taking online practice SAT exams and attending Test Prep Club meetings," Randall said. "I would recommend online practice exams, College Board practice problems and resources like Khan Academy to anyone looking for places to study."

Varner said her experience with other standardized tests prepared her for the PSAT. She advised students to "take your time on the test and utilize any resources available."

"I took a few practice tests when I could, but really, having already studied for the ACT, I knew what to expect for the most part," Varner said. "If seminars open for practice, attend them. If a senior offers up any of their resources, use them. Use the internet, the teachers, books – anything to prepare if you do not feel confident about the test."



Caleb Youngblood

MSMS National Merit Scholarship Semifinalists pose outside the Hooper Academic Building. Pictured are (top row, from left to right) seniors Daniel Caton, Richard Zheng, JD Hagood, Vivek Nagarajan, Ryan Neal, (bottom row, from left to right) Madison Echols, Andra Dustin, Lauren Varner, Elsa Pfrenger and Chloe Dobbins.

Even though the PSAT offers numerous scholarship opportunities for semifinalists, it is not the determining factor of high school or college success, said many MSMS semifinalists.

George said juniors should not stress about earning the semifinalist distinction.

"Just go in and try your best," George said. "It's nothing big. It's not as if your life's over if you don't get [semifinalist standing]."

Varner agreed and said the pressures surrounding making a certain score on standardized tests are unnecessary.

"Don't stress too much about [the PSAT]," Varner said. "Standardized tests are not representative of a person or their abilities."

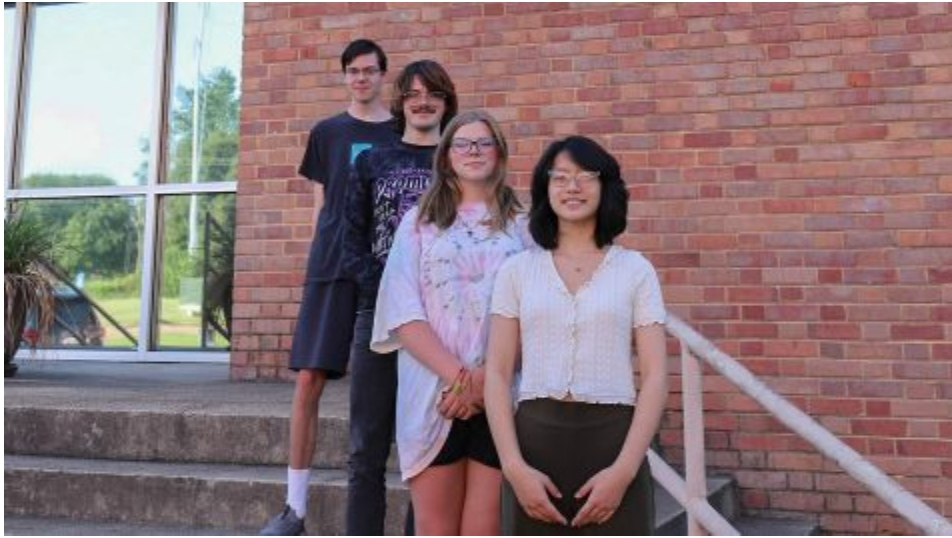
As these semifinalists move forward in the competition, the next step is to submit an application to the NMSC, which includes personal essays, recommendation letters and a high school transcript. NMSC will use this application to determine finalists, who will be announced in February.

Many in the MSMS community, including math teacher Lauren Zarandona, said they are proud of these students for receiving the honor.

"I was so excited [for these semifinalists] for lots of reasons," Zarandona said. "First, the ones that I teach or have worked with are incredible students. Many are leaders in the senior class. They're creative, thoughtful people that have been fun to teach. It's really exciting when you see people step up and show they're capable of awesomeness, even on standardized tests like the PSAT."



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Pictured are (from top to bottom): Dylan Randall, Nathané George, Danielle McConnell and Mandy Sun. (Photo by Caleb Youngblood, MSMS)