

National Merit Semifinalist Cutoffs Class of 2022

1,063 Comments

By Art Sawyer | January 10, 2021 | National Merit, PSAT



The National Merit Scholarship Program for the class of 2022 will be the most unusual in the competition's 60 year history. There has never been such a large drop in PSAT takers. Only 737,000 juniors were able to take the October 2020 PSAT/NMSQT, which is just 44% of the October 2019 level of 1.7 million. Almost 1 million students were not able to test because of COVID-19. The January PSAT will narrow the gap, but the shortfall will lead to a lower Commended cutoff nationwide and lower Semifinalist cutoffs in many states. The decline in test takers is different in every state because of the course of the pandemic and the related restrictions. In



EDUCATION GROUP

[PRACTICE TESTS](#) [TUTORING](#) [ABOUT](#) [RESOURCES](#) [LOGIN](#) [CONTACT](#)

For an overview of the National Merit program, see [our FAQ.](#)]

While it is common shorthand to say that National Merit Semifinalists represent the top 1% of test takers and that Commended Students fall in the top 3%, those are coincidences rather than formulas. National Merit honors are not determined by a percentage of test takers. National Merit Scholarship Corporation (NMSC) targets an approximate number of Commended Students (34,000) and an approximate number of Semifinalists (16,000) no matter how many students actually test. Percentiles are not used, and the percentiles on student score reports are based on historical data only.

The top 50,000 students, based on PSAT Selection Index, are selected nationally and establish the Commended cutoff. It does not matter if one state has far more test takers or high scorers than another, since the 50,000 is tabulated from all PSAT takers. Semifinalist counts, on the other hand, follow an allocation to states based roughly on the number of high school students in each state. For example, Rhode Island will have approximately 50 Semifinalists, Georgia will have approximately 450, Illinois 700, and California 2,000. The student in Rhode Island is not competing with the student in California, which is why states have such different cutoffs. The only caveat is that a student cannot become a Semifinalist without first reaching the Commended cutoff. This is true for both regular and alternate entrants.

PSAT participation at the lowest level in decades

We estimate the eventual number of test takers in the class of 2022 at only 1.1 million. That's a level that the PSAT has not seen in decades and would mean that one-third of students were not able to test. The Commended cutoff is a good place to start when evaluating the impact of those numbers. Compass has compiled data on how the students who tested in October 2020 stack up against prior years' test takers. College Board does not release data by Selection Index, but the 1400-1520 range provides a convenient reference.





EDUCATION GROUP

	PRACTICE TESTS ▾	TUTORING ▾	ABOUT ▾	RESOURCES ▾	LOGIN	CONTACT
	Class of 2018	3.6%	64,875		211	
	Class of 2019	3.9%	67,514		212	
	Class of 2020	4.1%	71,041		212	
	Class of 2021	3.0%	49,749		209	
Oct 2020 Only	Class of 2022	3.5%	26,103		N/A	
Projected Oct and Jan	Class of 2022	3.5%*	39,000*		206-208*	

*Compass Estimates

One theory going into the October PSAT was that schools with traditionally strong PSAT numbers would try harder to administer the PSAT. If that happened, the impact was too limited to see. The 3.5% of test takers achieving a 1400-1520 Total Score was in line with the average seen since the introduction of the new PSAT in 2015. To date, only 26,100 juniors in the class of 2022 have scored at least a 1400. We estimate that between 35,000 and 40,000 will reach that mark after the January PSAT. Alternate entrants do not factor into cutoffs.

The historical comparisons show the 1400-1520 scorers correlate with the Commended cutoff. The class of 2017 and class of 2021 saw relatively low numbers of top scores because of poorly constructed and scaled PSATs in 2015 and 2019. While the cause of the drop is quite different this year, the same idea holds. NMSC keeps moving the cutoff lower until it accounts for more than 50,000 students. Compass expects the Commended cutoff to be between 206 and 208 depending on the outcome of the January PSAT. It would represent the [lowest cutoff in decades](#) (adjusting pre-2015 scores to the new scale).

The Commended cutoff moves in a predictable manner, because it doesn't matter where the 50,000 students come from. The Semifinalist cutoffs will be more chaotic this year. We expect to see some state cutoffs drop significantly, while others could actually move higher.





EDUCATION GROUP

[PRACTICE TESTS](#) [TUTORING](#) [ABOUT](#) [RESOURCES](#) [LOGIN](#) [CONTACT](#)

cutoffs decline from the previous year. Not surprisingly, there is a bounce-back effect in the subsequent year. The pre-pandemic expectation for the class of 2022 was a bounce-back year. Most cutoffs would have gone up. What happens in the pandemic reality? States where students were able to test at normal levels may see a bounce-back, resulting in higher cutoffs. States where there was a modest decline in test takers are more likely to see cutoffs fall close to the class of 2021 levels. States with large drops in test takers are likely to see drops in their Semifinalist cutoffs, as well.

In order not to unfairly worry students in an actual state, the fictional state of Meritland provides a hypothetical. The cutoff in Meritland was 218 last year but had been 220 the year before. The state sees approximately 500 Semifinalists a year, so its cutoff is normally stable. Meritland was very fortunate and had relatively few school closures in October 2020. The number of PSAT takers was 95% of last year's figure. In this case, Meritland would be more likely to see a cutoff of 220 than 218.

Compare this with a similarly-sized state of New Merit that also saw a cutoffs of 220 and 218 in the last two years. New Merit, however, only had 50% of its students able to test in October and January. It's likely that New Merit's cutoff will be at 218 or lower. Compass would estimate a range of 215 – 219.

Cutoff changes have a runaway brake built in. As NMSC moves down each notch of the Selection Index, more and more students are at a given score. For example, New Merit might have 50 students scoring exactly 220, 75 scoring 218, and more than 100 at 216.

There is no parallel to the sort of mass test cancelations we have seen this year. However, there are two examples of sudden changes in the opposite direction. In recent years, Illinois and Michigan switched their state-mandated testing from the ACT to the SAT. As a result, the number of PSAT takers more than doubled in a short period. In both cases, cutoffs moved up 3 to 4 points. In states where the pandemic severely impacted PSAT testing, we could see drops of that magnitude.





EDUCATION GROUP

PRACTICE TESTS ▾


TUTORING ▾

ABOUT ▾

RESOURCES ▾

LOGIN

CONTACT

State	Class of 2022 (Most Likely Est.)	Class of 2021 (Actual)	Class of 2020 (Actual)	Class of 2019 (Actual)	Class of 2018 (Actual)	# of NMSF Class of 2021
Alabama	210 - 216	212	216	216	216	227
Alaska	210 - 217	212	213	215	217	36
Arizona	216 - 220	218	219	220	220	295
Arkansas	210 - 216	212	214	214	215	140
California	217 - 223	221	222	223	222	1,942
Colorado	216 - 222	217	220	221	220	270
Connecticut	217 - 223	220	221	222	221	194
Delaware	217 - 223	219	220	222	221	45
District of Columbia	220 - 223	222	223	223	223	28
Florida	215 - 220	216	219	219	219	879
Georgia	217 - 221	219	220	220	220	456
Hawaii	216 - 221	217	219	220	220	63
Idaho	212 - 217	214	215	214	216	78
Illinois	217 - 222	219	221	221	221	



E D U C A T I O N G R O U P

PRACTICE TESTS ▾

TUTORING ▾

ABOUT ▾

RESOURCES ▾

LOGIN

CONTACT

State	Likely Est.)	(Actual)	(Actual)	(Actual)	(Actual)	2021
Indiana	214 - 220	215	218	219	219	340
Iowa	211 - 217	212	215	216	216	162
Kansas	212 - 219	214	218	218	219	143
Kentucky	212 - 219	214	217	218	217	205
Louisiana	210 - 218	212	215	217	216	233
Maine	211 - 218	213	215	217	215	72
Maryland	218 - 223	221	222	223	222	296
Massachusetts	218 - 223	222	223	223	222	341
Michigan	214 - 220	216	219	219	219	542
Minnesota	215 - 221	218	219	220	220	288
Mississippi	207 - 215	211	214	215	213	141
Missouri	212 - 218	214	217	217	217	332
Montana	207 - 215	210	214	214	214	47
Nebraska	210 - 217	213	216	216	215	103
Nevada	212 - 219	215	218	218	217	112
New Hampshire	213 - 220	215	218	219	217	72
New Jersey	218 - 223	222	223	223	223	574



E D U C A T I O N G R O U P

PRACTICE TESTS ▾

TUTORING ▾

ABOUT ▾

RESOURCES ▾

LOGIN

CONTACT

State	Likely Est.)	(Actual)	(Actual)	(Actual)	(Actual)	2021
New Mexico	209 - 216	211	213	215	215	102
New York	216 - 222	220	221	221	221	1,035
North Carolina	215 - 221	217	219	220	219	494
North Dakota	206 - 211	209	212	212	211	28
Ohio	213 - 220	215	218	219	219	681
Oklahoma	209 - 217	211	214	215	216	180
Oregon	216 - 222	217	220	221	220	182
Pennsylvania	215 - 221	217	220	220	219	721
Rhode Island	214 - 221	216	218	220	216	50
South Carolina	210 - 218	212	215	216	217	197
South Dakota	206 - 215	209	214	215	215	36
Tennessee	213 - 220	215	219	219	218	332
Texas	216 - 222	219	221	221	221	1,441
Utah	209 - 217	212	215	215	216	157
Vermont	210 - 218	212	216	216	217	33
Virginia	218 - 223	221	222	222	222	249
Washington	217 - 223	220	221	222	222	543



EDUCATION GROUP

PRACTICE TESTS ▾

TUTORING ▾

ABOUT ▾

RESOURCES ▾

LOGIN

CONTACT

State	Likely Est.)	(Actual)	(Actual)	(Actual)	(Actual)	2021
West Virginia	206 - 211	209	212	212	211	62
Wisconsin	212 - 218	213	216	216	217	314
Wyoming	206 - 213	209	212	212	213	16
Territories	206 - 209	209	212	212	211	27
Outside US	220 - 223	222	223	223	223	103
Commended	206 - 209	209	212	212	211	

Am I Safe?

The most common question received from commenters is, “I got a 2xx Selection Index, am I safe in [state]?” As mentioned above, using the class of 2021 cutoffs as a reference point comes with problems. If complete “safety” is the goal, it is better to look at the highest cutoff for your state over the last 4 years. If your score is 2 points higher than that cutoff, there is a greater than 99% chance that you will be at or above the Semifinalist cutoff.

The highest cutoffs reach a limit because of how rare it is to receive scores in the 225 – 228 range on the PSAT. Even in a normal year, our model shows that no cutoff will go above 224 (and even that score is highly unlikely). This means that any student in the country (or eligible student studying abroad) with a score of 224 or higher will qualify as a Semifinalist. This is not a normal year, of course. Many states will see nothing close to 100% PSAT participation.

The Wild Card. What is Alternate Entry, and how will it impact the numbers?

Every year students miss the PSAT for legitimate reasons such as illness. To allow those students the opportunity to compete in National Merit, NMSC has a process known as [Alternate Entry](#). Because of the pandemic, NMSC has adopted a no-ex - necessary policy for Alternate Entry for the class of 2022. Students can [apply directly to NMSC](#) and be considered based on their SAT scores.



E D U C A T I O N G R O U P

PRACTICE TESTS ▾

TUTORING ▾

ABOUT ▾

RESOURCES ▾

LOGIN

CONTACT

target number of top PSAT scores for the state. Once those cutoffs are set, alternate entrants are judged against them. If the Commended cutoff is 207, then any alternate entrant with an SAT Selection Index of 207 or higher will qualify. If the state Semifinalist cutoff is 215, then any entrant in the state with a 215 or better will qualify.

Is it fair?

While PSAT takers and alternate entrants have to meet the same cutoffs, many students are concerned that it is easier to achieve high scores on the SAT (and the SAT can be taken more than once).

The SAT and PSAT share what is known as a vertical scale. A 700 Math score on one test is meant to represent the same level of achievement as a 700 Math on the other. However, the SAT has more difficult problems, so its scale runs from 200-800. The PSAT runs from 160 to 760. In order to keep the maximum Selection Index at 228, a student's SAT score in each section is capped at 760, just as it would be on the PSAT.

Despite vertical scaling and the score cap, no experienced test taker would prefer the PSAT over the SAT when attempting to achieve a high Selection Index. The PSAT is not well designed to measure high scores. It becomes a game of chance in the most competitive states. There is more room for error on the SAT. So, "Is it fair?" If fairness is defined as equivalent testing circumstances for all students, then the system is not fair. Compass encourages students to take a broader view. Is it fair to disqualify students because of a test cancelation or illness — especially a cancelation or illness during a pandemic? NMSC has few workable options.

PSAT takers actually benefit from a large number of alternate entrants, because it indicates fewer regular entrants. Only regular entrants are used when calculating cutoffs. This means that cutoffs will be lower (as shown in the hypothetical Meritland above) in rough proportion to the number of alternate entrants.

Expect a higher number of Semifinalists

How is it possible that everyone wins? If NMSC follows its normal procedures - there is no indication that it won't — there will be an abnormally high number o.





EDUCATION GROUP

PRACTICE TESTS

TUTORING

ABOUT

RESOURCES

LOGIN

CONTACT

California, for example, was hard hit by October PSAT cancellations. Most large


districts were closed for in-person testing, and a limited number of independent schools were able to offer exams. We estimate that as few as 10-20% of students were able to test in October. Because of the current (January) surge in cases, cancelations will also be commonplace for the makeup January PSAT. It would be surprising if the state reaches even 40% of typical levels. What will be the result?

California usually has around 2,000 Semifinalists at a cutoff of 221 or 222. If only 40% of those students were able to test this year, though, that only accounts for 800 scores at 221 or 222. The cutoff would likely need to drop 3-4 points to sweep up the additional 1,200 top PSAT scores. If — purely as a hypothetical — the top 2,000 California PSAT scores this year fall at 218 and above, what happens? First, those 2,000 students will qualify as Semifinalists. Second, any alternate entrant with a 218 or higher on the SAT will also qualify.

Depending on how the January PSAT goes and how many students are able to take the SAT this spring, 2,000 – 3,000 alternate entrants could reach the Semifinalist cutoff in California. Since the alternate entrants don't squeeze out the PSAT qualifiers, California could end up with 4,000 – 5,000 Semifinalists. Would NMSC allow this? The current rules indicate that it would.

As for fair outcomes, this seems like one of the better ones (and better still because it would not involve any rule changes). It's unclear if NMSC would still try to cap the number of national Finalists at 15,000 or would let that figure move upward, as well.

At this point, we can only speculate on the final numbers. Perhaps the January PSAT will go off better than expected. Perhaps a large portion of SAT takers won't apply for Alternate Entry. Perhaps NMSC has a top secret escape plan.

As for students who have taken the PSAT, their qualifying work is done. They cannot apply via Alternate Entry. An SAT or ACT score only comes into play at the Finalist stage as a "confirming score." This condition was waived for the class of 2021 because of test date cancelations. We expect the confirming score requirement ' return for the class of 2022 unless significant cancelations occur into the sumr 



EDUCATION GROUP

[PRACTICE TESTS](#) [TUTORING](#) [ABOUT](#) [RESOURCES](#) [LOGIN](#) [CONTACT](#)

within range of Commended level (possibly as low as a 206 SAT Selection Index) consider applying for Alternate Entry. The online form should take 5-10 minutes to complete. Since NMSC will use a student's best SAT Selection Index, it is safe to use one of the 4 free reports included with SAT registration fees.

No matter how students qualify, the earliest they will receive word on National Merit honors is when schools notify students in September. It will feel like a long wait for students who have already waited a long time to test.



About Art Sawyer

Art graduated magna cum laude from Harvard University, where he was the top-ranked liberal arts student in his class. Art pioneered the one-on-one approach to test prep in California in 1989 and co-founded Compass Education Group in 2004 in order to bring the best ideas and tutors into students' homes and computers. Although he has attained perfect scores on all flavors of the SAT and ACT, he is routinely beaten in backgammon.



SIGN UP FOR OUR NEWSLETTER

Email:





E D U C A T I O N G R O U P

Class Year. **PRACTICE TESTS** ▾ **TUTORING** ▾ **ABOUT** ▾ **RESOURCES** ▾ **LOGIN** **CONTACT**

[Sign up](#)

Popular Posts

National Merit Semifinalist Cutoffs Class of 2022

January 10, 2021

[PSAT National Merit FAQ](#)

October 4, 2020

[SAT Subject Tests FAQ](#)

March 17, 2019

[What's a Good SAT Subject Test Score?](#)

April 2, 2019

[SAT Essay Scores Explained](#)

March 11, 2019





E D U C A T I O N G R O U P

PRACTICE TESTS ▾

TUTORING ▾

ABOUT ▾

RESOURCES ▾

LOGIN

CONTACT

Impact of COVID-19 on College Admission and Testing

April 12, 2021

Our Top Tips for 2021 AP Exam Prep

April 8, 2021

How Smart Sophomore Planners Turn Into Strong College Applicants

April 6, 2021

SAT and ACT Policies and Score Ranges for Popular Colleges and Universities

March 23, 2021

Keeping Your Options Open

February 1, 2021

Categories

Categories

Select Category





E D U C A T I O N G R O U P

[PRACTICE TESTS](#) ▾[TUTORING](#) ▾[ABOUT](#) ▾[RESOURCES](#) ▾[LOGIN](#)[CONTACT](#)

1,063 Comments

[« Older Comments](#)**Sharon says:**[Reply](#)

April 9, 2021 at 6:21 pm

My daughter received a 224 (alternative entry) for the state of Maryland. Do you think that will be enough to be a semifinalist?

**Art Sawyer says:**[Reply](#)

April 11, 2021 at 4:40 pm

Sharon,
As long as NMSC sticks to its prior rules, a 224 will qualify in MD.

**Kelley says:**[Reply](#)

April 8, 2021 at 8:58 am

Art,
Any idea when the projections from the January test results will reflect actual totals? Since the results were released to the students in March I was hoping for an update to the project. Thanks!



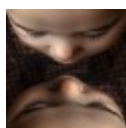


E D U C A T I O N G R O U P

[PRACTICE TESTS](#) [TUTORING](#) [ABOUT](#) [RESOURCES](#) [LOGIN](#) [CONTACT](#)

Kelley,

I haven't yet been able to get the January numbers. Keep in mind that while the figures might give us a better sense of the Commended levels, they are unlikely to give more insight into Semifinalist cutoffs (which depend on the vagaries of test site availability).

**Lisa says:**[Reply](#)

April 6, 2021 at 4:18 am

Thanks for the informative article! Do you have any information on the historical cut-offs for boarding school regions? I am particularly interested in Boston area region—that is, what have been the historical selection index cutoffs that would include Exeter and Andover? Do you know which top boarding schools administered the PSAT and which did not? I am wondering how alternate entry might impact the boarding school regions. Thoughts?

**Art Sawyer says:**[Reply](#)

April 11, 2021 at 4:48 pm

Lisa,

Boarding school cutoffs are set regionally based on the highest state cutoff in the region — so it doesn't actually reflect the scores of the boarding school students. In New England, Massachusetts is typically going to establish the cutoff (so you can look at MA for historical performance). I don't know how successful the boarding schools were in administering the PSAT, but most independent schools had more flexibility than did public schools.





E D U C A T I O N G R O U P

[PRACTICE TESTS](#) [TUTORING](#) [ABOUT](#) [RESOURCES](#) [LOGIN](#) [CONTACT](#)

219 on the October PSAT. The cut-off score was lower last year than it has been before (214 compared to 217, 218, and so on), and I was wondering if you have an educated guess on the chances of me becoming a SF because I am not sure how the predicted cut-off score will vary based on the current circumstances.

**Art Sawyer says:**[Reply](#)

April 11, 2021 at 4:49 pm

Junior,
I think the chance of KY's cutoff moving to 220 is essentially 0.
Congratulations!

Leave a Reply

Name *

Email *

Website

☐ Save my name, email, and website in this browser for the next time I comment.



E D U C A T I O N G R O U P

PRACTICE TESTS ▾

TUTORING ▾

ABOUT ▾

RESOURCES ▾

LOGIN

CONTACT

[Submit Comment](#)

SIGN UP FOR OUR NEWSLETTER

Email:

Your email address

Role:



Class Year:

[Sign up](#)

By using this website, you agree to our [Privacy Policy](#).

© 2021 Compass Education Group. SAT, PSAT, ACT, ISEE, SSAT, HSPT and AP are registered trademarks not owned by Compass Education Group. The trademark holders were not involved in the production of, and do not endorse, this website.

