

THE MICHIGAN MERIT AWARD SCHOLARSHIP AND MEAP **By Liz Arasim, Legislative Analyst**

The Michigan Merit Award Scholarship Act, as created by Public Act 94 of 1999, establishes the Michigan Merit Award Scholarship program to provide college scholarships for high school juniors as well as seventh and eighth grade students who received qualifying results on an assessment test. The Act defines "assessment test" as the Michigan Education Assessment Program (MEAP) subject area assessments, or a successor assessment test. The Act also establishes the Michigan Merit Award Trust Fund, which will include the following percentages of the State's revenue from the settlement with the tobacco industry: 30% in fiscal year (FY) 1999-2000, 50% in FY 2000-01, and 75% in FY 2001-02 and subsequent fiscal years.

An 11th grade student who meets the Act's criteria is eligible for an award of \$2,500 if he or she is enrolled in an approved postsecondary educational institution in Michigan, or \$1,000 if he or she is enrolled in an approved out-of-State institution. While in high school, the student must have taken an assessment test in the subject areas of reading, writing, mathematics, and science. (He or she must have received qualifying results in all of the subject areas; or, if he or she did not receive qualifying results in one or two of the subject areas, the student must have received an overall score in the top 25% of a nationally recognized college admission examination, or a qualifying score on a nationally recognized job skills assessment test.) A student who took the assessment test in the seventh and eighth grades may be awarded an additional \$250 if he or she received qualifying results in two of the test's subject areas, \$375 for qualifying results in three of the subject areas, or \$500 for qualifying results in all of the subject areas.

In addition, a student must have graduated from high school or passed the general education development (GED) test or an equivalent exam within seven years before applying for a Merit Award Scholarship. (Also, an eligible student must not have been convicted of a felony involving an assault, physical injury, or death.) A Merit Award Scholarship may be used only to pay tuition and fees; related costs for room, board, books, supplies, transportation, or day care; and other costs determined by the newly created Michigan Merit Award Board.

The Board, which will administer the Act, consists of the State Treasurer, the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, and the Director of the Department of Career Development (or those individuals' designees), as well as four members appointed by the Governor with the advice and consent of the Senate. The Board must determine how a student will apply for payment of a Merit Award Scholarship, and the procedure for making payment to the student or the educational institution. In addition, the Board must establish a statewide toll-free telephone line and Internet access to receive questions, comments, and complaints concerning the assessment test.

The reliance of the Merit Award Scholarship program on the MEAP tests to determine student eligibility for a scholarship focuses public attention on the statewide assessment test. The following is a brief review of the current administration of the MEAP testing program and its possible integration with the provisions of the Merit Award Scholarship Act.

What is MEAP?

The Michigan Education Assessment Program, administered by the MEAP Office in the Department of Education, is a statewide program initiated 30 years ago. It is the only assessment test given to all students in public schools across the State. The testing program originally measured student achievement by using norm-referenced tests in which a student's performance was compared to the performance of other students. The test, however, did not provide information on whether students were meeting a specified standard. Today's tests are criterion-referenced, which means that the results report a student's performance against a standard established by State educators and approved by the State Board of Education. The tests are based on the Model Core Curriculum Outcomes and Content Standards approved by the Michigan Board of Education in 1991, and are designed to measure what students should know in the five content areas of mathematics, reading, science, social studies, and writing, at the grade level at which the test is administered.

The Act provides that for a student to receive a Merit Award Scholarship, he or she must demonstrate qualifying results, meaning assessment test results, scores, or ranges of scores determined by the Michigan Merit Award Board. How are test results categorized now?

The MEAP Office involves educators, school administrators, parents, curriculum and measurement specialists, and others in a technical process in which standards are set by finding a cut score that differentiates one performance category from another. Results of seventh grade mathematics and reading tests are categorized as satisfactory, moderate, and low. The eighth grade writing test results are categorized as proficient and not yet proficient, while science results are classified as proficient, novice, and not yet novice. Student Certificates of Recognition are awarded to each seventh grade student who achieves satisfactory performance on the mathematics and/or reading test and to each eighth grade student who achieves a proficient performance on the science and/or writing test.

Public Act 335 of 1993 provided for the development of high school proficiency tests in mathematics, science, and communication arts, with students having the opportunity to earn an endorsement by achieving proficient scores on the tests. As the result of Public Act 175 of 1997, the MEAP high school tests were subject to major revisions, including a change in the reporting of student performance from three to four categories. Results of the MEAP high school tests now are categorized in four scoring categories: Level 1 (Endorsed - Exceeded Michigan Standards); Level 2 (Endorsed - Met Michigan Standards); Level 3 (Endorsed - At Basic Level); and, Level 4 (Not Endorsed). The Act charges the Merit Award Board with determining the assessment test results, scores, or ranges of scores that will be used as the qualifying results. Thus, the Merit Award Board could use these classifications to determine qualifying results for the Merit Award Scholarship program.

The Act requires the Michigan Merit Award Board to give each student written notice of whether he or she is eligible for the award of one or both Merit Award Scholarships. How are test results currently reported?

Results are mailed directly to a school district's superintendent, the district's MEAP coordinator, or the individual schools, depending on the option chosen by the district. Test results are compiled for an entire school district, an individual school, and individual students. Generally, students are required to include on test answer sheets certain information, such as name, age, and date of birth, to help link the student with his or her answer sheet for each test. Teachers then must gather each test answer sheet and bundle the sheets into a complete package for each student. High schools have the option of preregistering students by obtaining a student's identification information, which is then preprinted on answer documents for each student. According to the Department of Education, approximately one-half of the State's high schools use this option. Department officials note that a system will have to be developed to keep track of students, particularly those in the seventh and eighth grades, who might qualify for Merit Award Scholarships but move and change school districts prior to graduation.

The Merit Award Scholarship Act provides that a student who initially does not receive qualifying results must be given an opportunity to achieve the qualifying results by taking a subsequent assessment test. A nonpublic school student or home-schooled student may take, and the Merit Award Board must administer if requested, an assessment test at a site designated by the Board. Are there opportunities currently for students to retake the MEAP tests and for nonpublic school and home-schooled students to participate in the testing program?

The State School Aid Act requires that high school assessment tests be administered to students during the last 30 school days of the 11th grade (MCL 388.1704a). The assessments must be scored and the scores must be returned to the students, their parents or legal guardians, and districts no later than the beginning of a student's first semester of the 12th grade. A student who wants to repeat an assessment may do so, without charge, in the next school year or after graduation. The Department of Education is required to establish, schedule, and arrange periodic testing opportunities throughout the year for students who want to repeat an assessment. A student may repeat an assessment during a retesting period. According to the Department, a student who takes the high school assessment in the spring of his or her junior year generally is able to retake the test in the winter or spring of the senior year. There are, however, no retesting periods provided for students who take the seventh and eighth grade MEAP tests.

The State School Aid Act also permits a student in a nonpublic school or a student who is home-schooled to take a high school assessment test. To take an assessment, the student must contact the public school district where he or she resides, and the district is required to administer the assessment. A student may take the assessment at a nonpublic school if it is allowed by that school. Upon request of a nonpublic school, the Department is required to supply assessments and the nonpublic school may administer the tests. According to the Department, approximately 70,000 high school juniors in public schools, out of approximately 100,000 juniors in public schools who were eligible statewide, took the high school assessment tests in the spring of 1998. The Department also reports that 600 nonpublic school students and 33 home-schooled students took the test that year.