**Test Scores: What they tell us/What they don't tell us**

Standardized test scores can tell educators a lot about what a student knows and, more importantly, about what they don’t know. With that information, a proactive educator can tailor lessons to the needs of each child. With competent teaching, a child should show progress from year to year in their learning and thus in their test scores. So looking at an individual’s test scores each year and comparing those scores year to year can, and should, drive instruction. Standardized test scores are one tool in providing students a quality education but, when viewed as an average, they do not inform about an individual student’s abilities nor about the overall population nor the size of the sample of the school.

Given highly qualified teachers who are dedicated to helping their students, why don’t all children do well on standardized tests? Looking at the scores alone does not give the teacher, the parent, or the general public enough information about the student’s underlying abilities, how best to teach them, or by what means they can communicate what they do know. It does not have an indicator of emotional or anxiety issues that influence test-taking ability. Students are not standardized and to truly judge a student’s progress, a teacher must look at far more than standardized scores to provide the best education possible.

Before forming judgments about a school’s instructional program based on averaged test scores one must familiarize themselves with the population of that school. The larger the sample of students, the more accurate the average score is. District schools are in most part representative of the variety of students that live in their area. The proportion of special needs students and gifted students is small compared to the total population of students. Charter schools, on the other hand, have a self-selected population. Parents choose to move their students to a charter school for a variety of reasons, but often it is because the student has not found success, whether it be academic, social, or perhaps adequate challenge in the district school. Charter schools were created to provide a choice for those families. Charter schools do not simply replicate the education offered in the district but they offer something the district cannot provide.

Nittany Valley Charter School received its lowest SPP score for the 2013-14 year, based on the PSSA scores of its students. With this low average score, why is this school still in existence for its seventeenth year? Why haven’t all of the parents withdrawn their children to attend a higher performing school? Why do new families enroll each year? Could it be that these averaged standardized scores don’t tell the whole story?

Nittany Valley Charter School has a total of 48 students in grades K-8 with an average of 5 or 6 students per grade. So the first problem in interpreting the PSSA test scores is that the size of the sample makes the results statistically insignificant.

Nittany Valley Charter School provides a safe and diverse environment for children. It has recently been chosen to represent the state as a Benchmark school for the School Wide Positive Behavior Plan program. Students are exposed to and become appreciative of a very diverse group of children, diverse in ethnicity, cultural background, and abilities/disabilities.

Nittany Valley Charter School is meeting the mission of its charter. Students and staff respect the environment and have recently been recognized by the borough as a Green Business Partner for actual practice in caring for the environment.

Nittany Valley Charter School does use testing to individually drive instruction and record progress for all students.

Nittany Valley Charter School has had tremendous success helping all types of students become comfortable in a school setting and in meeting their personal challenges. The students are happy and making progress, thus their families are happy. And those happy families spread the word to other families who have a child who is not successful or adequately challenged in the district schools.

Will the report of average low scores be ignored by the teachers and administration at NVCS? Will they make excuses and sit back complacent that they fill a need in the county? No. Each and every staff member fights daily to improve their students’ educational experience. They want what is the very best for each child, holistically. They also rejoice in the successes of the program and anticipate a future of continuing to make a difference in children’s lives.