**How Can My Honor Roll Student Score “Low” on the NJASK? (And Vice-Versa)**

This is a common question, especially at this time of the year when NJASK scores are about to be released to parents and teachers. It’s a question that many parents and educators think about. I “googled” the question and was surprised by how many search results popped up, and at how varied the responses were.

My own thoughts about the answer to this question are best organized into a music analogy. My parents are Juilliard trained classical musicians in their early 70s who are still working professionally. My mom’s major was the piano and she currently plays the organ at a local church. That instrument works best with this analogy.

Someone learning the piano might, at one time or another on the road to being a successful musician, be asked to reach every key on the piano, play rote scales, play different genres and styles of music, play solos & duets, play with different instruments, improvise, play for his/her own enjoyment, play in front of a crowd formally and informally etc. A music teacher listening to a student playing a Mozart concerto imperfectly would watch and listen to observe why it’s not “music to the ears” and offer strategies to improve it. Are the piano keys out of tune? (hire a piano tuner) Is it a problem reading sheet music? (review note value and offer less difficult music) Is it a posture or hand positioning problem? (work on rote scales focusing on issue). Does the child find Mozart stuffy? (share Mozart history and meaning behind the piece).[[1]](#footnote--1)

I can connect that to Language Arts instruction pretty easily. My job as a teacher, I feel, is to listen to each student’s “performance” and to offer them as many opportunities as possible so that they can find their strengths and capitalize on them, and find their weaknesses and strengthen them. The curriculum I am given determines what skills are appropriate for each grade. In Reading alone (not Spelling, not Writing, not Grammar, not Handwriting,- just Reading) there are more than 20 different sub-skills on which we work, though many fall under the umbrella of **comprehension** and **fluency**.

If I want to measure a student’s comprehension, one of the tools could be to have them read a story and re-tell it to me. If a student seems strong in comprehension, I might offer text with more challenging vocabulary or suggest different genres to “expand his/her reading menu.” If a student is struggling with comprehension, then my next step is to figure out exactly where the challenge is (vocabulary? Decoding? Sequence? Plot structure? Interest level? ), isolate that specific skill[[2]](#footnote-0), and offer ways to work through it. (word structure lessons? Increased word exposure? Phonics review? Graphic organizers? Interest survey?)

So how does this all play out for an honor roll student and the NJASK? These are my thoughts. My mom has been playing piano for about 70 years and has pretty impressive credentials. Yet she still practices Monday-Saturday using the music she will be playing Sunday on the church organ. To prepare, she plays her scales and probably throws in some old favorites, but she plays each church hymn several times before walking into the church Sunday morning. And come Sunday morning, she arrives before the church-goers to make sure the organ is in good working condition, the music stand is functioning, and she changes into soft, worn, 100 year- old shoes that make it easier for her to use the organ’s pedals. If I told my mom she would not be able to practice next week’s hymns in advance, she would most likely feel such anxiety that she either wouldn’t be able to perform, or the quality of her performance would suffer. This is a woman with perfect pitch, 70 years experience, and advance knowledge of the genre of music required of her. (She knows, afterall, that in all likelihood the church isn’t going to ask her to play jazz or Elvis or rap music.).[[3]](#footnote-1) Of course there are (and have been many) times when she has to “cold read” a piece of music. It’s the nature of the business and many agree there are things in life we have to do whether we like it or not. Those are the times when she relies on her skill and knowledge base and hopes that *that* particular piece doesn’t have her using the pedal when she didn’t bring her ugly soft shoes, or contain a lot of bass clef that would require the use of the left pinky she jammed that morning. Or if it’s chock-full of bass clef and pedal work, she hopes no one listening to the music will hear her sub-par performance and feel it detracts from the whole musical experience.

The NJASK is like a “cold reading” of music. The test makers have chosen a “piece of music” for the students to perform. It will contain Reading passages and Writing tasks. If I’ve done my job (exposed them to all the skills offered in our curriculum and worked to improve & strengthen according to each student’s needs) and the students have done their jobs (a topic for another day), I can allow myself (and my students) to feel success (defined as peace of mind knowing I’ve done my best). [[4]](#footnote-2)We don’t know what specific skills will be targeted on the test. It could be heavy in “comparing and contrasting” and light in plot structure. The reading passages could be familiar and interesting or alien and dull. Add to this the anxiety many children feel on test day, questions over who is scoring the tests and how they’re doing it, and the value of the test results could potentially be less worthy of attention than many believe.

What do I as a teacher do with these thoughts? If I know a student will face the NJASK in the spring, I want to make sure I offer practice with “cold readings”. (e.g. Reading tests, timed writing samples, practice tests during which I intentionally make myself unavailable for consultation). I want to offer practice tools that have strong correlation to NJASK score improvement (e.g. Study Island, Pearson online assessment). I want to keep every opportunity open for every student (Breakfast Skills? Leadership Camp invitation? After-school club?) . I want to talk honestly about anxiety and the dichotomy of “necessary evils” and self-worth and confidence.

And I will keep reminding them that whether the audience rises for the standing ovation or not, their effort is music to my ears. No matter what drummer they march to.

1. I have not studied music formally so please don’t rely on this advice for piano improvement [↑](#footnote-ref--1)
2. visit pearsonsuccessnet.com/testprogress/skillmastery for a list of what skills your child is currently working on mastering [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
3. Elvis as a genre? [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
4. way too many parentheses but it’s late and blogs are typically informal [↑](#footnote-ref-2)