

### **Similar Schools Scoring Band:**

The PSSA test gives the illusion of accountability when in fact it (1) uses scaled scores and (2) categorizes and scores schools based on community type and socioeconomic status. What does this mean?

Scaled Scores: Student results are always reported on a set range of 1000-1600

Community Type: The superintendent selects the type of community as urban, suburban, or rural

Socioeconomic Status: The type of community is further identified by the number of low-income students in the school, as represented by the number of children receiving free and reduced lunches. For example: One school district may have two elementary schools with one being identified as "rural" while the other is identified as "suburban" depending upon their enrollment of low income students.

As a result, twenty schools with the same demographics compose a "Similar Schools Scoring Band" with which an individual school is compared. Schools from one community and socioeconomic classification are not compared with schools in another. For example, inner city schools are not compared with affluent suburban schools. Prior to the past five years, the PSSA has been criticized when the Department earlier admitted that the PSSA would not give parents and districts diagnostic information on student's individual academic achievement. Since that time, the Department has modified the assessment to reflect more diagnostic results for parents and school officials. Up until that time and before the advent of the No Child Left Behind Act, the PSSA only served as an internal audit of how well the schools were meeting the Pennsylvania state academic standards.

The PSSA is not norm-referenced to a fixed standard. It is scaled yearly, which means parents and schools never know how well their children or their schools are doing compared to other schools or students within the state or nation. Instead the PSSA is criterion referenced, which means it is a test designed to provide a measure of performing that is interpretable in terms of clearly defined and delimited domain of learning tasks. On the PSSA there is a sampling of skills required to master each of the academic standards throughout the various curriculum. Whereas a norm referenced test is designed to provide a measure of performance that is interpretable in terms of an individual's relative standing in some known group. Which is why many local school districts take the initiative to implement a nationally known standardized test each year for their students to provide diagnostic results of each student's strengths and weakness' based on the national norms, such as the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, Metropolitan Eight, Stanford Nine, or California Assessment Test. With the PSSA, the State sets the scoring criteria and students taking the tests are only compared within their "similar schools scoring band" which reinforces this fact: "A school district can appear to look better or worse depending upon which "similar school scoring band" you are entered into for that particular year." Yes, that it correct, it's worth mentioning that because one's respective school district is necessarily in one specific scoring band within one year with twenty other schools does not necessitate that it will be in the same similar schools scoring band in all consequent years, in fact, it is unlikely. The twenty schools within each band vary every year also. Naturally so, because the demographics and student variables change from year to year. If a district just so happens to be placed into a weaker band in comparison to another year, the schools results can appear to be look better or worse. For a school district with two or more elementary school buildings, each building is placed into a different "similar schools scoring band" which proves students cannot and could not be even compared from year to year within the same school district, as was often the case in Mars Area School District between Adams Elementary and Middlesex Elementary, where one was identified as rural and one was identified as suburban. While the community made comparisons between the two schools and its students for decades, in all reality, these schools were in unique and changing scoring bands that made it an administrative challenge to measure the longitudinal academic progress of individual students and grade levels of elementary students in grades 2-5 in any given year.

As a result of this process, school districts, inclusive of Mars, have implored to the State for the past ten years, prior to the No Child Left Behind Act, to make the appropriate modifications to the current state assessment system. Local school directors wanted the decision to use norm referenced, standardized achievement tests in lieu of the PSSA. Many school districts wanted to utilize the commercially produced and commercially scored national achievement tests that are available to homeschoolers to measure student and school achievement. Many believed this effort would allow schools to measure student achievement, provide accountability, and be more feasible. Interestingly, the State responded through their Chapter 4 Education Regulations stating that local districts can choose to do a local assessment, but, the PSSA is still a legal requirement and still has to be administered to students.