Golden Valley Charter School of Sacramento

Unpacking the Academic Performance Index (API)

October 2011

Introduction

In Waldorf education slow and steady wins the race. That is, if we consider that our children are in a race, which of course, they are not. Although, in mainstream education it very much looks like a race requiring children to reach benchmarks and demonstrate on standards based tests that they know a particular body of knowledge at a predetermined time. Unfortunately, this approach fails to take into account those children who learn at a slower rate or attend a school where the standards do not align with the Standards being tested. We in Waldorf education base our curriculum and teaching methodology on the premise that from birth to adulthood, children's development follows a predictable process of maturing – intellectually, emotionally and physically. It is our role as parents and educators to help our children navigate the stages of childhood in such a way that they are allowed to fully reap the benefits of each developmental stage while addressing the needs of individual children who mature at a faster or slower rate. In doing this, we believe that all students will reach their highest potential. In this paper, we will discuss how the API, which is based on the STAR Program (California Testing and Reporting), fails to accurately reflect the academic achievement of the students attending Golden Valley Charter School (GVCS), a K –8 public charter school inspired by Waldorf education.

In performing this analysis, it needs to be brought to the reader's attention that although the scores are accurate (http://star.cde.ca.gov/star2011/), for statistical purposes the sampling size is small with 211 GVCS students taking the STAR in 2011.

Background

You may be familiar with the popular Waldorf tag line, "*educating the head, heart and hands*." This summarizes two aspects of child development upon which Waldorf education is based. First of all, we acknowledge that the human being is a three-fold being made up of an intellect (head), emotion or feeling life (heart) and will or ability to get things done (hands). Secondly, as children mature they go through three distinct developmental stages. In each of these stages one of these three aspects of the human being comes more to the forefront to be "educated" than the other two. Based on this view of child development, the teaching methodology, curriculum content, and student expectations differ in each stage. The beauty of the Waldorf curriculum is that it is designed to meet the developmental and educational needs of students as they progress through these stages. At GVCS we are very careful not to rush our students prematurely on to the next stage. We want our students to fully reap the gifts to which they are naturally open during each stage of development. Our goal is to educate students so they develop naturally into compassionate, knowledgeable and skilled adults who are of themselves able to impart direction to their lives. As a result, the order and timing of what we teach in a given grade does not always match up with California State Standards for that grade. This is especially so in kindergarten through third grade.

The chart below is a summary of these stages. For a more complete explanation of the GVCS curriculum, please see GVCS of Sacramento Charter pages 11 – 42 (www.goldenvalleycharter.com/node/250).

Table 1

Birth to 7—Early Childhood	7 to 14—Late Childhood	14 to 21—Adolescence
Emphasis on developing the will Learning through: imitation Building: healthy habits "I am safe. The world is good."	Emphasis on developing the feeling life Learning through: story Building: an active feeling life "I love life. I see the beauty in all things. I see the flaws in all things."	Emphasis on developing the thinking Learning through: understanding Building: idealism "I search for the truth in all things. I can make a difference in the world."

STAR Meets a Curriculum Inspired by Waldorf Education

All of the Kindergarten through 8th grade California Content Standards are included in our GVCS curriculum. However, due to the fact that we base our curriculum on the framework of child development described above (see Table 1), some of the California Content Standards are taught at different grade levels at GVCS than in a mainstream public school. This is especially true in kindergarten through third grade. (This is most obvious in the area of reading skill acquisition. Formal reading and writing instruction begins in the first grade.) Our curriculum in the early grades emphasizes the development of healthy habits and capacities for concentration, observation, focus, memory, self-control, and imagination. This prepares our students to successfully and enthusiastically engage in the rigorous academic work and content rich curriculum that we offer in the upper grades. Our students are learning the same skills, just not in the same order or at the same time as their peers in traditional public school. This conclusion is born out in an analysis of our students' STAR scores by grade level over the past four years. As the students progress through the grades, the percentage of students in every class scoring proficient and advanced increases.

The following table (Table 2) shows the trend of our ELA and Math proficiency scores by class over the past four years. The "10-11" column indicates our trend over the past two years and the "08-11" column indicates the trend over the past four years. As you can see, ALL of our classes show improvement over both a two and four year period.

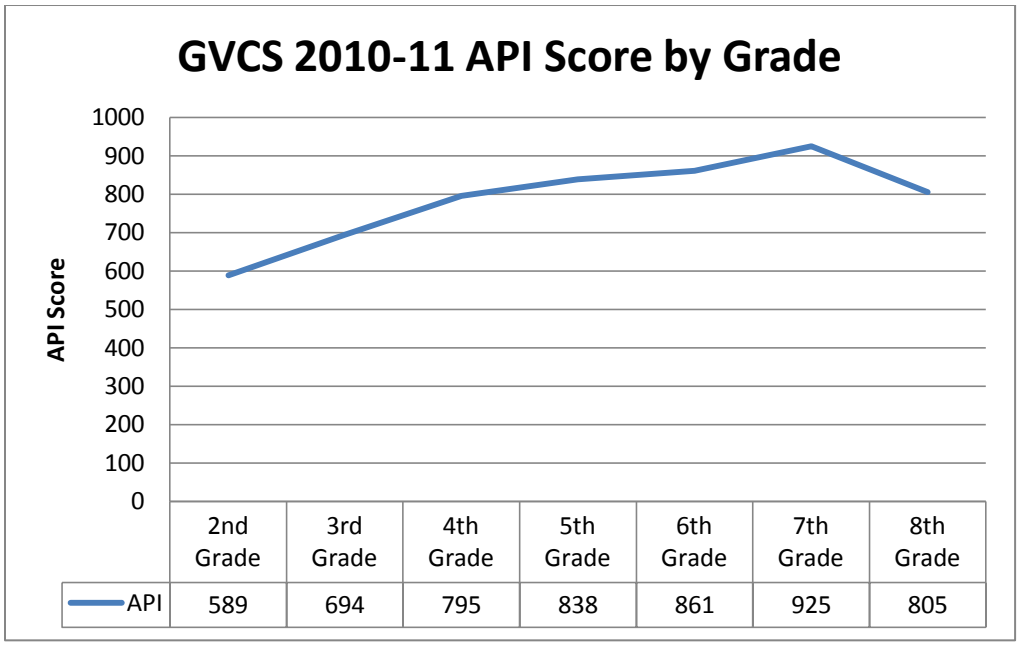
Table 2

% Proficient/Adv (Math)	07-08	08-09	09-10	10-11	% Change '10 to '11	% Change '08 to '11
Class of '17				31.37%	NA	NA
Class of '16			32.00%	50.00%	18.00%	NA
Class of '15		76.00%	53.85%	60.71%	6.86%	NA
Class of '14	39.29%	72.73%	7.41%	40.00%	32.59%	0.71%
Class of '13	42.31%	47.83%	36.00%	56.67%	20.67%	14.36%
Class of '12	30.43%	36.36%	61.90%	69.23%	7.33%	38.80%
Class of '11	27.27%	52.38%	47.37%	60.00%	12.63%	32.73%
% Proficient/Adv (ELA)	**07-08**	**08-09**	**09-10**	**10-11**	**% Change '10 to '11**	**% Change '08 to '11**
Class of '17				18.00%	NA	NA
Class of '16			12.00%	32.14%	20.14%	NA
Class of '15		16.00%	50.00%	82.14%	32.14%	NA
Class of '14	29.63%	54.55%	51.85%	63.33%	11.48%	33.70%
Class of '13	42.86%	65.22%	72.00%	75.86%	3.86%	33.00%
Class of '12	45.45%	68.18%	66.67%	84.62%	17.95%	39.17%
Class of '11	45.45%	61.90%	57.89%	75.00%	17.11%	29.55%

API Score by Grade: 2010-11

There is another way we can show the effectiveness of the Waldorf curriculum through an analysis of our STAR data. Using the Data Director Program we were able to break out the 2011 STAR scores of our students by grade. As the following graph illustrates, our fourth grade student "API" is just below the 800 API target set by the State and our fifth through eighth grade "API" scores are all above the 800 target. I am sure we would all agree that the academic performance of students in the upper grades is more indicative of their true academic proficiency than in the lower grades. Remember, we purposefully emphasize the development of capacities over knowledge, concepts and skills in the lower grades in order to prepare our students to better absorb, understand, and master these concepts in the upper grades. While academic learning is important, our understanding of child development teaches us that earlier is not necessarily better. In some cases, teaching a skill or concept too early or in the wrong sequence can weaken academic understanding rather than strengthening it. When our students perform well academically in the higher grades, we take this as an affirmation that our developmental approach is effective.

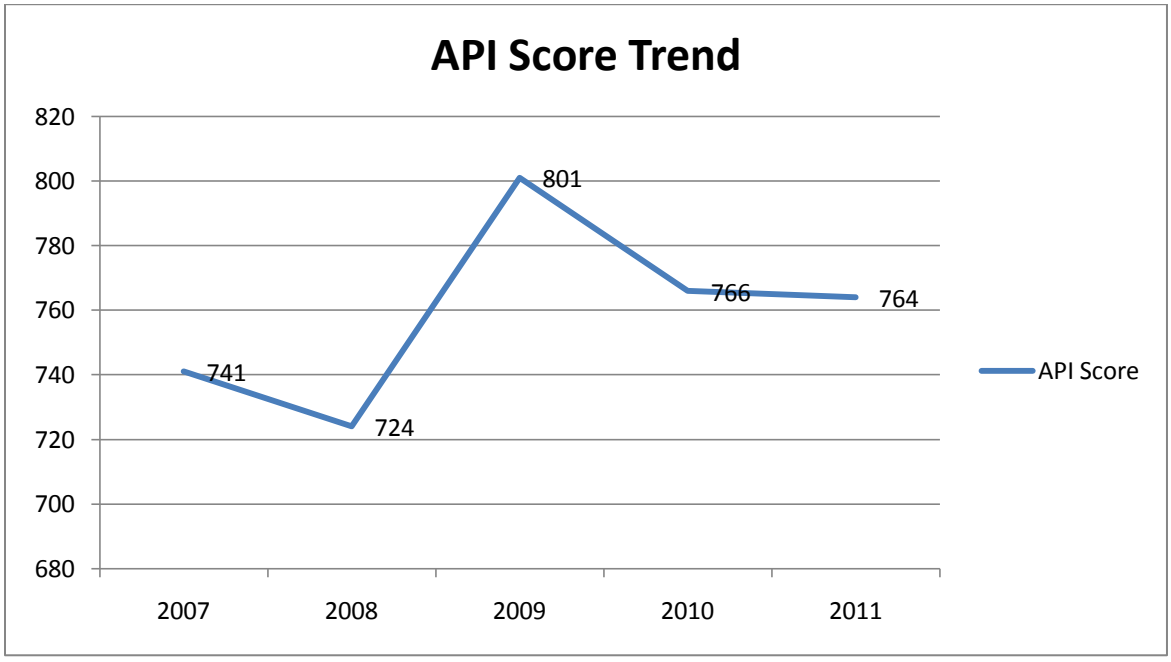
Graph 1



API Score Trend: 2007 – 2011

Despite our yo-yoing API over the past 5 years, we have experienced an average increase of about 6 points per year over this time (we consider our 801 score in 2009 to be an anomaly and do not expect it to repeat.)

Graph 2



API Score Projection: 2011 – 2018

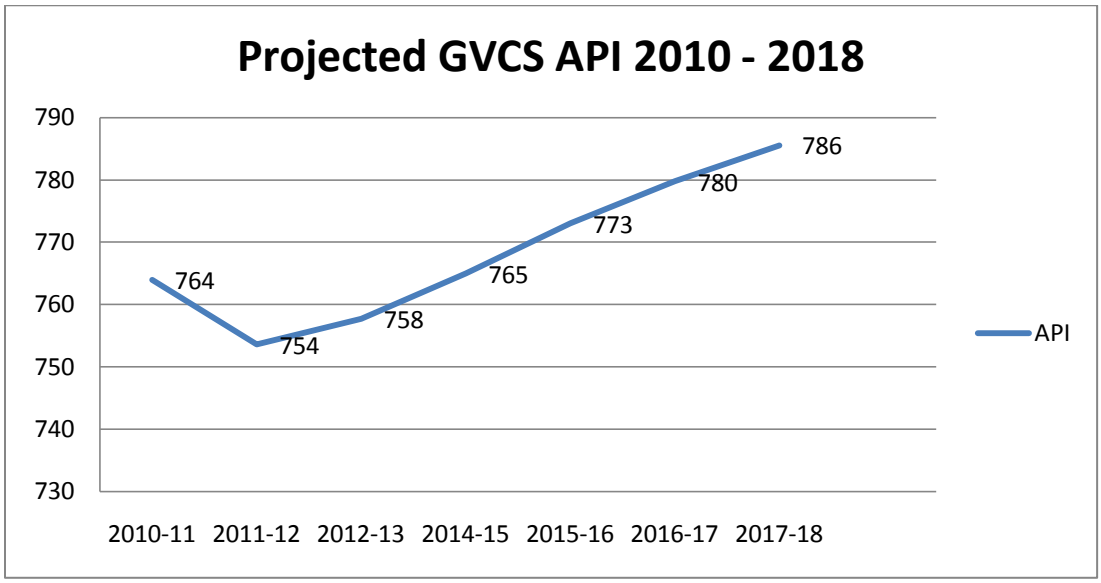
As a result of enthusiastic parental interest in our school as evidenced by long waiting lists, we established a second first grade class two years ago and will continue to add a class each year until we have two classes of each grade through the eighth grade. As a result, this past spring twice as many second graders (who score the lowest) took the STAR test than in previous years. Therefore, even though the percentage of students scoring proficient and advanced increased in every class, (see Table 2) our API actually went down by two points (see Graph 2)

The following table and graph illustrate a projection of our API over the next six years. The two factors used in this projection are the following: (1) The average grade-level API test score in 2011; (2) the student population in each grade over time as we complete our double tracking process. Since we continue to increase enrollment in our lowest scoring classes over the next two years, our scores are projected to drop before they start increasing again the following year. Also, since our average second and third grade API scores are so far below our overall target score of 800, even when we are fully double tracked in 2018, our average projected score does not reach our State mandated target of 800. Yet, if we were to remove our second and third grade test scores from our API calculation, our 2010-11 API score would have been 840.

Table 3

	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	API Scores
2nd	51	60	60	60	60	60	60	589
3rd	28	60	60	60	60	60	60	694
4th	28	30	60	60	60	60	60	795
5th	29	30	30	60	60	60	60	838
6th	29	30	30	30	60	60	60	861
7th	26	30	30	30	30	60	60	861
8th	20	30	30	30	30	30	60	861
API	**764**	**754**	**758**	**765**	**773**	**780**	**786**	

Graph 3



Conclusion

The API score alone does not accurately illustrate the academic performance of GVCS students. Only through a deeper analysis of the STAR test data is it clear that GVCS students are academically successful. Please ask yourself this question… "Are we not succeeding as a K-8 academic institution if our students not only meet but exceed State standards for proficiency in Math, ELA, History, and Science by the time they enter high school?"

Authored by:
Deborah Lenny, Principal
Andrew Silvert, Business Manager
Lee Pope, Curriculum Director