

# **Executive Summary to the 2005 Annual Update**

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The Somerset County Public Schools' Master Plan 2003-2008 stands as the single blueprint for systemic educational improvement. Over a three year period, the county has moved from a system without any developed or operational strategic plan to a system with an integrated plan that establishes administrative and supervisory annual goals and responsibilities, guides the work of six standing action teams, directs the budget, and promotes self study and improvement. Foremost, the Master Plan of Somerset County provides critical, systemic cohesiveness and coherency for our students as they move through the system Pre-K to 12. It equally serves staff as they work to fully articulate and coordinate courses of study, instructional strategies, and assessment practices with their colleagues. The Management Plan for the Master Plan has proven to be a valuable, instructive tool for monitoring our progress and updating our action plans.

The Master Plan guided the Somerset County Public Schools Reorganization in which the county moved from a configuration of primary, upper elementary, middle, and high schools to Elementary (PK-5), Intermediate (Grade 6-7), Academies (School within a School 8-9 grades), and High Schools (Grade 10-12). The results of these changes are stronger programs organized for maximum student benefit, increased attention to students and their achievement, decreased facility operational costs, and better facilities for all students. While the schools and communities were concerned and questioned these sweeping changes, those faculties and families already impacted by the plan, have come together, endorsed the changes, and commented on the benefits. Anticipated concerns and resistance have not materialized due to strong principal leadership and committed staffs. A once divided county has united and recognized early benefits from the reorganization.

Somerset County Public Schools was named a System in Need of Improvement in 2004, although no individual schools carried that label, "In Need of Improvement". The absence of Special Education students' mastery at specific levels made the system as a whole vulnerable for labeling. However, the "red flag" clearly alerted the system to the need for an instructional and professional development focus on our Special Education program. The results of this focus were substantial: Special Education students from the Third Grade out performed other subgroups, including "All," by several percentage points in Reading. Throughout the county and in particular at elementary schools, Special Education student groups made outstanding gains in both math and reading, frequently outperforming other subgroups.

The Somerset County Public Schools Master Plan focuses on six areas: Student Achievement; Family and Community Involvement; Highly Qualified Educators; Environments Conducive to Learning; Safe and Disciplined Settings; and Community Pride in Our Schools. Each area has seen significant progress and development over the two years of implementation. The gains made as a system in the Master Planning "Process" have been equally, if not, more impressive. This "process" now internalized is: the involvement of the community in decision making, the equitable distribution of resources through prioritizing, ownership of the plan by facilitators, and the development of a management/accountability mechanism (Quarterly Progress Report) to override such barriers as limited resources and minimal personnel.

A significant demographic impact on Somerset County Public Schools is a stabilized rather than declining enrollment. Some of this may be due to a return of students and families from a local private school to our public schools. Our ELL enrollment reflects an increasing Hispanic population that has settled in the county year round rather than migrating to other sites. The Health Department reports an increasing number of Mixtec (Mexican Indian) people who are extremely needy, use a unique dialect, and are prone to primitive practices. In addition, the number of foster care and surrogate family placements are increasing. This increasingly diverse population together with a declining employment rate is contributing to the escalating numbers and an increasing percentage of Free and Reduced lunch students. The demographics of our personnel are also shifting from a middle and upper aged staff to a younger less experienced staff, although the predicted exodus of retirees has not occurred. We speculate that our more

experienced teachers are securing assignments viewed as advancements and positioning themselves in coaching or facilitator roles. Our student population in some sites show equal enrollments of White and African American students, eliminating the minority label. Although one quarter of our new teachers are African American, our total percentage of African American teachers throughout the county is less than one fifth of all teachers.

Somerset received the largest amount of Thornton–Bridge to Excellence funding to date—\$2.57 million additional dollars for the 2005 – 2006 school year. Approximately 58% of the funds went to annual negotiated salary increases for all units and new support special education and alternative learning positions. Nearly 26% went to fixed charges; 12% was split evenly for increases in transportation and facility operation costs. Lost funds include Workforce Development Funding and a large reduction in state technology support. Federal grants have been secured to run an extended day program (*21<sup>st</sup> Century*) and to provide support for our struggling students (*Healthy Students/Safe Schools*).

Sections 1, 2 and 3 of the Master Plan Update 2005 describe several notable achievements: a notable improvement in performance measures of groups of Somerset's students at the same point in their education; a stronger alignment with the Voluntary State Curriculum; and an overt strengthened link between assessment and instruction. Assessment is now the beginning point rather than the end point of instruction. Significant progress is being made with integrating technology and realizing its power for instructional design, delivery, monitoring, and assessment. Staff have been trained in computer adapted instructional and assessment programs as well as classroom data management programs. One-to-one computing through the distribution of handheld computers to each 7<sup>th</sup> grader was a learning experience and set the stage for developing a stronger program and an expanded distribution. Increased fluency among staff with data collection, analysis, and application is apparent in walk-throughs, teacher dialogue, and principal goals. As a Gear Up site we have made gains with the class of 2006 in planning for their post secondary training and education, and we have begun a Career Education Program as a middle level priority.

The challenges facing Somerset center around long present economic limitations that have stunted development in critical areas such as Education That is Multicultural (ETM), Gifted and Talented (K-12), and a full fledged Fine Arts program. Progress is being made in each area, but it is limited and does not fully honor the gifts or the needs of our students. Two sites at the secondary level have missed AYP and are Schools in Need of Local Attention. Staffing, professional development, and program changes have been made to address these issues.

Parent and Community Involvement is at a high point and continues to grow. The official position of Volunteer Coordinator was piloted last year and has expanded to three positions. Somerset County Public Schools continues to make progress toward a 100% highly qualified staff and laments that gains made during the year that are lost when staff transfer to higher salaried counties. Professional development opportunities have been abundant in Coalition of Essential Learning Sites and well provided across the county through grants, liaisons, and partnerships with Higher Education Institutions. Safety and discipline have become priorities as a result of several threatening events during the Fall of 04-05 which stimulated Master Plan action team work on the expansion of Alternative School options with intensive behavioral and academic support targeted to a transition supported return. The Positive Behavior Intervention System has fully trained staff and has spread to the majority of Somerset County Public Schools. Pride in Somerset County Schools has taken multiple positive turns this past year with escalating community participation and involvement.

Although we have miles to go, Somerset County Public Schools and its communities stand energized and focused on the academic and social success for each our students regardless of the barriers they face or the challenges they present.