

SOMERSET COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Executive Summary for the 2005-2006 Master Plan Update

*“We’re real Chesapeake Country,
Three centuries of Americana and still
Fresh as the breeze off the Bay.
Discover what nature has kept for herself,
What history has passed on for generations....”*

Introduction

These inviting words welcome both guest and native to the rural jurisdiction of Somerset County, Maryland’s southern most county of 25,000 persons. With 327 square miles of land and 284 square miles of water, Somerset is one of only four counties in Maryland where farmland has increased rather than decreased in the last ten years. Supplementing tree farms and traditional dairy and chicken farms are over 600 miles of county shoreline that have set the stage for many a waterman’s life of harvesting bay crabs and oysters. Somerset is the state’s second smallest jurisdiction with approximately 4,600 residents between 5 and 18 years of age. Slightly less than 3000 of this age group are educated through the public school system. Of those, 75% pursue college or trade school; 22% go directly into the workforce; and 3% enlist in the service.

School enrollment in the nine schools throughout the county is increasing slightly with school age population projected for a 10.9% increase by 2010. Ranking 24th out of 24 jurisdictions for average household income and 23rd in local wealth per pupil, Somerset County suffers significant poverty. Approximately 20% of Somerset’s residents live below the line of poverty, and 57% of that 20% are families with children under 18 being raised by a single parent. More than 30% of all of Somerset’s children are being raised by single mothers. An additional 15% are being raised by grandparents. Over the last three years, public school population by race is changing in proportions: the Hispanic and African American percentages are increasing and the White percentage is decreasing. Education has historically not been highly valued in the county: only 11% of the population have earned Bachelor Degrees and 30% have less than a high school diploma. However, this does not mean that our schools or our community today do not see the potential of their youth and hold high expectations and great hope for their future.

Successes

In order to make the required critical difference in educational attainment, resources to fight the scars of poverty are needed, gratefully received, and well used. As a direct result of the Bridge to Excellence-Thornton funding and the focused work of dedicated educators, significant success is being realized by the public schools for Somerset’s children. Key successes include:

Exemplary Elementary Performance: Reading and Mathematics achievement at the elementary level continues to accelerate and has substantially exceeded the annual measurable objective. 100% of the elementary students will be proficient in reading and mathematics before 2014.

Progressing Middle School Performance: Reading and mathematics achievement at the middle level continues to accelerate with each year’s tested group outperforming the previous years’ groups.

State of the Art Facilities Improvements: All of Somerset County's elementary children are learning in new or well maintained facilities/. The fully renovated Carter G. Woodson Elementary School opened its doors to 575 students on September 5, 2006.

Competitive Salary Increases: Teacher and staff salaries were substantially increased to a competitive level with surrounding counties. Somerset will be able to attract and retain highly qualified staff.

Systemic Integration of the Master Plan: Continuity of practice and common focus among leadership teams across the county has increased the county's capacity to implement change. Prioritizing targets and collaborating on strategies has enabled Somerset to make real and lasting progress.

Challenges

Somerset County has many hurdles and burdens that present challenges for new and continuing achievement. Of greatest concern is the absence of sufficient academic progress among the secondary population. There is a profound need to increase middle and high school level students' proficiency in reading comprehension to assure their success in all content areas. The 2006 class presented significantly decreased numbers of graduates and an increase in drop outs. Requirements for graduation have increased including the requirement to pass all four High School Assessments; effective instructional and tutorial interventions are missing and sorely needed. Subgroup needs at all three levels is presenting an ever growing challenge. Beginning with readiness for school, a significant gap is present between the low income (FARMS) students, of whom 68% are prepared, and the middle and high income preschooler students, of whom 83% are prepared. The gap is even greater with English Language Learners (ELL) who post a bare 50% as prepared. The Hispanic population and larger ELL group continues to struggle from their entry into school, with reading expectations at the first MSA assessment and on through secondary measures. While significant gains have been made with Special Education students' reading and math achievement at the elementary level, dramatically unacceptable gaps with regular education performance are seen at the secondary level in assessment, graduation, and drop out rate.

Fiscal Resources

Good will coupled with great ideas, boundless energy and unfailing commitment are abundant, but remain clearly inadequate for making the needed difference. Fiscal climate stands as the keystone support for enduring change. The recognition of Maryland for the need to equitably provide resources for all children's education has had tremendous impact. Somerset experienced a \$2.5 million increase in state revenue (a 13.7% increase over 2005). Two federal grants for FY 07 boosted federal revenue by 45%. This revenue obscures dramatic federal Title I decreases in excess of 20% in each of the past two years. Local appropriations increased slightly through the support of nonrecurring items and major capital improvements. Local support for the Woodson Renovation was \$2.5 million and another \$3.4 million was promised for the Somerset Intermediate School at Tawes new construction project which broke ground May, 2006. With the lowest taxable income in the state, an unemployment rate of 5.6%, and the lowest state property tax yield in Maryland, Somerset is proud of the support of the locals. Health Care and operational increases were anticipated and budgeted for FY 06. However, by the close of the fiscal year, the county had pleasantly yielded unanticipated savings of \$489,000 in these areas. Transfers were made to help improve the instructional program, particularly in technology and instructional computer software.

Fiscal Impact on the Master Plan

Recognizing the fiscal adequacy demands for particular subgroups of students (\$14,413/ Special Education student, \$13,948/FARMS student; and \$13,284/ELL student), Somerset is called to stretch every dollar and to access all grant opportunities. The added *21st Century Grant*, the *Safe*

Schools/Healthy Student Grant, and MHEC Grants have become core programs, not temporary enhancements. Somerset is challenged to fiscally sustain these programs when the grants conclude in FY 09. Somerset has been scrupulous in aligning all budget items with the Master Plan and conscientious in involving the community in selecting budget priorities. Annual workshops are held each year to fully review the progress of the county, study student needs and priorities, and identify challenges. The FY 07 priorities set by the Master Plan Steering Committee in February 2006 were:

- (1) meeting teacher salary increases;
- (2) enhancing high quality teacher recruitment, retention, and professional development;
- (3) advancing instruction through increased student time, math emphasis, materials and texts, and appropriate assistance staffing;
- (4) fostering safe and positive learning environments through security, health services, characterized programs, and parental involvement in schools; and
- (5) boosting special education services through added clerical services.

All of these directives have been put in place for FY 07. Each is reflected throughout the specific progress, challenges, changes and adaptations described in this *2006 Master Plan Update*.

Priorities

Somerset County has many more challenges than the most prominent ones cited above and has earnestly endeavored over the first two years of Master Planning to address each one of the challenges. But, SCPS is a small system and consequently, resources were spread too thin and results were sporadic. Following the 2005 Update process, a dramatic change was made: setting priorities became a reality along with a rigorous system of monitoring and assessing progress on each targeted action plan and step. This has reaped benefits but remains a critical priority requiring extreme commitment and rigorous vigilance. Therefore SCPS prioritizes

Priority 1: Integrating the Master Plan strategies and data analysis into daily practice

Acquiring the technical expertise to make a profound difference in secondary progress for all subgroups is a priority for 06-07 that can be seen in the addition of formal weekly professional development for all secondary staff. The greatest impact on student achievement is based in the teaching-learning relationship between teacher and student. Our teachers need full command of the most effective instructional strategies for their content areas, multiple opportunities to collaborate with their peers, and continuous skill development for tracking and impacting student progress. Therefore, SCPS is focusing professional development on

Priority 2: Accelerating secondary students' achievement.

More fully meeting the needs of the growing Hispanic and English Language Learner population before, during, and after entry to the public schools is a pressing priority being addressed through staffing, interagency work, and technical assistance. These two groups present the largest achievement gap. Therefore, SCPS is focusing elementary and middle level instructional efforts on

Priority 3: Accelerating Hispanic and English Language Learners' achievement.

Accelerating, sustaining and increasing the community partnerships established over the past three years is of essential importance. The successful education of our youth has become much more than the business of schools – it is the base for a growing economy; it is the heart of a stable society; it is no less than the promise for tomorrow. The Somerset County Public Schools' priority is working together as an entire community to fulfill our mission of

Priority 4: *Uniting the best efforts of our entire community in order to assure that all students achieve high standards, graduate from high school, and are equipped with the skills and behaviors needed to attain success in a rapidly changing world.*