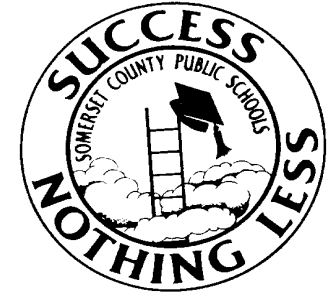


# SOMERSET COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

## Executive Summary for the 2008-2009 Master Plan Update



*We are building our future one student at a time.*  
– **SCPS 2009 Commitment**

*“Making your mark on the world is hard. If it were easy, everybody would do it. But it’s not. It takes patience; it takes commitment; and it comes with plenty of failure along the way. The real test is not whether you avoid this failure, because you won’t, it’s whether you let it harden or shame you into inaction, or whether you learn from it; whether you choose to persevere.”*

**-- President Barack Obama**

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

The Somerset County Public School staff, students, and community chose to persevere for there is nothing as valuable to any individual or holds as much potential as an education. The challenge was set seven years ago with the following Master Plan Mission:

***To unite 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.***

Somerset is making its mark on Maryland’s educational success. In spite of economic hurdles, increased standards of performance, and diminishing revenue, Somerset County students, families, staff, and community are seeing significant progress in the educational system and learning. Somerset takes pride in much stronger schools of higher performing students taught by highly qualified and highly effective staffs dedicated to continuous improvement. There are miles, many miles, yet to go but it is clear that by building one student at a time, we will secure a future of promise.

Progress depends upon both incremental change and systemic development. Both are seen in the progress of Somerset County Public Schools during the 2008-2009 year. Incremental change will be addressed in this summary in brief discussions of each Update goal area. Substantial systemic growth can be categorized in four areas: High Quality Professional and Classified Instructional Staff; Embedded Professional Development through Structured Collaboration; Integrated Technology for Student Engagement and Academic Progress; and Community Engagement.

#### **A. High Quality Professional and Classified Instructional Staff**

The quality and effectiveness of Somerset’s teaching and leadership staff is the most influential determinant of student growth and development. Somerset has achieved 100% of its Core Academic Subject Classes taught by Highly Qualified teachers in Title I schools, which in Somerset are all elementary schools. In all secondary schools, the percentage of Core Academic Subject Classes taught by Highly Qualified Teachers has increased to 92%. This represents a 38.6 percentage point gain over the life of the Master

Plan. Supporting classroom teachers is a core group of elementary paraprofessionals of which 100% are highly qualified.

Qualifications are only one side of the coin; assured effectiveness is the other. The first assurance of effectiveness comes in the active formation and implementation of a Leadership Team in each school composed of the principals, assistant administrators, instructional coaches, and key leader teachers. The Leadership Team is responsible for the development, implementation, and assessment of the site's professional development and school improvement plan. The Leadership Team sets instructional "Look Fors", collects data on the "look fors" through palm recording of observations during on going walk throughs, collates collected data, and analyzes findings as a leadership team. These findings serve to direct coaching support to teachers suspected of having low student impact and enable the setting of specific goals for improvement.

A second assurance is student performance on departmentalized common benchmarks. Student data is entered into the data management system *Performance Matters* and available for individual teacher analysis and application as well as full subject area team comparisons, discussions, and planning during weekly professional development sessions.

The third assurance is a strong program of support for the entering teacher. Following a full week of orientation, teachers are assigned a trained site mentor who provides on-going formal and informal support regarding instructional effectiveness, building operations, and student services.

Highly Effective teachers, so designated by their building principal by three or more years of outstanding evaluations and observations, have an Alternative Evaluation Option of demonstrating their continued effectiveness through a structured process in one of six areas:

- Individual Action Research
- Team Action Research
- Peer Review
- Peer Observation
- Reflective Journaling
- Portfolio Documentation.

## **B. Embedded Professional Development through Structured Collaboration**

Structured Collaboration has come to be recognized by Leadership Teams and staff as one of the most powerful formats for professional growth and development of teachers of all subjects and experience levels. Collaboration was maximized at the elementary level during the 2008-2009 school year with designated weekly times for grade level subject teams to focus on the analysis of student progress in reading or in math, collaboratively design instructional plans as well as intervention, and then share reflection on their classroom experiences with implementation. Structure collaboration also involves the mastering of a new skill taught by an instructional coach, group problem solving, and benchmark design followed by analysis of performance. The results of this collaboration can be seen in the continued academic progress of Somerset's elementary students.

Unfortunately, a barrier to that progress has been erected for the 2009-2010 school year. The teachers' union, TASCOS, at the request of two teachers questioned a potential contract violation of requiring teacher participation during designated "individual preparation and planning time." Rather than invest unavailable time and resources in the grievance procedure, administration directed principals to temporarily modify and slightly reduce structured collaboration requirements with the opening of the 2009-2010 student year. Leadership Teams report concern for student progress.

### **C. Integrated Technology for Student Engagement and Academic Progress**

Somerset County Public Schools is committed to assisting every student in crossing the digital divide regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, family income, geographic location, or disability. This means that every teacher within the system is fully trained and demonstrates competence in effectively integrating appropriate technology in instruction and assessment to engage learners and maximize their academic progress. Somerset has long envisioned the full use of individual student issued laptops to enhance instructional mastery and promote student development of the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills of communication, problem solving, collaboration, independent learning, creativity, and critical thinking. That vision became a reality in 2008-2009 as each 7<sup>th</sup> Grader in the county was issued a laptop to use throughout the school day. In 2009-2010 students with issued laptops will be using them both at home and at school.

Through Somerset County commissioners' support and MSDE grants, Somerset was able to initiate the planned expansion of technology integration in both directions: up the grade levels through the 2008-2009 8<sup>th</sup> Grade Technology Initiative and down the grade levels through the 2008-2009 5<sup>th</sup> Grade Technology Initiative. These initiatives entailed significant staff commitment, training, and willingness to take new risks in planning and delivery of instruction. The response has been very positive and set the stage for the continued work of 2009-2010.

### **D. Community Engagement**

The Somerset County Master Plan prioritizes Family and Community Involvement as a major strategy for achieving the mission. Significant headway was made through the first four years in opening school and classroom doors to parents, increasing the number of parent and community volunteers, and engaging parents in family learning nights at the elementary level. Over the next two years progress was made in developing Parent Advisory Councils at sites as a compliment or subset of the Home and School or Parent Teacher Organization. The Parent Advisory Group was intended to assume a decision making role with site leadership. Success varied among sites.

During 2008-2009, the superintendent formed a "Countywide Parent Advisory Council" with a representative from each site. The purpose of C-PAC was:

- to provide the superintendent and the Board with input on decisions regarding policies, programs, initiatives, and items of parent concern
- to provide participants with accurate information on current topics of concern to the community

- to create a connection between site parents and central office

C-PAC members agreed to honor confidentiality, seek clarity of what is said and heard at meetings, reach decisions by consensus, and assume that each person who is present at the table for meetings is there with good intentions to improve our students educational program and activities. C-PAC became the initial vehicle for community unrest over an episode of student violence (serious premeditated fighting leading to suspension and expulsion). It afforded opportunities to speak and be heard as well as to listen and learn. It was a beginning step in working together for a long term solution to struggling students' needs.

The positive impact of this group was felt throughout the county. They influenced the structure for Parent Conferences improving the quality of the conference as well as attendance. They promoted support of Connect-Ed, a media based school to home system for announcements and emergency messages which was consequently purchased and implemented. They carried the suggestion of considering a uniform dress code back to their respective site parent groups with two members reporting a high interest and willingness to consider being a pilot school for 2009-2010. That pilot is underway and has further substantiated the authentic role of C-PAC.

## **II. BUDGET NARRATIVE**

### **A. Context**

Maryland has recently been named the wealthiest state in the nation and is identified in the 2009 "Overview of Maryland Local Governments" by the Department of Legislative Services as having "one of the lowest poverty rates in the nation" at 8.3%. The US poverty rate is 13%. Maryland's Median Household Income is \$68,080. Although one of the 24 jurisdictions in Maryland; Somerset County does not mirror these numbers in the least.

Somerset, with a second smallest population of a Maryland County, posts a poverty rate of 20%, just 2 percentage points below Baltimore City. Of greater significance, Somerset posts the lowest Median Household Income in Maryland at \$33,700 which is less than 1/2 of the state median and a mere third of Maryland's highest county's median. Somerset also holds the spot as the county with lowest per capita total revenue at \$2,307, and the lowest assessable base. Somerset has the lowest taxable income in Maryland, therefore the 3.15% income tax as the second highest in the state, does not yield significant revenue.

Somerset has experienced an 8.6% increase in minority population between 2000 and 2007, and a 5.2% over all population increase.

Somerset's enrollment is 2959 and is comprised of approximately of 48% White students, 47% African American students, 5% Hispanic students, and less than 1% Asian and American Indian students. Approximately 37% of Somerset's children live in single parent households; and 58% of all students are on Free and Reduced Meals. The 2000 census cites 30% of Somerset's adult population having less than a high school diploma and 11% with a Bachelor's Degree or higher.

## **B. Fiscal Climate**

Somerset County Public Schools' fiscal capacity expanded greatly during the five years (2003-2008) of Thornton Bridge to Excellence support. The 2009 Budget as developed and approved experienced a severe decline in Federal Revenue as well as a decrease in State Revenue totaling a combined loss of \$1,108,715. An unusually large Fund Balance from 2008 of \$1.2 million offset that loss as well as increased non-recurring costs support for technology in Local Appropriation. Cost cutting measures were still necessary. However, unanticipated Federal Grants were received as well as additional state grant technology funding that enabled a further redistribution and retargeting of funds to critical goals for 08-09.

The 2010 Budget Development and Budget Approval process proved to be particularly challenging. There was no question that revenue would fall short again and likely be insufficient to meet basic increases in operations. Any increase would be through anticipated federal revenue in new streams—State Fiscal Stabilization Funds and American Recovery and Reinvestment Act Funds. When all was settled and finalized, Somerset County Public Schools had a 2010 Approved Budget of less than .2 (two-tenths) of a percent larger than 2009. This was not enough to recover the losses from 2009 or to move forward on fiscal priorities for 2010. Through partnership work with TASC0, representing SCPS' three unions: Teachers; Classified; and Administrators, it was enough to maintain staff and key programs.

### **1. Planned Targets for Needed Resources in 2009**

The establishment of budget priorities for each year previous to January of 2008 had been focused on directing new resources to those priorities that would lead to the greatest gains in student and system progress. The process changed: the 2009 budget was built upon the efforts of stakeholders to protect priorities from loss. The protected priorities were:

- Maintain Strong Early Childhood Education
- Maintain Instructional Support for Teachers through Site Coaches in Core Areas
- Maintain and Focus Elementary Intervention for Students in Core Areas
- Maintain site based embedded professional development
- Maintain integration of technology in instruction in order to increase student engagement and achievement
- Maintain capital improvement plan progress on systemic renovation of Washington Academy and High School to begin Summer, 2009.

### **2. Eliminated or Adjusted Resources for 2009**

Resources were adjusted in order to meet three priorities: student achievement, highly qualified staff, and a safe learning environment. Adjustments included redistributing a portion of funds from elementary textbooks, teacher mentoring stipends, external professional development funds including consultants, media furniture replacement, utilities, and maintenance van replacement.

The following steps were taken

To support Student Achievement:

- The Instructional Technology Plan was maintained adding equipment and support to the Intermediate School;
- Class sizes were maintained at the elementary level through the addition of an Itinerant Core Teacher at one site;
- A kindergarten teacher was added to accommodate increased enrollment;
- An administrative position was partially transferred to a teaching position with oversight for HSA Bridge; and
- Several teaching positions were transferred to academic intervention positions.

To support hiring and maintaining highly qualified and effective staff:

- Salary increases were provided Pre-K -12 staff (through the elimination of positions opened by attrition and reductions in stipends, recruiting efforts, retirement and recruiting bonuses;
- A reduction but not elimination of professional development work with external consultants was implemented;
- Collaboration among teams at all levels was developed and facilitated by site staff; and
- Site professional development through weekly sessions of the secondary staff and early dismissals among the elementary staff.

To assure school community of a safe and quality environment for learning:

- A critical portion of the Student Services Child Study Team site staff costs no longer supported by a Federal Grant were assumed by the local budget;
- An instructional support position was reassigned as a vice-principal position;
- The dual supervisory staff in Student Services was maintained;
- Professional staff whose positions are targeted for assuring a safe and quality environment (counselors, deans of instruction, alternative learning staff, learning support specialists, and behavior intervention staff) received the negotiated increase.

### **C. Fiscal Priorities of SCPS for 2010 and the Distribution of Resources to those Priorities**

The community of Somerset County Public Schools is committed to continuing to strive toward achieving a complete quality educational experience for every Somerset student. The large portion of students lacking parental support and interest in their child's educational progress, the increasing numbers of homeless and transient families in the county, and extensive poverty challenge the system's progress in meeting its commitment to every Somerset child as an educated child. Resources do play a role in realizing that commitment. Somerset felt the positive changes with former increased resources. In fact it was clearly documented in the MGT independent audit of the positive impact of increased state revenue on student achievement in school with high poverty. The continuing shortfall of funds to meet Somerset's long term goals and short term initiatives was clear before the 2010 budgeting process was even initiated.

The picture looked like this:

**Budget 2010**

<b>Local Revenue</b>	<b>\$ 9,008,774</b>	(-\$299,768 from 2009)
<b>State Revenue</b>	<b>\$ 23,070,614</b>	(-\$209,017 from 2009)
<b>Federal Revenue</b>	<b>\$ 3,800,000</b>	(-\$800,000 from 2009)
		(Total: -\$1,308,785)

The prominent priority of the Board in developing the 2010 budget was to maintain a quality academic program for students at all grade levels and to preserve positions. Specifically in addition to minimizing the loss of positions, the Board sought to provide effective academic intervention to increase student progress and success at all three levels, to provide training for staff in critical need areas such as Special Education, and to upgrade the integration of technology into instruction.

**1. New Funds- ARRA & SFSF**

Although it is reasonable to label funds from a previously untapped source as “new,” this should not be confused as equating to “additional” funds, as the term new has been used in past Master Plan Updates. For Somerset County, the ARRA and SFSF funds for 2010 have served to fill the “holes” created by reduced local, state, and federal revenue for 2010. Specifically, the fiscal status of Somerset in regard to “new” funds is as follows:

<b>Fiscal Year</b>	<b>State Revenue Amount of Increase/Decrease</b>
2005	+ \$1,377,603
2006	+ \$2,715,467
2007	+ \$2,536,690
2008	+ \$2,509,147
2009	- (\$308,715)
2010	-\$209,017 <b>SFSF \$320,169</b> + \$111,152

ARRA Restricted Funds (Title I & Special Education) are totaled at \$1,539,184. This brings the 2010 Total Budget to \$37,680,477 or **\$68,671** above the 2009 approved budget—an amount unable to cover even one professional position with benefits.

SFSF and ARRA funds have enabled the restoration of some positions. There were a total of 17.5 positions eliminated in the original 2010 budget. Specifically, SCPS

- Lost 3.5 Character Education Teacher Positions—Restored 2 in other roles
- Lost 3 Reading Coach/Intervention Positions—Restored 2.5
- Lost 1 ELL Instructional Aide Position—Restored 1
- Lost 2 IEP Aide Positions—Restored 2
- Lost 1 Choral Position—Remains Unfilled
- Lost 1 Landscape/Agriculture CTE Position—Program discontinued
- Lost 6 Learning Support & Behavior Intervention Positions—Restored 3.5

SFSF have enabled the purchase of \$109,200 worth of needed instructional materials and textbooks.

SFSF and ARRA dollars have enabled the following:

- a. **Intensive Academic Coaching and Intervention** through
  - Contracting Tutors and providing a program and materials for Grades 3-12 Reading, Math, and ELL Intervention
  - Funding for 4 FTE certified teachers and 16 part time aides
  - Student data tracking software
  - Continuation of Computer assisted Instructional software (*Success Maker*)
  
- b. **Co-teaching Initiative: Collaborative planning, instruction and assessment between Special Education and regular education teachers** providing
  - A Consultant for Co-teaching Training and Monitoring
  - Stipends for Participant Training
  
- c. **Coordination of Parent and Community Involvement in Title I Schools** providing
  - A system support position for SIT Parent and Community Involvement planning, implementation, and assessment
  - A system coordination of character education planned, delivered, and monitored
  
- d. **Extended School Year Programs for Special Education and Regular Education Students** providing
  - Staffing of teachers and assistants for 5 week school based programs focusing on Improving or Sustaining Progress in Math and Reading
  - Staff participation in Summer Reading Home Visits for Elementary
  
- e. **Supplemental Special Education Professional Development and Student Program Initiatives** providing
  - Training in the development and implementation of programs for autistic students
  - Enhancing staff and student capacities for coping with disabilities and building upon one's strengths—academically, behaviorally, and socially
  
- f. **Technology Enhanced Instruction** providing
  - Training for teachers with 1:1 consultant
  
  - Equipment and training for highest poverty elementary school (78%) now named as the first High Tech Elementary School in Somerset (*Promethean Boards, Activote Sets, Teacher Laptops, Docking Stations, Document Cameras, Audi Enhancement*)

- Implementation of planned expansion of Technology Initiative—  
Grade 4  
(*Promethean Boards, Activote Sets, Teacher Laptops, Docking Stations*)

## **2. Continuing Funds- Redistributed and Retargeted**

Although SFSF and ARRA funds significantly helped to fill budget shortfalls, retargeting and redistributing continuing funds was necessary to continue progress toward the goals of increasing student achievement, maintaining highly qualified and effective teachers, and assuring a safe and quality environment for learning.

A portion of 2009 allocations were redistributed in 2010 through:

- Eliminating positions through attrition,
- Eliminating of one facilitator position (Elementary Science),
- Eliminating of Character Education positions,
- Minimizing salary increases including eliminating cost of living increases and eliminating performance bonuses,
- Decreasing technology equipment by lengthening replacement cycle,
- Decreasing resources for technology software and using public domain or teacher developed materials,
- Decreasing specific materials and textbooks,
- Decreasing resources for furniture and instructional equipment replacement,
- Decreasing resources for utilities based upon energy program savings, and
- Decreasing capital outlay budget line in operating budget by delaying small projects.

Retargeted resources for 2010 included:

- Changing the Science Facilitator salary and a pilot position of Site Assessment coordinator to two Technology Lab Teacher salaries,
- Changing an Intermediate School Language Arts classroom teacher salary to an Intermediate School Reading Intervention Teacher,
- Changing an Intermediate School Math classroom teacher salary to an Intermediate School Math Intervention Teacher,
- Reducing number of classroom core teachers by one to add a Math Instructional Facilitator to the Intermediate School,
- Changing a .5 Character Education teacher salary to a Pre-K teacher salary and adding one section of Pre-K to meet increased enrollment, and
- Providing for an anticipated step recognition for Unit I (Professional Unit) and Unit III (Classified Unit) in second quarter and an opportunity for administrators to “cash in one” to three days of annual leave.

## **D. Summary Statement**

The 2010 Budget has required: temporarily frozen salaries, the loss of valuable positions, reductions in per pupil allotments, profound reductions in professional development opportunities and support, a delay of anticipated programs, and a slowing of academic progress. These are significant set backs. The SFSF and ARRA funding has provided a

life jacket but, unfortunately, one with built in obsolescence—it will cease in two years. The progress of Somerset County students and staff in the last six years is undeniable. The link of resources as a primary source of that progress is also undeniable: we know statistically there is a significant correlation between the achievement of children of poverty and expenditures per pupil.

As a county genuinely unable to fund above maintenance of effort at any time in the past or to even begin to approach the state's calculations of required funding for adequacy, our children's educational well being and progress stands severely threatened for the immediate future. Without state support, the inequity between the educational opportunities available to a student from Somerset County and one from nearby Worcester County or across the Chesapeake Bay: Calvert County, Howard County, or Montgomery County will reach an unjustifiable and shameful difference. We cannot allow this to happen.

### **III. GOAL PROGRESS**

#### **A. Maryland School Assessments/High School Assessments**

Although slowing in pace, elementary students' progress demonstrated by increased percentages achieving proficiency continues in both reading and mathematics. In 2009, 84.9% of the elementary students achieved reading proficiency or higher and 81% achieved Math proficiency or higher. All seven subgroups demonstrated gains in reading and six out of seven subgroups demonstrated gains in mathematics. Somerset elementary students will reach the 100% proficiency or higher target by 2014. Both middle level reading proficiency and mathematics proficiency continue to increase as a whole in the middle level band with reading gains in all three service subgroups: Special Education, FARMS, and ELL. Middle level math proficiency continues to increase in all three service subgroups: Special Education, FARMS, and ELL while Reading proficiency increases were seen in only two of the three service groups: Special Education and FARMS. Somerset is experiencing similar leaps of success in the HSA English measure, moving from 43.6% pass rate in 2006 to 70.7% in 2008 and 75% in 2009. The secondary mathematics measure also shows continued improvement with each assessed class. Scores advanced from a 65.3% pass rate in 2006 to 80.1% in 2008 and 82.1% in 2009. All students met the HSA graduation requirement for the Class of 2009, through demonstrating proficiency on the assessment, achieving a 1602 cumulative score of all four HSA assessments, or completing HSA Bridge projects.

#### **B. Limited English Proficient Students**

The number of students with Limited English Proficiency is increasing in Somerset County although resources to serve those students are not. The results of increasing focused efforts to enhance classroom teachers' knowledge and use of selected LEP skills in conjunction with increasing ESOL teachers' repertoire and application of interactive strategies have led to positive system trends. A three year upward trend in specific domains of proficiency is apparent at the various levels. At the High School level, the trend is apparent in Listening and Writing. At the Middle Level, the trend is evidenced in Speaking. At the Elementary Level, the positive trend domains are Reading and Writing.

### **C. Adequate Yearly Progress**

In reviewing the most recently released MSDE Official AYP Analysis data (9/16/2009), the measure of All Students meeting proficiency in Reading is 79.5%, slightly above the current AMO of 74.8%, and the measure of All Students meeting proficiency in Mathematics is 73.3%, again above the AMO of 67.4% with a somewhat healthier margin. Standing significantly below all other subgroups is the Special Education system performance measuring 59.7% proficient in Reading and 52.5% proficient in Mathematics. In neither subject does the performance fall within the confidence interval.

In reviewing the three levels, all students and all subgroups in both Reading and Mathematics performance met AYP at the Elementary Level. At the Middle Level which involves Somerset's Intermediate School and High School Academies (Grade 8), AYP was not met by several subgroups:

Special Education Students-Reading and Mathematics

Limited English Proficiency Students-Reading

African American Students-Mathematics

At the High School Level, all students and all subgroups met AYP in both Reading and Mathematics with the exception of Special Education students in reading performance.

When reviewed by site and not system, Somerset Intermediate School met AYP for all students and all subgroups in both Reading and Mathematics, with exception of Limited English Proficient students in Reading where only 5 out of 12 tested students achieved proficiency. Therefore, although Somerset Intermediate has continued its upward trend in achievement reaching a 79.8% proficiency in Reading and a 72.9% proficiency in Mathematics, it missed AYP by less than 2 students' performances and is now considered a school in need of improvement and potentially corrective action for 2010-2011.

With a Graduation Rate of 70.8% at Crisfield Academy and High School, AYP has not been achieved nor were the Special Education subgroup or the Hispanic subgroup within reach of the AMO.

### **D. Highly Qualified Teachers**

In 2003-2004, the percentage of core academic classes taught by Highly Qualified teachers was 53.4%. Through the focused work of the Human Resources division, the increase in resources through Thornton Bridge to Excellence funds, and the high quality and effective leadership of building principals and their leadership teams, Somerset has moved that percentage to 92% for 2008-2009. The Elementary staffs achieved the 100% mark in 2008-2009, a goal Somerset expects to accomplish at the Secondary level in 2009-2010.

The time has come to move the focus to highly effective teachers.

### **E. Safe Schools**

Safe schools are of primary concern to the Somerset community, particularly when community occurrences have threatened safety at home. Somerset reports no persistently dangerous schools, decreasing numbers of suspended students, a data based conclusion

that bullying, harassment, and intimidation are the exception rather than the rule and 100% of Somerset Schools are involved in PBIS practices. However the system remains highly concerned about the numbers of students suspended in school and particular subgroups' overrepresentation.

#### **F. Specific Student Groups**

Somerset remains committed to the implementation and expansion of CTE Programs of Study within Career Clusters and is experiencing the highest number of enrollees for 2009 in a decade. There is an excellent partnership between the CTE program and home schools with all teachers focused on academics as well as the area of career and technical study.

At the other end of the spectrum, Early Learning, Somerset achieved a composite score of 85% on the MSSR, ten percentage points above the state target. This represents exceptional readiness growth among two subgroups: African American students and male students. In comparing Somerset's Pre-K students with Head Start students and with Informal Home Care students, students in Somerset's Pre-K are significantly better prepared. SCPS continues to make strong efforts to partner with Head Start.

Another specific student group is Gifted and Talented. A strong fully inclusive program (Primary Talent Development) is fully in place for Pre-K to Grade 2 students. Identification and differentiation begin in 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade and continues through 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup>, and on to the secondary schools. Budget constraints over the last two years as well as a desire not to close any doors to high achieving students who may not be identified by traditional measures have prevented program expansion.

#### **G. Cross-cutting Themes**

Educational Technology has been an area of priority and significant progress for Somerset County throughout the Master Plan initiative for both students and staff. Staff knowledge and skill in integrating technology into instruction and with the Maryland Technology Standards continues to increase. A required assessment of all staff's skills remains in place, along with the opportunities to move through two more levels of instruction, certification, and acquisition of additional classroom tools. Equitable access to appropriate technology resources has advanced with the adoption of *Promethean* white boards, a 1:1 laptop program at the 7<sup>th</sup> grade level intended to move with the students through their secondary years, professional development and training, and improved infrastructure for sites.

Education That Is Multicultural represents a second cross cutting theme. Two goals drive Somerset's attention to ETIM: first, a commitment to increase institutional understanding and effectiveness with students and families of diverse cultures; and secondly, an effort to enrich students' multicultural classroom and field experience learning in alignment with the Maryland State Curriculum. Progress has been made in providing the beginning steps of professional learning experiences in cultural proficiency. Multicultural learning activities continue to grow in number and diversity among all three levels.

## **H. Local Goals and Indicators**

Five prominent goals compose the local initiatives: (1) increasing student engagement and teacher effectiveness through technology initiatives; (2) increasing administrative and teaching staffs' fluency and proficiency with 21st Century skills; (3) maintaining and expanding high quality educational programming with revenue reductions and limitations, (4) securing necessary funding to proceed with critical renovations, and (5) giving genuine voice to diverse representation of parents through a countywide Parent Advisory Council. All five of these goals have been collaboratively developed, thoroughly planned, explicitly communicated to all stakeholders, and served as the stimulus for site progress in both academics and social skill development (behavior).

## **IV. CONCLUSION**

Somerset County Public Schools faces multiple challenges and is therefore quick to seize opportunities that will benefit students, staff, and families. As a system, we are challenged to focus our efforts on the conditions and issues over which we have influence and which we can change in order to accelerate student performance and overall progress. However, every opportunity has a cost, if not in dollars most assuredly in time and energy. Operating under the belief that teaching positions are of the highest priority with building support and leadership positions falling second in revenue considerations, the central office staff has not grown in number, only in workload. Central Office responsibilities and expectations have exceeded its capacity to fully meet the needs of the system on a daily basis. We are poised at a precarious spot. A high level of camaraderie, high respect, and team commitment is an apparent life raft in these times of high seas. Unfortunately, relief is not in sight.

Nonetheless, our students cannot wait and we have no intention of making them do so. We are committed to meeting the challenge of engaging our students at every level in every subgroup and service category in their learning on a personal and relevant level. We are committed to building an inclusive culture of proficient adults and students. We are committed to thoroughly preparing our students for tomorrow through their fluent application of 21<sup>st</sup> century knowledge and skills to today's learning. We must continue to meet the challenge of hiring and retaining highly qualified, highly effective, compassionate and persistent staff who draw inspiration, support, and enthusiasm from one another in vibrant professional learning communities, who are recognized and rewarded by their students' progress and achievements, and who take both responsibility for and pride in their students' progress. We must provide facilities, equipment, materials, and staff learning opportunities that engender pride and promise while attracting students, families, and staff to SCPS.

Somerset cannot do this without resources. The Thornton Bridge to Excellence funding provided a remarkable increase in the capacity of Somerset to serve its children and help them to discover their strength and promise. Somerset's funding has been used well; but as it diminishes so does our support to our students. Revenue that sustains and further develops Somerset's programs is critical to delivering the opportunities to learn that the children of Somerset need and deserve.