

BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN CONCEPT AND REALITY

**An Evaluation Report of Year One Implementation of the
Comprehensive Secondary School Reform Plan**

**Prepared for the Harford County Board of Education
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Executive Summary

On June 27, 2005, the Harford County Public Schools (HCPS) Board of Education approved the Comprehensive Secondary School Reform Plan (CSSRP) for preparation in the 2005-2006 school year, followed by implementation in the 2006-2007 school year. At the time of this action, the Board of Education set forth a set of “Parameters,” or key areas of the CSSRP implementation, on which they wished to be kept closely informed. Included in this document was the stipulation that the district hire an outside firm to “review and document the impact and range of outcomes resulting from the CSSRP.”

Leadership Capacity, Inc. (LCI), an external consulting group based in Howard County, Maryland, contracted with the Harford County Public Schools on August 15, 2007, to conduct a study and report to the Board of Education and administration on three primary areas of the CSSRP:

1. Develop surveys and focus group protocols to determine stakeholder groups’ satisfaction with the implementation of the seven core concepts of the CSSRP; conduct the surveys and analyze the results; and conduct the focus groups and analyze the results;
2. Review Harford County Public School data reports to the Board of Education on the implementation of the CSSRP over the course of the fall and winter, 2007-2008, to validate the results and identify implications for the implementation of the CSSRP;
3. Compile all findings from the satisfaction surveys, focus groups, and staff reports to produce a final report to the Board of Education on the first year impact of CSSRP on the students, staff, and families of the Harford County Public Schools.

The conclusions that the external reviewers reached regarding stakeholder perceptions of each CSSRP concept are based upon analysis of written surveys and focus group sessions conducted by LCI between November, 2007, and February, 2008. They are combined with an analysis of student achievement data conducted by the external review team and with the data that were gathered by LifeTrack Services from the class of 2007 graduates and supplied to the LCI team. The findings and

recommendations for each of the CSSRP concepts and of the CSSRP as a holistic reform effort follow. Concepts 2 and 4 both address the issue of “rigor,” and those recommendations are presented together.

Concept 1: Equalize credit offerings at all comprehensive high schools.

Findings: The 4-period block schedule that all schools were required to use to reach the goal of equalizing offerings was among the most contentious issues of the CSSRP. About 60% of the students, 2007 graduates, and school administrators, but only 44% of the parents, 38% of the school counselors, 33% of the teachers, and 28% of the supervisors and coordinators felt (by agreeing or strongly agreeing) that the 4-period schedule is the most appropriate way for students to earn as many credits as possible.

Findings: Less than one-quarter of the teachers, supervisors, and coordinators agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that students learn more in the 4-period schedule than in shorter periods. This can be contrasted with the finding that 55% of the students, a little over 40% of the 2007 graduates and the parents, and a little more than one-third of the counselors and administrators agreed or strongly agreed with this statement.

Findings: The 4-period block schedule did not *prevent* achievement from continuing to improve in Harford County Public Schools, as it had been increasing in many data points over the past several years. Countywide achievement rose in nine of 14 data-based areas in 2006-07, as measured by a variety of standardized assessments and by teachers’ final course grades. Student behavior also improved, as measured by office referrals and out-of-school suspensions. It is too soon to conclude whether the block schedule accelerated achievement over the long haul.

Findings: Student achievement increases or declines were not associated with any particular schedule. Achievement changes appeared to be more associated with reasons that were idiosyncratic to the characteristics of the assessments or to initiatives implemented in each school than to the 4-period block schedule.

Recommendations: The external review team recommends that the Harford County Public Schools continue to monitor the impact of the schedule and other school factors on student achievement as well as to identify and monitor at the district level several definitive data points that should be used in the future to determine the success of the schedule and other CSSRP initiatives.

Concept 2: Increase the graduation credit requirement to 26 credits for students who will graduate from Harford County Public Schools in 2010 and beyond.

Finding: Rigor is operationally defined in the CSSRP as the quantity of credits that students take and not the quality of instruction in classrooms.

Finding: Almost three-quarters of the school administrators, supervisors, and coordinators; more than one-half of the teachers and counselors; about one-third of the parents and the 2007 graduates, but only 17% of current students indicated their support of increasing credit requirements.

Concept 4: Require students, who will graduate in June 2010 and beyond, to earn a fourth year mathematics credit to receive a high school diploma from HCPS.

Finding: About three-quarters of school administrators and school counselors; a little over one-half of the teachers, parents, supervisors, and coordinators; about 44% of 2007 graduates; and 30% of the students agreed or strongly agreed with this statement in the survey.

Recommendations: The external review team recommends that the Harford County Public Schools reframe the dialogue on rigor away from the quantity of credits that students take and toward the academic intensity of instruction in classrooms. Additionally, we suggest that the district dedicate future professional learning community (PLC) activities and staff development to exploring ways that ongoing classroom instruction might incorporate increased rigor in all courses by raising the level of cognitive demand required in student work.

Concept 3: Organize schools into smaller learning communities to provide opportunities for students to spend their school day with a core group of students and adults.

Findings: Over 80% of the school administrators, coordinators, and supervisors; about three-quarters of the counselors and parents; and almost two-thirds of teachers, 2007 graduates, and students agreed or strongly agreed that having ninth grade students take most of their classes with other freshmen increases positive relationships with teachers and other students.

Recommendation: The external review team recommends that the Harford County Public Schools capitalize on this support and move quickly to implement all aspects of the smaller learning communities concept, particularly with ninth graders.

Findings: Only 7% of the teachers, 13% of the students, 17% of school counselors, 22% of parents, 24% of administrators, and 28% of supervisors and coordinators agreed or strongly agreed that the course Living in a Contemporary World helps students adjust to high school expectations. Slightly larger percentages of each group indicated that the course includes important information and skills for ninth graders to learn. These survey findings were supported in focus groups across stakeholder categories.

Recommendations: The external review team recommends that the Harford County Public Schools make Living in a Contemporary World a more worthwhile course by upgrading the curriculum, considering whether to reduce the length of the course, conducting embedded professional development for teachers throughout next school year, attaching the course to a specific and appropriate departmental “home,” and making the course a credit bearing graduation requirement.

Concept 5: Develop additional off-campus educational experiences including the utilization of the Internet, college courses, and e-learning.

Findings: Three-quarters of all stakeholder groups responded that they agreed or strongly agreed that high schools should develop additional work study and/or internship opportunities. Even larger percentages agreed that such experiences would provide students with meaningful learning opportunities well beyond the current curriculum offerings. These findings were supported by focus group responses.

Recommendations: The external review team recommends that the Harford County Public Schools capitalize on this support and move quickly to allocate appropriate staff and other resources as needed to fully implement this concept.

Concept 6: Create programmatic consistency and equitable opportunities in all high schools.

Findings: Every supervisor and coordinator and over 80% of all other groups indicated support for having approved curriculums for all Harford County high school courses.

Making the same courses available to all Harford County high school students received somewhat less support on the survey, ranging from a high of 83% approval from parents to a low of 48% from school counselors. Focus groups indicated concerns with programmatic consistency in relation to signature programs currently being implemented in some high schools.

Recommendations: The external review team recommends that the Harford County Public Schools continue the successful practice of only implementing approved curriculums and programs within established guidelines.

We also recommend that more information be provided system-wide about the relationship of signature programs to the concepts of programmatic consistency and equitable opportunities.

Concept 7: Create connected programs of study through career pathways that support quality preparation for a career based on student interests, ability, skills, and talents.

Findings: About 80% of the school administrators, supervisors, and coordinators; about two-thirds of the parents and students; and a little over one-half of the teachers and counselors agreed or strongly agreed that students should select a career pathway with specific courses to help them focus their high school program. Focus groups' findings suggested there was little awareness of these pathways among parents, teachers, and students and that there was a concern among many in these groups that 9th grade is too early for students to determine a career path.

Recommendations: The external review team recommends that the Harford County Public Schools continue to disseminate information about career pathways that will help students make productive personal choices. We recommend that this selection process be portrayed to students, teachers, and parents as an exploratory choice based on current interests and goals, rather than viewed as a long-term commitment, as many currently perceive it.

The CSSRP Process

Findings: Only 15% of the teachers; 18% of the parents; 24% of the counselors, supervisors, and coordinators; and 50% of the administrators indicated that they had opportunity for input prior to the implementation of the first year of the CSSRP. Just 10% of the teachers, 18% of the supervisors and coordinators, and 31% of the school counselors, but 59% of the school administrators said they had sufficient information to implement the program. Focus group findings indicated a strong sense among all stakeholder groups that their opinions were not taken into consideration and, furthermore, that the opportunities to gather input were perceived as attempts to create the appearance of consensus building.

Recommendations: Harford County Public Schools should engage in a countywide public engagement process designed to bridge the gap between the concepts of CSSRP and the reality of their implementation. This process should build on the numerous stakeholder strengths that exist in Harford County in order to identify collaboratively the best ways for Harford County high school students to obtain the increased high-level learning that all groups indicated they supported. This process should be facilitated by an outsider to Harford County with no agenda to promote. Participants should leave the sessions with the feeling that they have truly been heard and that their opinions and experiences matter.

Members of the external review team found the Harford County Public Schools and its stakeholders to be truly committed to achieving a top quality high school program that will equip all students for success in the 21st century. With stakeholders such as those who participated in this study, Harford County is well-positioned to achieve this important goal.

