

## **PART I: Introduction**

Harford County Public Schools' Comprehensive Secondary School Reform Plan (CSSRP) had its beginnings in 2002, when the system's secondary school principals examined key components of the district's Master Plan and identified potential actions to be taken in response to that plan. Foundational to their thinking was the 1996 document, *Breaking Ranks: Changing an American Institution*, published by the National Association of Secondary School Principals. The overarching theme of that report was that the high school of the 21<sup>st</sup> century must be ". . . more student centered, intellectually rigorous, and personalized in programs and support services."

The report of the principals' group was presented to the Board of Education (BOE) by the Director of Secondary Education in May, 2003. Because of the comprehensive nature of the changes proposed in that report, it was recommended that the BOE first consider the plan in individual pieces, rather than a whole document, and that it begin with consideration of general, foundational concepts, rather than specific recommendations. Once these concepts were approved, "representative groups" would then proceed with development of the detailed means by which each general concept might be addressed.

Ten concepts to guide the CSSRP process were approved by the BOE on October 13, 2003, seven of them pertaining to high schools and three to middle schools. The seven pertaining to the high schools, which are the focus of this study, are presented below. The format and wording -- but not the substance -- of the original concepts were modified by the administration on August 31, 2007, and it is this modified version that is presented here.

### Seven High School Concepts of Comprehensive Secondary School Reform Modified August 31, 2007

#### **1. Equalize credit offerings at all comprehensive high schools.**

- Students earn credit for each high school course they pass.
- Prior to CSSRP, some schools had a 7-period day, thus students earned 7 credits per year. Other schools had a 4-period day, where students earned 8 credits per year (following a semester or every-other-day schedule).
- All students now have the opportunity to earn 8 credits each year. Thus, they can take 32 credits throughout the four years of high school, instead of 28 [credits] as previously offered at some high schools.

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

- Currently, students must earn 21 high school credits to graduate.
- The current graduation credit requirement allows for excessive course failure and greatly diminishes the value of a student's senior year.
- HCPS students will have a more rigorous senior year and have the opportunity to increase their learning.

**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.**

- This "school within a school" fosters positive relationships and provides the support students need to learn.
- Ninth graders have seven required courses out of their eight course schedule. Thus, the freshman class [is] together for most of the day.
- Ninth grade students choose a "Career Cluster," in order to focus many of their remaining high school course offerings on a topic of interest, and attend classes with other students who have similar interests. These classes are taught by a core group of instructors who get to know the students well.

**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.**

- The 4<sup>th</sup> math credit will expand a student's current mathematics proficiency.
- A 4<sup>th</sup> math credit will more effectively prepare students for post-secondary educational opportunities.

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

- Online courses and courses on a college campus increase the range of course offerings available to all students.
- The use of technology not only engages students in a different and motivating format, but also allows for highly individualized methods of instruction and specific content delivery.

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

- All Harford County Public Schools' approved curriculums and programs are implemented within established guidelines.
- Programs and courses may vary from school to school due to student registration and availability and experience of staff.

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

- Students will become more interested in their own education when they have a choice in their field of study and perceive value and purpose to the courses they take.
- Improved motivation should have a corresponding positive effect on attendance, behavior, and achievement.

On June 27, 2005, the BOE approved the Comprehensive Secondary School Reform Plan (CSSRP) with preparation beginning in the 2005-2006 school year, followed by implementation in the 2006-2007 school year. At the time of this action, the BOE set forth in a separate document 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 would hire an outside firm to "review and document the impact and range of outcomes resulting from the CSSRP."

Subsequent to the approval of CSSRP, the BOE received multiple reports and updates from the administration. At the review update which took place on August 6, 2007, the report from the administration indicated that the plan for completing the Year 1 review of the CSSRP included the following:

- BOE will receive data reports on a variety of parameter elements during the fall, 2007 and the winter, 2008.
- External reviewers will receive data reports on a variety of parameter elements during the fall of 2007 and the winter of 2008.
- External reviewers will utilize surveys and focus group strategies aligned to the seven concepts of CSSRP to collect the opinions and perceptions of teachers, students, and parents regarding the following: schedule, 9<sup>th</sup> grade transition, 4<sup>th</sup> math credit requirement, staff development, and other outcomes.
- External reviewers will analyze the data collected provided by HCPS and the data collected through surveys and focus group sessions in relation to the seven elements of the CSSRP.
- External reviewers will provide the BOE with reports of progress and reports indicating ". . . the impact and range of outcomes resulting from CSSRP during the winter and spring of 2008."

It was these five elements that essentially defined the scope of the work for which LCI, the external reviewers, were contracted.

## **Leadership Capacity, Inc.**

LCI is a consulting and training group based in Columbia, MD. Its principals, who were primarily responsible for the conduct of this study, are:

Dr. Michael Hickey, President

Dr. Heather Fox, Associate

Dr. Ronald Thomas, Associate

For the focus group portion of this project, the qualitative analysis of data, and the writing of this report, the principals of LCI were joined by Dr. Kami Patrizio.

All are educators with a wide range of experiences in program evaluation, data analysis, and the change process. Their biographical statements are included in Appendix A of this report.

LCI submitted a proposal in response to HCPS' Request for Expression of Interest (REI) and was awarded the contract on August 15, 2007. The contract provided for a study and report to the BOE and the administration focusing on three primary areas:

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 HCPS data reports to the BOE 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 BOE on the first year impact of CSSRP on the students, staff, and families of the Harford County Public Schools.

It is these three elements, then, that form the basis for the report that follows.

## PART II: Study Methodology

This study considers data from four different sources:

- Written surveys of students, parents, teachers, school administrators, supervisors/coordinators, school counselors, and other instructional staff of the Harford County Public Schools that were developed and administered by LCI.
- A written survey of graduates of the class of 2007, conducted by LifeTrack Services, Inc.
- Focus groups, including members of these same stakeholder groups, conducted by LCI.
- Student achievement and other data obtained from the Maryland State Department of Education, the Harford County Public Schools, and the College Board.

### Written Surveys

The written surveys used with stakeholder groups were developed by the LCI team after reviewing a comprehensive set of documents from the initiation of discussion about CSSRP in 2002, up to current BOE briefings provided by the HCPS administration. Statements were generated for each of the seven concepts on which the program is based, with each statement focusing on a particular aspect of the CSSRP related to that concept. Appendix B contains the surveys that were administered to students groups, parent groups, teacher groups, and administrator/staff groups.

For example, Concept 1 is *Equalize credit offerings at all comprehensive high schools*. One of the statements in this section of the survey was, “The four-period schedule is the most appropriate way for high school students to earn as many credits as possible.” This statement appeared on all four versions of the survey. Respondents were asked to indicate whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement on a five point, Likert-type scale ranging from “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree,” with “Neutral” being the mid-point on the scale. A sixth choice, “Unable to Judge,” was also provided, in the event respondents felt they had no basis for making a judgment on the item in question.

While many of the statements were common across all four surveys, there were variations in others due to the need to reflect differences among responding groups. For example, the statement, *I feel prepared to teach effectively using the 4-period schedule*, appeared only on the teacher group survey for obvious reasons. Likewise, the statement, *My child has been able to take courses in Harford County that meet his/her interests and needs*, appeared only on the parent survey. See Question Comparability chart,

Appendix C. The number of statements on the surveys ranged from 27 to 29, in order to keep the completion time to 15-20 minutes.

Total countywide sample sizes of 2,000 each were used for the student and parent groups. When survey participants are identified at random, there is a total population of about 10,000 and it is assumed that the population is about 50/50 divided on most issues to be surveyed, polling experts have identified a final sample size of 370 responses to be the minimum necessary to obtain +/- 5% sampling error rate.<sup>1</sup> A total of 2,000 students and parents were chosen to be contacted to ensure that there was a final poll of at least 370 responses.

To increase the precision of measurement, stratified samples were identified.<sup>2</sup> Using the Harford County Public School computer database, random samples, roughly proportional to the student populations of the schools, were identified for both the parent and the student groups, while the teacher groups, counselors, administrators, and instructional support staff at each high school were surveyed in their entirety.

The sample sizes by school for each group are summarized on the table on the following page.

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<sup>1</sup> Salant, P., & Dillman, D.A. (1994). *How to conduct your own survey*. New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc.

<sup>2</sup> Sapsford, R. (2007). *Survey research*. London: SAGE Publications, p. 69.

**TABLE 1: POTENTIAL SAMPLE SIZES FOR WRITTEN SURVEYS**

SCHOOL	STUDENTS	PARENTS	TEACHERS	ADMIN/SUPPORT
Aberdeen	176	261	97	26
Alternative Education*			20	8
Bel Air	233	232	91	22
Edgewood	195	196	84	23
C. Milton Wright	292	292	102	25
Fallston	242	242	93	26
Havre de Grace	128	127	46	18
Harford Technical	176	175	71	16
Joppatowne	167	168	66	24
North Harford	231	233	84	26
Patterson Mill	73**	74	34	12
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1999</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>788</b>	<b>226</b>

\*Due to the transient nature of the students attending the Alternative Education program, it was decided to survey only the staff.

\*\*Grades 9 and 10 only in 2007-2008

Parents in the random sample received their surveys, a letter of explanation, and a prepaid return envelope via U.S. Mail in late October. Survey forms for the other three stakeholder groups were administered in each school during the school day by a representative of LCI during the period November 1-20, 2007.

The randomly selected students were brought to a designated room at the school, usually in groups ranging from 15 to 50, depending on how many groups the school established among the students in the sample. Most faculty surveys were administered by the LCI representative during a faculty meeting, and the instructional support group completed its survey at the same time. The administrator group usually completed its surveys in a separate session with the LCI representative, although some schools elected to complete theirs with the faculty group. In the case of all three school-based groups, individuals who were absent did not participate in the survey. However, if faculty members or administrators had to leave school early due to coaching or other responsibilities, they were permitted to complete their surveys at another time in the school day.

With the exception of the parent surveys, all completed forms were taken by the LCI representative for scanning. In the case of the parent surveys, all returns went to Harford County Public Schools' administrative offices where they were held – unopened – until LCI picked them up for scanning.

The following table indicates the number of surveys received from each stakeholder group, response rates, and the number of comments. The response rate for students and parents exceeded the 370 individuals needed to make judgments at the +/- 5% sampling error rate.<sup>3</sup>

**TABLE 2: RESPONSE RATES**

STAKEHOLDER GROUP	POTENTIAL NUMBER OF SURVEYS	NUMBER OF SURVEYS RECEIVED	RESPONSE RATE	NUMBER OF COMMENTS
Students	1,999	1,491	74.6%	348
Parents	2,000	602	30.1%	210
Teachers	788	688	87.3%	268
Administration/ Support Staff	226	150	66.49%	42
<b>Totals</b>	<b>5,013</b>	<b>2,931</b>	<b>58.5%</b>	<b>868</b>

### **Focus Groups**

The second data source used in this study was focus groups, members of which were randomly selected by Harford County Public Schools from among each of the stakeholder groups. The size of each sample invited to participate in the focus groups for each school was:

- Teachers – 20
- Parents – 50
- Students – 30
- School-based administrators – total group
- Central office high school instructional staff – total group
- School counselors – total group

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<sup>3</sup> McNamara, J.F. (1994). *Surveys and experiments in education research*. Lancaster, PA: Technomic Publishing Company, p. 3.

Parents and students who had completed written surveys were excluded from the focus group sample pool in order to afford a wider range of perspectives.

All the focus group sessions for each high school were conducted on the same day during the period from January 23 to February 15 by a team of two representatives of LCI, one of whom led the focus group while the other took detailed notes. Parent sessions were scheduled at 7 a.m. and 5 p.m., in order to afford parents the opportunity to participate either before going to work or on the way home. The other groups were scheduled throughout the school day, as determined by the school administration. Each focus group was planned for a 45 minute session, although a few did not require that much time, and some took slightly longer.

The questions for the focus groups were developed by the LCI team after a careful analysis of the descriptive statistics from the survey data, including the written comments which members of each respondent group had the option to add to their surveys.

Of the total 5,013 survey respondents, 868 chose to add comments. Most of the comments fell into consistent categories or themes within each of the sample groups. For example, one was very clearly the 4-period day; another was the 9<sup>th</sup> grade course, *Living in a Contemporary World*. The questions developed by LCI were derived from the major themes of the written comments, and the focus groups afforded reviewers the opportunity to probe for clarification or deeper detail about the key components of CSSRP. The questions used in the focus groups were of two types: questions relating to the substance of the CSSRP and questions relating to the process by which it is being implemented.

A semi-structured interview process was used. In this research model, questions are prepared prior to the session and they are used in the planned order. The interviewer has the discretion, however, to delete or add questions and to pursue additional information from the respondents as needed. The focus group protocols can be found in Appendix D of the evaluation report.

It is also important to note that all participants in each of the sample groups, whether in the survey or in the focus group process, were assured of the confidentiality and the anonymity of their responses. It is not the intent of this report to single out individuals, or specific groups within schools, in reporting these results. Rather, statements will generally be made about each group's results across the district as a whole, except in those cases where added detail is germane (e.g., noting differences in results from schools previously using the various schedules that existed in the district). LCI has sole possession of all the raw data from the surveys and the focus groups.

### **Class of 2007 Data**

A sample of 525 graduates of the class of 2007 responded to a survey administered by LifeTrack Services, Inc., of Clarkston, Washington. This survey used 18 of the same questions developed by LCI that were included on the survey of current Harford County students. Results were supplied to LCI in March, 2008.

### **School System Data**

The Harford County BOE received two major progress reports on CSSRP from the administration on September 17 and December 5, 2007. Copies of these reports were provided to LCI and the data were carefully reviewed and cross-checked with other sources, including the Maryland State Department of Education and the College Board. Particular attention was paid to the conclusions and implications of these data.