

PART IV: Conclusions and Recommendations

Leadership Capacity, Inc., was charged with:

1. Developing surveys and focus group protocols to determine stakeholder groups' satisfaction with the implementation of the seven core concepts of the CSSRP; conducting the surveys and analyzing the results; and conducting the focus groups and analyzing the results;
2. Reviewing Harford County Public Schools' 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. Compiling all findings from the attitude 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.

This final section of our report will summarize the conclusions that the external reviewers reached regarding stakeholder perception of each concept based upon analysis of the survey results and focus group summaries. These data will be combined with an analysis of student achievement data conducted by the external review team (discussed in this section under Concept 1) and with the data gathered by LifeTrack Services from the class of 2007 graduates that were supplied to the LCI team.

Concepts 2 and 4 both relate to rigor and will be considered together. A final section will focus on overall understanding of the rationale and underpinnings of the CSSRP and the process of its implementation in the Harford County Public Schools. We will conclude each section with some possible next steps for the school system's consideration.

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

The concept of equalization

Issues associated with this concept revolved around the move to a consistent, countywide schedule in which students in all high schools have the opportunity to earn eight credits per year for a total of 32 credits through their four years of high school. About four of five administrators, supervisors, and coordinators; a little more than two-thirds of the parents and counselors; a little less than two-thirds of last year's graduates; well over one-half of the teachers; and less than one-half of the students agreed or strongly agreed with this concept.

Implementation of the concept through a consistent schedule

The specific type of 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 four-period schedule is the most appropriate way for students to earn as many credits as possible.

Generally, in the focus group discussions, teachers were split – depending on the location of their school – on whether the schedule needed to be consistent across the county. Typically, personnel from schools along the Route 40 corridor, where there is a higher degree of mobility, favored a consistent schedule to facilitate student transfers. Staff from schools in other parts of the county did not see the need for a consistent schedule because they pointed to only a handful of transfers each year into or out of their schools.

Type of schedule used

Most teachers in every school indicated in the focus group sessions that they wanted to return to the previous schedule that their school had used, regardless of which one of the five schedules that happened to be. Teachers in schools that had to make major adjustments to their instructional delivery (such as those in schools previously using a 7-period schedule) usually named a myriad of objections to the block schedule. Teachers in schools that had previously followed a block schedule usually saw it as valuable.

Except for teachers in schools that had used the longer periods before 2006-2007, most other teachers argued that 82 minutes is too long for instruction to be effective for high school students. By the same token, most teachers in the previous 7-period schools felt that 45-50 minutes was too short. There was a significant amount of interest expressed by teachers, students, and parents from all schools in a schedule with 60-minute periods.

Students' comments on the current schedule were more nuanced than teachers. A majority of students had both positive and negative remarks to make, indicating that the success of the schedule very much depended on the individual teacher. According to students, some teachers used the longer time quite effectively to engage students in a variety of worthwhile activities (including cooperative learning, problem solving,

experiments, physical activity, or art work) that needed an extended period to be completed. Students indicated that they are now learning more in these courses.

Students contrasted this experience with other teachers who lectured or had the students write the entire period, day after day. These lessons were characterized by students as “boring” or “dull” and not learning experiences for them. In most cases, parent comments on the schedule in the focus group discussions reflected the experiences of their children.

Student learning under the consistent schedule in 2006-2007

Less than one-quarter (22%) 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 over one-half (55%) of the students, a little over 40% of the 2007 graduates and the parents, and a little more than one-third (about 38%) of the counselors and administrators agreed or strongly agreed with this statement.

Respondents – particularly teachers – frequently mentioned that no research-based local, state, or national evidence was shared with them regarding the schedule and instead, they sometimes cited hearsay about “research” they had never seen or analyzed and/or misquoted existing research. Some mentioned that, when they inquired about research, they were “told there was ‘lots of research,’ but it was never given” to them.

A major point made by a vast majority of the teachers in the focus group interviews was that students are learning less of their curriculum under the countywide 4-period per day schedule. This contention was not borne out by an analysis conducted by the external review team of available student achievement data for 2006-07. Countywide achievement rose in 9 of 14 data-based areas as measured by both a variety of standardized assessments and teachers’ grades. Student behavior also improved, as measured by office referrals and out-of-school suspensions.

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 assessment or to initiatives implemented in each school than to the consistent, countywide schedule. Examples might be the requirement that all students from the class of 2009 and beyond must pass the HSAs to graduate and the aggressive HSA intervention programs put in place in different ways by each high school.

The overall preliminary conclusion of the external evaluation team, using only one year's worth of data, is that the consistent, countywide schedule did not keep achievement from continuing to improve in Harford County Schools, as it had been increasing in many data points over the past several years. It is too soon to conclude whether the block schedule accelerated achievement over the long haul.

Recommendation

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, particularly regarding high stakes assessments such as the High School Assessments, SAT, and Advanced Placement tests.

We believe that the first step in this process is to help all stakeholders understand that there is no perfect high school schedule. All schedules require trade-offs, and these pros and cons should be fully explained to all stakeholders prior to implementation of any schedule modification. While administrators will always bear the burden of developing master schedules, some schools have found it helpful to involve representative teachers in the process as much as possible. These teachers become information sources and are able to explain to the rest of the faculty the parameters that have to be followed to make a complicated schedule work and why key decisions were made.

Another essential step is to identify at the district level several definitive data points that will be used to determine the success of individual CSSRP initiatives such as the countywide schedule. Then, "let the data speak" to determine success. While the perceptions of stakeholders are certainly important, we believe that student achievement, based on the triangulation of data from multiple data sources, should be the primary metric by which success should be measured.

If data indicate drops in achievement that could be attributable to the alternate A/B schedule, the school system should permit individual schools to adjust the schedule *as needed at strategic points*. For example, schools should be able to meet the unique needs of their students by scheduling additional classes that meet every day, adding half-year classes, or using shorter periods or mods for short-term remediation.

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

Our study found significant differences of opinion on this concept. 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 support of this concept by agreeing or strongly agreeing in the written survey.

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.

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.

Both concepts 2 and 4 relate directly to the rigor of the instructional program. In focus group sessions, parents, teachers, and administrators agreed that “rigor” is defined by the CSSRP as the quantity of credits that students take and not the quality of instruction in classrooms.

Generally speaking, respondents from all groups indicated that the additional math requirement was unnecessary because students who needed it “would take it regardless of whether it was required or not.” To many, this requirement was seen as “setting students up for failure” and not taking into consideration the developmental needs and learning goals of all secondary school learners.

Stakeholders generally felt that, while there was a “need for minimum requirements,” there was also a need to include more meaningful electives that allowed students to meet those requirements. These concepts of CSSRP were seen by many to be “well founded” but their implementation “not realistic” for all of the stakeholders in all 10 Harford County high schools.

Recommendation

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 and quality of instruction in classrooms.

We suggest that the district dedicate future professional learning community (PLC) work and staff development to exploring ways that ongoing classroom instruction might incorporate increased rigor in all courses by raising the level of cognitive demand. This might involve teachers in professional readings, lesson study, and structured inquiry into effective ways to engage students regularly in analysis, synthesis, and evaluation; in problem solving in predictable and unpredictable

situations; and in more critical thinking in their content area. Involving students actively in additional high-level instructional activities will not only increase course rigor, but it will also go a long way toward reducing restlessness and boredom that teachers and students indicated were in evidence in some classrooms using the longer schedule.

The issue of additional credits for graduation might become part of a more global consensus-development dialogue process proposed in a later part of this section.

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.

Small learning communities

This concept was supported by a majority of all stakeholder groups. 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 responded that they agreed or strongly agreed that having 9th grade students take most of their classes with other freshmen increases positive relationships with teachers and other students.

Because of the overwhelmingly positive support found in the written surveys and the desire to keep focus group sessions to 45-50 minutes in length, questions on this topic were not part of the protocol. However, when asked at the end of the focus group sessions if participants had any additional components of the CSSPR that they wanted to share with the team, no group brought up the subject of small learning communities, indicating what may be a lack of information regarding it.

Recommendation

The external review team recommends that the Harford County Public Schools capitalize on this support and move quickly to implement the smaller learning communities concept, particularly with 9th graders.

Living in a Contemporary World

One component of Concept 3 was extremely problematic in the eyes of every stakeholder group: implementation of the 9th grade transition course Living in a Contemporary World. 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 this course helps students adjust to high school expectations. Slightly larger percentages of each group indicated that the course includes important information and skills for 9th graders to learn.

In group discussions, the course was portrayed by stakeholders as lacking appropriate resources and sufficient professional development as well as having goals and instructional activities that were inappropriate for 9th grade students' developmental needs. Many teachers, students, and parents called it a "waste of time."

Comments from all groups reflected two apparently opposite perspectives on the course's curriculum. Some content – such as note taking and organization skills – was perceived to have been studied (or should be studied) in elementary and middle school or to be content that could be acquired in a short period of time. Other course content – such as income taxes, the stock market, how to balance a checkbook, and how to write a resume – was indicated by stakeholders as more appropriate for juniors and seniors about to enter the workforce, at least on a part-time basis.

Focus group discussions and Harford County Public School data noted that teachers from many subject areas were assigned to teach the course "to fill out their schedules," and many did not attend professional development sessions that were offered. Only a few situations were described, primarily by students, of cases in which the course was effective because it was taught by a teacher who had the time, interest, content knowledge, and resources to invest in the class.

Recommendation

The external review team recommends that the Harford County Public Schools make Living in a Contemporary World a more worthwhile course and one that will be perceived by stakeholders as a valuable use of scarce instructional time by:

- Reviewing the course curriculum to ensure that the content is the most needed by 9th graders to be successful in high school and beyond;
- Considering whether course content would be more effectively delivered in a much shorter time frame, as many stakeholders have suggested;
- Conducting required professional development sessions for all teachers of the course prior to next school year;
- Structuring ongoing sessions in which teachers of the course can share best practices and successful strategies throughout the year, perhaps using the professional learning community (PLC) framework;
- Identifying the most appropriate departmental "home" for the course and making it a part of that department's instructional scope and sequence;

- Awarding high school credit for the course and requiring that students pass the course to graduate.

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

Questions relating to this concept on the written survey received overwhelming support. For example, about 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.

Recommendation

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 may be needed to begin to implement this concept.

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

Every supervisor and coordinator and over 80% of all other groups responding to the survey indicated support for all Harford County high school courses being taught from approved curriculums.

All Harford County high school students having the same courses available to them received much more lukewarm support on the survey, ranging from a high of 83% responses of agree or strongly agree by parents to a low of 48% support from school counselors.

There were some concerns raised in focus group interviews about the apparent misalignment between creating programmatic consistency, as called for in this concept, and signature programs being implemented or planned in select high schools.

Recommendation

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 concept 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.

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.

A sizable number of respondents made comments in focus groups indicating that accurate specifics about career pathways are not widely known among students, teachers, or parents. Other participants suggested that, in their opinion, 9th grade was too early in students' development to make a career cluster decision, while still others indicated that they knew of students for whom the selection had been useful in focusing their high school programs of study. Some administrators and teachers expressed concerns about the cluster concept from a programmatic and resource standpoint, indicating that many schools do not have the teachers or resources to teach enough electives to support multiple career pathways.

Recommendation

The external review team recommends that the Harford County Public Schools continue to disseminate information about career pathways that will help students make worthwhile choices. We recommend that this selection process be portrayed to students, teachers, and parents as an exploratory choice based on current interests and goals, not a long-term commitment, as it appears to be currently perceived by many.

Understanding of the underpinnings of the CSSRP

Only a very small minority of any stakeholder group, other than administrators, supervisors, and coordinators, was able to articulate sound, educational reasons for the CSSRP reforms. A very few teachers in one or two schools made vague references to studying as a faculty the National Association of Secondary School Principals' report , *Breaking Ranks: Changing an American Institution*, and its overarching theme that the high school of the 21st century must be “. . . more student centered, intellectually rigorous, and personalized in programs and support services.” Otherwise, no group gave substantive reasons for why their school was undertaking these changes.

The overwhelming number of parent, teacher, and administrator responses indicated to the external reviewers that the CSRRP is little understood as a comprehensive secondary school reform effort. Rather, it is perceived as a disjointed series of specific district actions, mostly centering on the shift to the block schedule, the four credit math requirement, and, to a lesser extent, the career pathways program. The other components, such as small learning communities and increased opportunities for students, appear to be only on the radar screen of a very few people, mostly counselors and administrators.

No participant at any point articulated connections among the seven CSSRP principles, nor was any participant ever able to articulate specific research or empirical data that were used to support the decision to adopt or inform the implementation of CSSRP.

Involvement in CSSRP process

According to survey responses, there was very unequal participation in the pre-adoption process for the CSSRP reforms across schools and stakeholder groups. 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, 31% of the school counselors, and 59% of the school administrators said they had sufficient information to implement the program.

Only school principals could identify in the focus group sessions any specific ways that they were involved in decision making prior to adopting the reforms. Teachers seemed largely unaware of any CSSRP pre-adoption discussions and felt that “there wasn’t extensive classroom teacher involvement” in the CSSRP development process. Some teachers mentioned awareness of a district-level committee that was addressing secondary school reform, but no respondents other than principals were clear about how or when this team was created. A few participants also mentioned open forums that addressed secondary school reform, but again, when prompted, offered few specifics.

Administrators had slightly more specific memories of the evolution of the CSSRP. They mentioned a meeting “where it [CSSRP] was originally proposed a few years ago by a number of principals at a principals’ meeting” and said that they had been “asked for quite a bit of input” prior to the adoption. No parent respondents mentioned any involvement in CSSRP prior to the adoption.

A significant number of stakeholders perceived the process to be closed with predetermined outcomes, regardless of the input that was received. There was a strong sense among all groups (but particularly teachers) that stakeholder opinions were not taken into consideration as well as the perception that opportunities to collect them were not true attempts at consensus building. “It was a done deal” was heard over and over again from many faculty members and some administrators.

Preparation for and evaluation of the CSSRP

Teachers and administrators varied widely in their perceptions of how well schools were prepared to implement CSSRP. The majority of teacher participants indicated that there had been no preparation for the CSSRP. A small number of teachers from fewer than half of the high schools mentioned professional development activities that involved modifying curriculum to the block schedule. A few respondents at each school also remembered engaging in a district survey about CSSRP, the existence of “teacher study teams” that were focused on best secondary scheduling practices, visiting other schools already using the block schedule, and the survey that was conducted by the external review team in the fall of 2007.

Most administrators were able to articulate efforts that had been made to prepare teachers in general terms (“departments were given time for that”; “teachers worked on curriculum”), but only a few identified specific professional development *activities* (such as a book study group, a specific faculty discussion, or structured lesson studies) that had taken place at their school. Financial support for implementation emerged as a consideration in this regard. There also was the perception that countywide professional development focused on topics other than the CSSRP.

Finally, there was no indication that stakeholders are engaged in an ongoing process of evaluation of the CSSRP program.

Recommendation

The external review team recommends that the Harford County Public Schools begin to bridge the gap between concept and reality by conducting an extensive staff and public engagement process to build on several positive factors observed by the external reviewers, including:

- The expressed commitment of each stakeholder group to continual improvement with the best interests of students at heart;
- The recent experiences of the Harford County Public Schools in the effective use of professional learning communities to identify best practices;

- Student achievement increases that were evident on many data points over the past several years;
- The conceptualization of the CSSRP by the administration as a “work in progress” and the willingness to modify processes and schedules to meet student needs;
- Overall support at the conceptual level for key components of the CSSRP.

This countywide engagement process – that would best be facilitated by an outsider to the Harford County school system with no agenda to promote – might lead stakeholders in a full review, in the spirit of collective inquiry, of the vast literature on high school reform. The purpose of the wide-scale process would not be to convince stakeholders that a particular schedule should be used or that a certain requirement needs to be put in place, but 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. Participants should leave the sessions with the feeling that they have truly been heard and that their opinions and experiences matter.

Conclusion

Members of the external review team wish to thank the stakeholders of the Harford County Public Schools for their warm hospitality and active participation in this study. We felt welcome in every school that we visited and were impressed with the honesty and openness of the parents, students, and staff. We found Harford County 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 the ones we heard from, Harford County is well-positioned to achieve this important goal.