

CHAPTER IV: HOW MIGHT WE PROVIDE IT?

In the previous chapter, it was shown that the programs of the HCPSS rest on the foundation of two main goals—rigorous performance standards and essential curriculum based on state requirements and local needs; and, a safe and nurturing environment in which to teach and learn. Building on the foundation established in the school system’s 1994 strategic plan, the two main goals are reinforced by three core values:

- A focus on rigorous instruction
- A focus on partnerships
- A focus on continuous improvement.

INSTRUCTION

The Howard County Public School System is committed to ensuring that each student meets or exceeds rigorous performance and achievement standards. To that end, the school system develops and implements curriculum and assessments that are relevant and challenging, hires the most qualified, dedicated teachers and staff, and pledges the highest level of institutional accessibility and accountability.

Essential Curriculum and School Safety

The paramount importance of the development and implementation of essential curriculum in the instruction of students was discussed above in Chapter III. The primacy of school safety and environment was also discussed there. But, there is more to instructional improvement.

Extended-day, -week, and -year Instruction

HCPSS recognized very early that disaggregated student achievement data showed serious discrepancies—“gaps”—in the differential performance of various student groups. One of the major targets of the school system is to eliminate all such gaps by 2007.

Toward that end, a report titled *Report of the Academic Intervention Task Force* was presented to the Howard County Board of Education on March 20, 2001. (Refer to Appendix A.) This report acknowledged the performance gaps among various groups of students in Howard County, particularly in reading and mathematics, and suggested the research-based strategy of providing before- and after-school programs, as well as extended-week and -year programs, for under-performing students. Those programs commenced in 2001 and continue to the present:

- A before/after-school elementary tutoring program in reading
- A summer full-day prekindergarten program

- A summer-school reading intervention program (Grades 1-5)
- A before- or after-school elementary mathematics tutoring program
- A parent education program in Family Math™
- A summer-school mathematics intervention program (Grades 1-5)
- An after-school reading support program for identified students in middle school
- A summer-school reading program for below-grade-level students between Grades 6 and 7 and Grades 7 and 8
- A summer-school writing program for below-grade-level students between Grades 7 and 8
- An after-school mathematics support program for identified students in middle school
- A summer-school “Fundamentals of Mathematics” program for students between Grades 5 and 6
- A summer-school mathematics program for below-grade-level students between Grades 6 and 7 and Grades 7 and 8
- An after-school writing program for high school students who have not passed the Maryland Writing Test (MWT)
- A summer school reading program for students between Grades 8 and 9 who have not passed the Maryland Functional Reading Test (MFRT) and are below grade level in reading
- A summer-school program for students who have not passed the required high school English assessment
- A summer-school writing program between grades 8 and 9 who have not passed the MWT
- A summer-school mathematics program between grades 8 and 9 for students who have not passed the Maryland Functional Math Test (MFMT)
- A summer-school math program for students who have not passed the required high school assessment in mathematics.

Though costly, these after-school and extended-school-year programs are regarded by the HCPSS as essential to the goal of eliminating achievement gaps by 2007. It is hoped that local operating funds for this purpose will be supplemented by an expanded measure of state and federal funds in the future.

PARTNERSHIPS

There is great power in partnering for a purpose. Research shows that school systems are more apt to realize their goals when they engage the public in sharing responsibility for school improvement. The HCPSS is committed to creating an environment in which partnerships among students, staff, families, and community members are highly valued and strongly supported. By coming together in partnerships, around the questions of what we want for our children and how we might accomplish it, we are not only empowered to serve the needs of today’s children more thoroughly, but also to ensure the quality of our community’s future.

The HCPSS’s strategic public relations program is guided by the following beliefs:

- Effective public engagement is essential to creating an environment in which students, staff, families, and community members participate and contribute.
- Communication is a primary function of leadership and a responsibility of all employees.
- Well-informed employees and citizens are effective ambassadors for developing broad community support.
- Open, two-way communication is critical to maintaining our public relationships.
- Accurate, understandable and timely communication is essential to the decision-making processes of the school system.
- Using a variety of sources and strategies enhances the school system's ability to communicate effectively and thoroughly.
- Public relations and communications strategies must be explicitly linked to the mission and goals of the school system.

As the HCPSS looks to enhance relationships with its various publics, it is critical that decision makers recognize and acknowledge that the public is no longer content to just understand organizational goals and decisions. They are demanding a different level of “engagement” in decision-making processes. They are no longer satisfied with “what” was decided, they want to know “how” the decision was arrived at. In some cases, they are interested in taking part in the “how.” Publics want status as substantive partners.

To address this sociological shift, the HCPSS employs a strategy that has been coined “public engagement.” Public engagement emphasizes building trust and delivering on promises. Its effectiveness is measured not by how many community members come to a public meeting but rather by how well the school system and individual schools connect their work to the priorities of the community. To this end, the HCPSS has identified an extensive list of individuals and groups who are stakeholders in education and uses numerous identified strategies to elicit the desired behaviors from each of the groups. Five major stakeholder groups have been identified along with subgroups of each. The list was not intended to be all-inclusive, and subgroups are added based on identified needs.

All Parents/Guardians (includes all grade levels)

- PTA and non-PTA members
- Extended family (grandparents, etc.)
- New immigrants
- Parents of children with special needs
- Non-English speaking parents
- Economically disadvantaged parents
- Preschool
- Parents as volunteers

All Students

- All levels (involved and uninvolved in traditional ways)
- By special programs (ESOL, Tech Magnet, Special Education, et cetera.)

All Staff

- Teachers
- Administrators
- Central Office Staff
- Support Staff
- Retired Teachers

Local Government Officials

- County Council
- Howard County Delegation
- County Executive
- County Administrators

Community Leaders (includes representatives of the following)

- Business (Chamber of Commerce, Educational Partnerships, realtors, et cetera.)
- Organizations and Associations (PTAC, CAC, NAACP, Rotaries, AA Coalition, Columbia Association, et cetera.)
- Local Education Institutions (preschools, HCC, et cetera.)
- Religious Institutions

Keeping employees involved and informed is necessary to any organization's success. For this reason, the HCPSS has identified school system employees as an important public and has targeted a number of strategies to enhance employee's public relations skills as a critical first step in building positive relationships with the school system's external publics.

Communication and Stakeholder Engagement in Support of the School System's Strategic Goals

Communication and public engagement activities are ongoing and support all programs and initiatives of the school system. Individual communications plans are developed as needed for large-scale initiative such as the *Comprehensive Plan for Accelerated School Improvement* and the implementation of recent kindergarten initiatives.

The HCPSS's *Comprehensive Plan for Accelerated School Improvement* calls for all members of the school community and the greater community to take responsibility for supporting and implementing the achievement acceleration process. In support of that goal, a communications and public engagement plan was implemented to develop understanding of and support for the *Comprehensive Plan* by accomplishing the following objectives:

- All school system staff members will have a basic awareness and understanding of the *Comprehensive Plan for Accelerated School Improvement*.
- Roles will be defined for all stakeholder groups and opportunities for communication and stakeholder engagement will be provided.
- All support materials will incorporate key messages and all communication and public engagement activities will have defined objectives.

In support of the school system's second strategic goal, the HCPSS's Safe School Action Plan identifies a number of strategies designed to engage families and community members in fostering public schools that are safe and nurturing learning environments. Of those, the following strategies directly relate to communication and the engagement of stakeholders:

- Students will receive information on reporting procedures for Board of Education policies on harassment, discrimination and violence in an age appropriate manner.
- As part of the of the School Improvement Plan, each school will identify a school-wide discipline approach that includes positive behavioral interventions and supports for all students. Methods or strategies to communicate the approach to students, staff and parents will also be incorporated into the School Improvement Plan.
- The Student Support Teams and Instructional Intervention programs will be utilized to identify causes of disruptive behaviors and create intervention plans to appropriately address the behavior before it reaches suspension level.
- The system will establish and maintain strong alliances with the home following initial disciplinary referrals in order to continue to provide an additional avenue of communication and unified effort with the home to correct behaviors that lead to suspension.
- The School Improvement Planning Survey (student version) will be administered in Spring 2003 in order to identify areas for continuous improvement related to respectful and supportive relationships at the school level.
- Annual information sessions on policies related to "safe schools" are required for all employees.
- Upon hiring, new employees receive information packets and reference materials on all policies affecting a "safe school" environment.
- A variety of methods will be used to inform parents and the community of Board of Education policies related to Goals 2. Information will be disseminated through methods identified in the community outreach plan of the Public Information Office. This includes outreach efforts to community organizations, clubs and houses of worship.
- By Spring 2003 information contained in the HCPSS Calendar Handbook will be translated into four languages used by the majority of the school system's non-English speaking parents (Chinese, Korean, Spanish, and Urdu).
- Demographics of the Howard County community will be considered when appointing parents and/or community members to system level or school-based committees or action teams.

- By 2004 the Howard County Public School System will increase the number of materials translated into the four identified languages.
- By Fall 2003 the School Improvement Survey (parent version) will collect information from parents at each school and at all grade levels for use in school improvement planning.

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Even the best can get better. That is the rationale for adopting a philosophy of continuous improvement—a commitment to be better today than yesterday so that the school system might be even better tomorrow. This approach requires the gathering of critical data in Key Results Areas. These data provide a means by which to evaluate areas of strength or weakness, a means by which to move the district and each school toward the goal of all students achieving. The Key Results Areas will be discussed more thoroughly in Chapter VI. Here, in this chapter, the main strategies by which the HCPSS seeks to foster continuous improvement for students, in particular, and for schools, in general, are elucidated.

School Improvement Teams

In connection with the Maryland School Performance Assessment Program (MSPAP), school systems in Maryland formed local school teams that guided and monitored school performance, teams known as School Improvement Teams (SITs), comprise school leaders, teachers, students and parents. Howard County has followed this pattern.

In the HCPSS, School Improvement Teams (SITs) monitor student achievement at the school level. The SIT is charged with developing a school improvement plan that serves as a tool for monitoring school progress, appropriately adjusting instruction, and delineating responsibility for implementation. Each school's plan is reviewed and monitored by the Assistant Superintendent for School Administration and the Administrative Directors. The Chief Academic Officer reviews and approves the plans of designated low-performing schools. SIT membership includes school staff and representatives from the broader school community, including the school's business partners and the PTA, and reflects the school's diversity to the greatest extent possible. SIT members are responsible for communicating school improvement goals and decisions to the staff and community.

Comprehensive Plan for Accelerated School Improvement

Over the last ten years, the enrollment and demographics of the school system have been rapidly changing. This phenomenon has presented a challenge to educators. Recent

results indicate processes that once worked well for the majority of students have proven insufficient for the growing number of students from diverse backgrounds. Student achievement gaps have continued to widen. Therefore, the system must adjust its approach to affect student results in a positive way.

The HCPSS *Comprehensive Plan for Accelerated School Improvement*, launched in March 2002, sets world-class standards for the Howard County Public School System. (Refer to Appendix B for the complete plan.) The plan supports the system's commitment to educate its entire student population, one child at a time, and to prepare students for the world of work and post-secondary education. The intent of the plan is to accelerate breakthrough improvement in student achievement for all student groups. It is designed to increase the achievement of students performing on or above grade level while accelerating the achievement of students performing below grade level:

The HCPSS goal is for each school to meet state standards by the year 2005 and to eliminate all achievement gaps by ensuring that all student subgroups meet state standards by 2007.

FOR ALL SCHOOLS...

This approach differs from past practice in several ways:

- Specific achievement targets have been set.
- School improvement planning will be multi-year.
- Central office and school level instructional leaders will serve on the School Improvement Teams in designated low-performing schools.
- The instructional focus is on acceleration versus remediation.
- All student performance will be measured against state standards.

The *Comprehensive Plan for Accelerated School Improvement* includes the following components for all schools:

Student Support Plans for Acceleration — Individual Student Support Plans (SSPs) that outline strategies for accelerating academic progress are required for all students in Grades 1-12 who are performing below grade level in reading and mathematics.

Exemplary Instructional Models — Teachers use research-based instructional practices to address the personal, cognitive, and social development of students.

Extended-Day, -Week, and -Year Programs — To accelerate achievement across the system, more time on task is provided for students performing below grade level.

Data-driven Decision-Making — The school improvement process is designed to focus on the Key Results Area of Student Performance and the related indicators. Data-driven decision-making at the system, school, and classroom level is enhanced and encouraged through the systemic use of these indicators.

Electronic Learning Community — Intra-net technology is used to enhance professional development and communication between and among educators, and provide quick access to curriculum and assessment information.

Professional Development — Professional development for school-based staff is extensive, targeted, and job-embedded. Focused leadership training will be provided for current and aspiring administrators, instructional leaders, and team leaders.

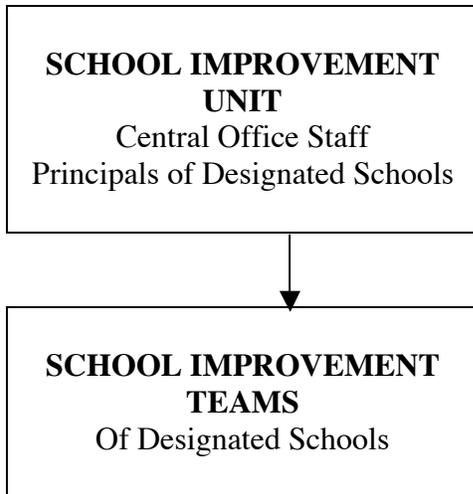
Family and Community Involvement — All members of the school community and the greater community are expected to take responsibility for supporting the achievement acceleration process. A designated group of community organizations and businesses will be invited to join a AAA Investors' Network, whose members will identify ways they can engage with the school system in four investment areas: recruitment, retention and renewal of school personnel; high level educational experiences for all students; quality preschool experiences for all students; and, academic interventions for students performing below grade level.

School Improvement Unit

Some Howard County schools have experienced great difficulty in increasing student performance. Based on specific selection criteria, 15 schools have been designated for special interventions and support.

In addition to School Improvement Teams, the School Improvement Unit (SIU) was created to address the needs of designated low-performing schools. The SIU is composed of staff from the Division of Curriculum, Instruction, and Administration, who identify and coordinate academic interventions to provide those schools with the capacity to improve teaching and learning and ultimately accelerate student achievement. State assessment data, as well as other measures, are used to set targets for improvement for those designated schools. On average it takes elementary schools three years, middle schools three to five years, and high schools five years to achieve substantial and sustained improvement, so multi-year targets are established. Targets for improvement are determined by the principal in collaboration with the School Improvement Unit. Principals of designated schools report directly to the Chief Academic Officer for issues related to student performance until data show substantial and sustained improvement.





It is the first goal of the school system to see that all students meet or exceed rigorous standards for student achievement. The system cannot reach this goal unless all students—regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, disability, or socioeconomic status—are successful. Furthermore, all members of the school community—students, educators, parents, and the greater community—must take responsibility for supporting and implementing the acceleration process. The *Comprehensive Plan for Accelerated School Improvement* represents the Howard County Public School System’s commitment to focusing energy, talent, and resources toward the goal of all children achieving.

It is noteworthy that a second report to the Howard County Board of Education on December 12, 2002, titled *Differentiated Service Delivery Model* (refer to Appendix C), was derived from the *Comprehensive Plan for Accelerated School Improvement* (Appendix B), and provided a plan for the targeted deployment of school and central office staff to under-performing schools, while maintaining basic services to the remaining schools. Initial results of this staffing plan appear promising and the plan will be continued well into the future.

So it is that the major core values of the HCPSS—rigorous instruction (and the elimination of discrepancies in the performance of various student groups); community partnerships; and the principle of continuous improvement—provide the methodology for the accomplishment of the HCPSS’ two major goals: rigorous academic standards, and a nurturing, safe school environment.

In Chapters V and VI, specific objectives and annual strategies, which are derived from the goals and core values of the school system, will be presented.