

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

General Information

The Howard County School System is a suburban school system situated about halfway between Washington, D.C. and Baltimore, Maryland. The system comprises 68 regular schools (38 elementary, 19 middle, and 11 high) and two special schools (Cedar Lane School for profoundly handicapped students and Homewood School for alternative education programs). The school system educates over 46,000 students, and was academically ranked first in the state for nine of the past eleven years based on the Maryland State Performance Assessment Program (MSPAP). More than 85 percent of Howard County graduates pursue post-secondary education beyond high school and nearly 60 percent attend four-year colleges and universities. Attendance rates are high (Grades 1-5, 96.2 percent; Grades 6-8, 95.4 percent; Grades 9-12, 95.0 percent) and dropout rates are low (1.86 percent). Per pupil expenditures are high for the state (\$8,311 in 2002) and student/ teacher ratios are low (Kindergarten, 1:22; Grades 1-2, 1:19; Grades 3-5, 1:25; Grades 6-8, 1:20.5; Grades 9-12, 1:23.5). Forty-four (44) percent of high school students participate in at least one Gifted and Talented course. School Year 2002 had 16 National Merit finalists. Latest SAT combined scores were 1,084 (verbal, 534; mathematics, 550), and overall CTBS scores were at the 75th percentile nationally, 25 points above the national norm (50th percentile).

The 3824 teachers in the school system are well trained. Over 55 percent hold Master's degree and have taught in Howard County for an average of 8.9 years. They have an average of 11.8 years of teaching experience.

Historical Overview of School Improvement Efforts

School improvement must be at the core of all educational efforts at the federal, state, and local levels and, indeed, Howard County and the State of Maryland have been in the forefront of national school improvement. With the introduction of the Maryland School Performance Assessment Program (MSPAP), Howard County student assessment data in grades K-8 increasingly indicated not only general deficiencies in reading and mathematics in the tested grades, but also disturbing patterns of student performance in relation to ethnic and racial minorities, gender, and economic status. As disaggregated data have become increasingly available, the gaps in performance between majority and minority students are all the more glaring and persistent, despite numerous statewide efforts to close the gaps. Although the performance of Howard County students on MSPAP had been at or near the top of state scores, the disparities among the various groups of students were still disturbing.

In December 1997, the Maryland State Board of Education authorized the development of exit exams (and the concurrent development of content standards) in core content areas as part of a new high school improvement program, designed to extend the K-8 assessment program that comprised MSPAP. By approving the high school assessments,

the State Board realized it had set new standards of responsibility, equity, and accountability and, thus, had created a new imperative for monitoring individual student progress that would require a comprehensive program of prevention and early intervention. [More recently, MSPAP itself has been reconstituted as the Maryland School Assessment (MSA) program, owing to concerns that its predecessor, MSPAP, did not assess individual student progress adequately, as required by federal legislation.]

In January 1998, the State Board adopted a resolution calling for the Maryland State Department of Education to put in place for the 1999-2000 school year a comprehensive K-12 program of intervention assistance for students not succeeding in reading or mathematics or in one of the tested content areas. In response to this resolution, the Maryland State Department of Education developed *Every Child Achieving: A Plan for Meeting the Needs of the Individual Learner*. The plan recommends strategies to prevent student failure through academic intervention; to strengthen teachers' skills and administrators' leadership by improving educator capacity; and to enhance learning experiences for very young children to ensure student readiness. It is a framework for state and local efforts to change the fundamental systems that affect children's development and learning and to focus resources (including time and money) more sharply on individual students who are struggling to meet the state's increasingly rigorous standards. Of utmost importance are recommendations regarding academic intervention, which include strategies related to the establishment of content standards and alignment of local curriculum to these standards; the use of multiple assessments to determine and monitor student progress; the development of individual learning plans for students with deficiencies in reading and math (including extended-day and extended-year programs); and the development of methods of involving parents and families in the academic success of their children.

Additional state initiatives followed. A state "Visionary Panel for Better Schools" released its report in January 2002 that called for stronger accountability and reforms in testing, including individual scores on state tests (reflecting new federal requirements). The report resulted in the adoption of the Maryland School Assessment (MSA) program as a replacement for the MSPAP. The Visionary Panel also called for a greater focus on instruction, a greater emphasis on teacher preparation and development, a voluntary state curriculum, the hiring of only qualified teachers and professionals, and placing the most qualified teachers and professionals in the poorest performing schools. The recommendations of the Visionary Panel resulted in the *Bridge to Excellence* legislation, which is the *raison d'être* for the current document.

Local Howard County efforts paralleled, and often anticipated, federal and state requirements. At the very inception of the MSPAP program, Howard County began to develop local assessments that reflected MSPAP and the state content standards as they were being written. Similarly, as disaggregated MSPAP data revealed gaps between the performance of various ethnic and economic groups and state standards, the Howard County Public School System developed an academic intervention plan, designed to equalize the achievement of *all* students with in-school, after school, and summer programs. The *Report of the Academic Intervention Task Force*, presented to the Howard

County Board of Education on March 20, 2001, remains in force. (Refer to Appendix A.) On March 7, 2002, a *Comprehensive Plan for Accelerated School Improvement* was presented to the Howard County Board of Education. The recommendations of that report established a School Improvement Unit (SIU) that was constituted to provide targeted supervision and monitoring to designated under-performing schools. Schools served by the SIU were identified according to precise criteria and targeted to receive not only additional central-office staff assistance but also additional in-school staff, supplies, materials, et cetera. (Refer to Appendix B.) Most recently, on December 12, 2002, a report entitled *Differentiated Service Delivery Model* was presented to the Howard County Board of Education. This report detailed one of the strategies of the *Comprehensive Plan*, i.e., to target central and school staff and resources toward accelerated academic improvement, particularly in underachieving schools. (Refer to Appendix C.) Many other current Howard County reports and documents related to school and academic improvement, including Student Support Plans for Acceleration, Accountability Parameters for staff, and other related matters, will be discussed later in this document, insofar as they relate to the goals and objectives of Howard County's *Bridge to Excellence Comprehensive Master Plan*.

Federal legislation designed to improve the academic performance of schools has paralleled state and local legislation. The federal *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB) reauthorized the provisions of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) as new legislation designed to accelerate school reform on the basis of the following priorities:

- Stronger accountability for results
- Expanded options and choices for parents
- Emphasis on teacher quality
- Emphasis on teaching methods and evidence-based practices that work
- Consolidation and flexibility.

It is the last of these federal requirements—i.e., consolidation and flexibility—that provides a framework for the present document. That is, this document will seek to consolidate federal, state, and local school-reform initiatives flexibly, in such a way that they most effectively provide for the acceleration of student learning; the integration of school, parental, and community efforts; continuous improvement in student performance; a safe and drug-free school environment; and the elimination of performance gaps among racial, cultural, economic, and social groups in relation to state standards.

Organization of This Document

In a global document of this kind, an array of ideas, concepts, themes, strategies, and requirements (federal, state, and local) must be addressed. This document responds to the requirements of the federal *No Child Left Behind Act* including requirements related to:

- Student achievement and school accountability

- Teacher and principal quality
- Instructional methods based on proven methods.

Additionally, the five ESEA performance goals and their corresponding performance indicators must be included:

- By 2013-2014, all students will reach high standards, at a minimum attaining proficiency or better in reading/language arts and mathematics.
- All limited English proficient students will become proficient in English and reach high academic standards, at a minimum attaining proficiency or better in reading/language arts and mathematics.
- By 2005-2006, all students will be taught by highly qualified teachers.
- All students will be educated in learning environments that are safe, drug free, and conducive to learning.
- All students will graduate from high school.

The state *Bridge to Excellence* (BTE) legislation reflects federal requirements, and includes additional requirements, all of which will be addressed herein. The BTE requires local strategies that integrate or describe:

- “Best Practices” and “What Works” based on scientific research, and
- A focus on eliminating gaps, not merely “addressing” or “reducing” them.

Additionally, the BTE requires local school systems to meet the needs of specific school populations, including:

- Students requiring special education
- Students with limited English proficiency
- Prekindergarten students
- Kindergarten students
- Gifted and talented students
- Students enrolled in career and technology courses
- Students or any group of students performing at an achievement level lower than the student population as a whole, including strategies to address any disparities in student achievement for any subgroup of students.

It also requires local strategies that describe how school systems will:

- Provide full-day kindergarten programs for all kindergarten students by the 2007-2008 school year
- Provide publicly-funded prekindergarten programs for all economically disadvantaged children by the 2007-2008 school year.

Finally, the *Bridge to Excellence*, as well as federal legislation, requires attention to “cross-program themes,” which include:

- Fine arts initiative
- Education that is multicultural
- Gifted and talented programs
- School support
- Teacher capacity and quality
- Educational technology
- Learning environments that are safe, drug free, and conducive to learning.

In addition to these state and federal requirements, there are, of course, local requirements that are no less exacting. But, these may provide an organizational key to the integration of federal, state, and local initiatives.

In June 2001 the Superintendent of the Howard County Public School System identified three questions to guide school system activities:

- What do we want for our children?
- How might we provide it?
- How will we know we've done it well?

The school system's mission and goals provide initial answers to these questions, along with Core Values, Key Results Areas, and associated indicators of performance, which will be discussed later in this document. Each of the federal requirements under the *No Child Left Behind Act*, each of the ESEA Performance Goals, and each of the requirements of the state *Bridge to Excellence* legislation fits easily into the context of one or more of the three questions and is met by school system initiatives. (Refer to Appendix G for the *What do We Want for Our Children?* document.)

Six themes, derived from local, state, and federal documents, unify this document. The themes include:

- Stronger accountability to accelerate academic achievement for all students and close achievement gaps between subgroups of students
- Continuous improvement of classroom instruction in all schools that emphasizes best practices and teaching methods that have been proven to work
- Sustained, high quality technical support and assistance to low-performing schools
- A commitment to hiring only highly-qualified teachers and paraprofessionals and placing the most qualified staff in the poorest-performing schools
- Ongoing, high quality, and effective professional development programs that target the needs of teachers and the diverse and special needs of their students
- Expanded opportunities for the meaningful involvement of parents and the community in planning, implementing, and evaluating school improvement activities.

The remainder of this document is organized into chapters based on the three guiding questions, along with the integration of state and federal themes. It includes specific

objectives and strategies, for a five-year period and the cross-program themes, as well as estimated budget requirements (standards-based, integrating local, state, and federal monies). The epilogue presents a fourth question: “What will we do if it doesn’t work?”

The remaining contents are arranged as follows:

- Needs assessment (Chapter II)
- What do we want for our children? (Chapter III)
- How might we provide it? (Chapter IV)
- Cross-program themes (Chapter V)
- How will we know we’ve done it well? (Chapter VI)
- Budget and finance (Chapter VII)
- Epilogue and management of plan

Organizational Structure

The work on the Howard County Public School System’s *Bridge to Excellence Comprehensive Master Plan* has been supervised by an Oversight Committee (Refer to Appendix D.) The Oversight Committee and Writing Team work in tandem with the District Planning Team, which is advisory to the Superintendent and monitors district performance in Key Results Areas. The District Planning Team includes broad representation from the following groups:

- The Howard County Board of Education
- The Howard County Equity Council
- The Howard County Education Association
- The PTA Council of Howard County
- The Howard County Chamber of Commerce
- Howard County School System Central Office Administration and Support Staff
- School Administrators
- Howard Community College
- The Association of Community Services (Howard County) and,
- The Howard County Public Library.

The Deputy Superintendent of the Howard County Public School System directs the work of both the *Bridge to Excellence* Oversight Committee and the District Planning Team.