

# Somerset Intermediate School Case Study

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Study of Adequacy of Funding for Education in the State of Maryland

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### *Executive Summary*

Somerset Intermediate School is an example of the second category of schools – a school that has achieved a significant amount of academic growth over time.

Somerset Intermediate School, the only intermediate school in the Somerset District Public Schools (SCPS), formed in 2004 from the consolidation of two District middle schools. According to school documents, in 2014-15 the school served 409 grade six and seven students. Data from the Maryland Report Card indicate that in 2014, most of the students were either African American (44.8 percent) or white (43.5 percent). Three-quarters (75.8 percent) of students at Somerset Intermediate were eligible for free or reduced-price meals (FRPM), and 18.6 percent of the students received special education services.

From 2007 to 2012, Somerset Intermediate School demonstrated high growth in terms of the percentage of students who scored proficient or advanced in reading, mathematics, and science on the Maryland School Assessment (MSA). Specifically, the percentage of students who were at the proficient or advanced level increased 32 percentage points from 2007 to 2012 (54.6 to 86.9 percent).<sup>1</sup>

A number of resources likely contributed to these gains in student performance. Among these resources are:

1. A clear focus on the core subjects. Somerset Intermediate School prioritizes the core subjects of English/language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies. This prioritization is especially clear with respect to:
  - a. Staffing. Analysis of the school's staff suggests that the school targets many resources toward its core program. Specifically, the school employs a relatively high proportion of core teachers. It also employs special educators who co-teach in English/language arts and mathematics classes, special education aides who assist in science and social studies classes, intervention teachers for English/language arts and mathematics, and two full-time instructional coaches for English/language arts and mathematics.
  - b. Intentional use of time. Students spend four out of five class periods in core classes. Students at risk of academic failure use the fifth period of every other day for core subject intervention. Teachers work in teams that include educators from each core subject area, and they have regular opportunities to collaborate with their content-

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<sup>1</sup> Differences were calculated using unrounded numbers.

area colleagues during regularly scheduled after-school professional development sessions.

2. Multiple supports for students at risk of academic failure. As noted above, administrators, coaches, and teachers at Somerset Intermediate work hard to create and maintain a strong core curricular program. They also provide multiple academic and behavioral supports for students at risk of academic failure. These supports include academic interventions within the school day. They also include a number of behavioral programs that are administered or coordinated by the school's behavior support specialist and counselor.
3. A supportive, collaborative staff. School staff report that one contributor to student success at Somerset Intermediate is a staff culture that is marked by trust, support, and collaboration. Staff members note that previous and current school administrators as well as teachers value collaboration and that they use professional development and collaborative planning time to create and sustain this school culture.

## *Introduction*

Somerset Intermediate School is located in Westover, a town in the central Somerset County Public Schools district. The Somerset district, part of Maryland’s Eastern Shore, is bordered to the west and south by the Chesapeake Bay and to the east and north by other Maryland counties. According to information from the state archives, as of the 2010 census, the district had a population of approximately 26,000 residents. Parents of students at Somerset Intermediate work in a range of occupations such as agriculture, healthcare, and the public sector (e.g. state or district agencies, corrections, and the public school system).

Somerset Intermediate School is the only intermediate school in Somerset County Public Schools (SCPS). The school is relatively new. In 2004, SCPS consolidated two middle schools to create Somerset Intermediate. Grades six and seven students who had attended the middle schools began to attend the intermediate school, while grade eight students went to one of the district’s two high schools. For the first few years after the merger, Somerset Intermediate used facilities that already existed in the district. The district constructed a new, larger building for the school, however, and in 2009, Somerset Intermediate moved to the new facilities.

Because it is the only intermediate school in the district, some students travel relatively long distances to get to school. Four different elementary schools feed into the intermediate school, and students from the school matriculate to one of two different high schools. Overall enrollment numbers have been relatively stable across years. According to school documents, the school enrolled 210 grade six students and 199 grade seven students in 2014-15, for a total of 409 students. Table 1 shows the average number of students per homeroom by grade.

**Table 1**  
**Somerset Intermediate School Class Sizes**

<b>Grade-level</b>	<b>Class Size</b>
Six (10 homerooms)	21
Seven (10 homerooms)	19.9

Note: Based on a total enrollment estimate of 409 students.

Source: Somerset Intermediate School documents.

In 2014, most of the students who attended Somerset Intermediate School were African American (44.8 percent) or white (45.3 percent). While the school did not serve a large percentage of limited English proficient (LEP) in 2014, 75.8 percent of the students were eligible for FRPM, and 18.6 percent of the students were in special education (Table 2).

**Table 2**  
**Somerset Intermediate School Student Characteristics, 2014**

<b>Student Characteristics</b>	<b>Percentage of Somerset Student Population</b>
Race/ethnicity	
American Indian/Alaska Native	-
Asian	-
Black/African American	44.8
Hispanic/Latino	4.8
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	-
Two or more races	4.6
White	45.3
Student eligible for free or reduced-price meals	75.8
Limited English Proficient (LEP) Students	-
Special education students	18.6

A “-“ indicates either no students or the number of students was suppressed due to too few students in the category.

Note: These percentages are based on a total enrollment estimate of 417.

Source: Maryland Report Card ([www.mdreportcard.org](http://www.mdreportcard.org)).

***Student Performance***

From 2007 to 2012, Somerset Intermediate School demonstrated high growth in terms of the percentage of students who scored proficient or advanced in reading, mathematics, and science on the Maryland School Assessment (MSA). Specifically, the percentage of students who were at the proficient or advanced level increased 32 percentage points from 2007 to 2012 (54.6 to 86.9 percent; Table 3).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Differences were calculated using unrounded numbers.

**Table 3**  
**Somerset Intermediate School Performance, Maryland School Assessment (MSA), 2007-2014**

<b>Average School-Wide Percent Scoring Proficient/Advanced in Reading, Math and Science</b>								
<b>Performance Level</b>	<b>MSA 2007</b>	<b>MSA 2008</b>	<b>MSA 2009</b>	<b>MSA 2010</b>	<b>MSA 2011</b>	<b>MSA 2012</b>	<b>MSA*</b>	<b>MSA*</b>
	<b>2013</b>	<b>2014</b>						
All Students	54.6	69.3	75.5	85.4	86.0	86.9	85.0	63.7
Free and Reduce-Priced Meals (FRPM) Students	46.7	63.9	71.0	82.4	82.6	84.7	NA	NA
Limited English Proficient (LEP) Students	58.3	-	-	-	-	-	NA	NA
Special Education Students	25.8	52.7	55.8	78.6	86.2	78.0	NA	NA
Non-white/Non-Asian Students	49.7	61.9	66.8	77.8	80.7	85.0	NA	NA

A “-“ indicates either no students or the number of students was suppressed due to too few students in the category.

\*Assessment data by student subgroup for 2013 and 2014 were not available at the time this report was written.

Source: Data provided by the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE).

School staff attributed these student achievement gains, at least in part, to resources that allow them to collaborate with each other and to create and sustain a supportive school culture. This case narrative explores these and other resources that have been integral to improving student achievement at Somerset Intermediate School.

The case has 11 sections: 1) school performance, 2) school staffing, 3) school goals, 4) school schedule and collaborative planning time, 5) curriculum and instructional program, 6) assessments, 7) extra help for students at risk of academic failure, 8) professional development, 9) school culture and leadership, 10) summary and challenges, and 11) the degree of alignment between the school’s strategies and the school improvement strategies embedded in the EB Funding Model. These sections of the report draw upon information from a review of documents provided by school officials or available online and individual and focus group interviews held in early February 2015 with school staff, including school administrators, instructional staff, and support staff.

***School Staff***

Following the consolidation of the two middle schools in 2004, school leaders formed the staff for the new Somerset Intermediate School. During the interview process for the new school, staff

members learned about the vision and mission of the new school and were selected to teach in the new school due, in part, to their willingness to accept and support this mission and vision. In recent years, the school has experienced frequent turnover in the principal and assistant principal positions, which were filled with relatively novice administrators. The current school administration has been in the building for two years and has prior administrative experience. Table 4 presents an overview of Somerset Intermediate School staff by full-time equivalent (FTE) positions for the 2014-15 school year.

**Table 4**  
**Staffing in Somerset Intermediate School, 2014-15**

Category	FTE
<i>Administration</i>	
Principal	1
Assistant Principal	2
Clerical Support	3
<i>Main Program</i>	
Core Teachers	20
Elective Teachers	7
Instructional Coaches	2
Special Education Self-Contained	1
Special Education	4
LEP teachers	1
Interventionists	2
<i>Aides</i>	
Special Education (Self-Contained)	1
Special Education (Inclusion)	2
<i>Pupil Support</i>	
Guidance Counselor	1
Nurse	1
Behavior Intervention Specialist	1
Other Behavioral Pupil Support	1
Cafeteria Staff	4
Custodians and Maintenance Staff	5

Source: Personal communication with school staff.

Twenty teachers instruct students in the core subjects of English/language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies. Based on enrollment information from school documents that report 409 students in 2014-15, the average core class size is 20 students. The school's seven elective teachers focus on art, technical education, physical education, band, music, and media. Because

the media specialist has a background in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), she frequently provides professional support to the school's science teachers.

A variety of educators provide extra support for the instructional program. The school employs four special educators who co-teach with general education teachers. Beginning this year, these special educators are departmentalized such that each educator focuses on either mathematics or English/language arts. Two special education teacher aides assist in social studies and science classrooms. The school has one teacher who focuses on LEP instruction. The school also has two interventionists. One of these interventionists focuses on English/language arts and the other focuses on mathematics. A number of years ago, the school employed one intervention teacher, but the school administration replaced an elective position (home economics/family and consumer science) with a second intervention teacher.

One special education teacher works exclusively with students who have severe and profound needs. These students learn in a self-contained environment. They focus on acquiring the knowledge and skills they will need to participate in society. In addition to the special education teacher, one special education aide works with these students.

The school staff includes two non-teaching instructional coaches. One of these coaches focuses on English/language arts and the other on mathematics. Because the school does not employ instructional coaches for science or social studies, the school's assistant principals support these teachers when possible.

The school employs a behavior specialist who works in a variety of capacities to help students demonstrate positive behaviors in the school environment. Additionally, the school has one counselor, who works closely with the behavior support specialist, teachers, and students. The school also has another pupil support staff member who works with students who need time to reflect on their actions and for students who are serving in-school suspensions. In addition to the pupil support personnel listed in Table 12.4, the school has access to district-provided socioemotional supports. The school shares a school psychologist with a high school and an alternative school. The district also provides centrally staffed social workers and the school has access to the services of these personnel if needed.

In sum, the school has a number of human resources to support the work of improving student achievement. The school demonstrates a specific commitment to the core subjects. The school provides: 1) a high proportion of core teachers, 2) small class sizes in core courses, 3) additional supports for students who may struggle in English/language arts and mathematics (special educators, interventionists), and 4) additional supports for teachers of English/language arts and mathematics (non-teaching instructional coaches). The school supplements this focus on core subjects with streamlined electives and a variety of pupil support personnel.

### *School Goals*

Teachers at Somerset Intermediate report that they have a major influence over the school's goals and have had this influence since the founding of the school. While individual teachers have goals for classes and students within them, formal school goals are the purview of the school improvement team, made up of administrators, teachers, and other staff members. The school improvement team has three subcommittees: 1) literacy, 2) mathematics, and 3) school climate. The team meets at the beginning of the year to set school improvement goals and then meets monthly to examine student data and analyze how students are doing in terms of literacy performance, mathematics performance, and behavior.

School staff reports that the shift to the Maryland College and Career-Ready Standards and the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) assessment has impacted the process of creating school goals. The newness of these systems has introduced some uncertainty into the goal-setting process. Still, the school continues to monitor progress toward the achievement of student performance and behavior goals. For the 2014-15 school year, the school set a goal of 60 percent of students in both the grades six and seven becoming proficient on district-determined benchmarks in both English/language arts and mathematics.<sup>3</sup> Specific areas of focus for English/language arts for 2014-15 include writing and vocabulary, and specific areas of focus for mathematics include making sense of problems and persevering to solve them. School climate goals include improvements in student attendance and reductions in discipline referrals.

### *School Schedule*

Students begin their school day at 7:35 a.m. with a 10-minute homeroom period. After this homeroom period, students have five periods that last 70 minutes each, with the exception of one period that lasts 100 minutes (30 minutes for lunch). Students end their day at 2:30 p.m. Each day, students take four core classes and one elective class. Because students are enrolled in two electives each quarter, they attend each elective class every other day.

The school takes an individualized approach to scheduling students to homerooms. The principal has a transition meeting with every incoming grade six student and his or her parents during which the principal and parents discuss the student's academic and behavioral background. The principal and assistant principals then assign students to homerooms so that the students are matched with teachers whose strengths align with their needs. In addition to matching individual students to teachers, the school administrators assign special education students to classes with particular grouping strategies in mind. Specifically, in an effort to target support to special

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<sup>3</sup> The school's student achievement goals are tied not to the annual state assessment but rather to district benchmark assessments. Table 3 demonstrates that high percentages of Somerset Intermediate students performed at the proficient or advanced levels on the state assessment (the MSA). Therefore, a goal of 60 percent of students achieving proficiency on district benchmarks may seem low. However, school documents report that the percentages of students who achieved proficiency on these district benchmarks was below 60 percent prior to and/or at the beginning of the 2014-15 school year.

education students, administrators group special education students with their peers without disabilities in half of the classes in the school.

### *Curriculum and Instruction*

#### **Curriculum**

In addition to the core curriculum of English/language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies, the school offers a streamlined selection of electives including band, chorus, art, physical education, technical education, and media. In grade six, the focus of media education is mass communications, whereas in grade seven, the focus is STEM.

Across the core disciplines, teachers report that they supplement district pacing guides and curriculum maps with school-created curriculum. Teachers report that they gather external curricular materials by themselves, in teacher groups, and (in the case of English/language arts and mathematics teachers) with assistance from instructional coaches. While teachers use textbooks for some purposes, the extent to which teachers rely on them is mixed. Teachers of some subjects, particularly social studies, use the textbooks fairly regularly while teachers of other subjects, such as English/language arts, mathematics, and science, do not rely as heavily on texts. In some cases, teachers do not have enough textbooks to assign to students for use at home.

A common theme among discussions with staff is that the district- and school-level curricula are in transition due to the shift to the new state standards and the associated PARCC test. Staff members are actively working to ensure that their curricular materials align with the new standards and assessments. The school's English/language arts and mathematics instructional coaches have created scope, sequences, and curriculum maps to match the Common Core and PARCC, and science teachers have aligned their content with the Next Generation Science Standards.

The main resources that support a strong curriculum at Somerset Intermediate are time for common planning for all core teachers (discussed in more detail below in the section on professional development) and two full-time non-teaching instructional coaches for English/language arts and mathematics. Especially within a context of new standards and assessments, teachers' ability to collaborate with each other and with content-area experts allows them to navigate the transition and to create and maintain a robust core curricular program.

#### *Instruction*

Teachers at Somerset Intermediate report that they utilize many instructional strategies, rely on different student grouping strategies for different instructional purposes, and use a variety of instructional materials, including technological resources. The following paragraphs illustrate these reports.

Teachers' instructional strategies include direct instruction as well as project-based learning. Multiple staff members reported that they often use projects or lab activities to convey course

information because they value hands-on work and cross-student collaboration. Teachers also explain that they try to incorporate multiple activities into a single lesson regardless of the lesson's format as direct instruction or project-based. Examples of these activities include using exit tickets, or short assignments at the end of lessons aimed at assessing the extent to which students grasped the day's content; having students work on brief constructed responses; asking students to draw pictures about what they learned; focusing on vocabulary; using a "3-2-1" approach (for instance, having students write down three things they learned, two things they wanted to learn more about, and one thing they had a question about); applying the lesson to current events; and using intentional questions or probes to gauge students' familiarity with the content.

Teachers report that they group and re-group students often in classes. Teachers sometimes group students based on ability (both in terms of grouping students with similar ability and in terms of mixed-ability groups). Other times, teachers group students not by ability but rather with the goal of ensuring that students have the opportunity to work with all other students in the room so that they have the chance for broad interaction with their peers.

According to staff, teachers at Somerset Intermediate have access to instructional technology. Among these technological resources are laptops for the grade seven students. Students use the laptops to perform research, to write, and to access online learning materials. Despite the utility of these instructional resources, staff members report that funding for maintenance is an issue.

In sum, the key resources that support instruction at Somerset Intermediate are educators' knowledge of different instructional techniques and the ability to share these techniques with each other during collaborative planning time. The school also relies on instructional materials such as laptops, though teachers report that they would be able to rely more on these materials if they had additional resources to keep them in proper working order.

### *Assessments*

Educators at Somerset Intermediate School use a variety of assessments. Some of the assessments, such as the Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI) and the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS), are commercially available. Other tests are provided by the State. In prior years, the state test was Maryland School Assessment [MSA] and this year (2014-15) the MSA will be replaced by the PARCC assessment. Somerset Intermediate educators generate other assessments. These tests include English/language arts and mathematics benchmarks that were created by instructional coaches and unit tests created by teachers of all core subjects.

Staff at Somerset Intermediate use data from the SRI and DIBELS to place students into classes and interventions. The school uses results from the state tests to monitor overall school performance and to examine performance by subgroup, such as by race/ethnicity, by special education status, and by FRPM status. The school uses information from school-created

assessments to shape curriculum and instruction. Instructional coaches hold data meetings with teachers to analyze student performance and discuss what the results of student data mean for lesson planning. They look at overall proficiency as well as proficiency for student subgroups. Coaches and teachers analyze test items to determine if instruction is effective, whether lessons are more effective for some groups of students than for others, if students have an accurate understanding of content, and if assessment questions accurately measure the construct they intend to measure. While all core teachers look at data, the process is more formalized for teachers of English/language arts and mathematics, since the school has instructional coaches for these subjects.

As noted above in the section on instruction, teachers at Somerset Intermediate report that they value project-based instruction. Accordingly, teachers often use rubrics to measure student performance on projects. They use this information alongside the information gained from test-based assessments to determine the extent to which students are demonstrating mastery of course content.

In addition to access to the externally-developed tests, staff at Somerset Intermediate require time to collaborate with their colleagues to create tests and rubrics, analyze test data, and create lesson plans that take student assessment results into consideration. They also rely on the instructional coaches to assist them in the work of creating assessments and analyzing student performance on these assessments.

### *Interventions*

Somerset Intermediate School provides a number of interventions for students at risk of academic failure. While some of the interventions are targeted more directly toward students' academic needs, other interventions are targeted toward students' behavioral needs.

#### **Academic Interventions**

One way in which Somerset Intermediate attempts to provide academic assistance for students who may need extra help is to provide extra support within the core instructional program. As mentioned in the section on school staff, the school employs four special educators who co-teach in classrooms with general educators. These special educators focus exclusively on English/language arts or mathematics, and their presence ensures that students will have consistent access to two educators within the classroom setting. While science and social studies classrooms do not have special educator co-teaching arrangements, these classrooms do have access to special education aides who can assist in the classrooms for approximately 30-minutes every day. While this support may not be as intensive as the support available for English/language arts and mathematics, it nonetheless represents a core program support to which Somerset Intermediate students have access.

Another way the school attempts to assist students at risk of academic failure is to provide extra instruction within the school day, outside the regular instructional program. As mentioned in the

section on the school schedule, students take two elective courses per quarter. When students are struggling to master content in English/language arts or mathematics, the school assigns students to an intervention for one of those elective courses. While some students do have two intervention periods in a quarter, the school tries to limit student participation in intervention to one course per quarter so that the students can also participate in an elective course. According to school staff, intervention classes average about six students per class. Within these intervention periods, the school uses the Read Naturally Live and Read 180<sup>4</sup> programs for students who struggle in English/language arts and Dreambox software for students who struggle in mathematics. Because the math interventionist perceives that some of the Dreambox lessons to which the school has access are targeted toward younger learners, the math interventionist supplements this software with other materials.

In addition to the formal interventions embedded within the school schedule, the school and its faculty provide students at risk of academic failure with other academic supports. While the school does not have a formal tutoring program, students receive informal extra help from teachers during lunch hour or after-school. After-school tutoring is constrained for those students who live farther away from school and rely on school bus service for transportation. Additionally, the school assigns students to summer school if they are failing two or more core courses.

The major resource for providing academic support to students at risk of academic failure is a cadre of educators whose main role is to assist students who have challenges accessing content in the core program. This staff includes special education teachers, special education aides, and intervention teachers. Other key resources include the intentional use of time so that students can engage in academic interventions within the school day and access to the intervention programs themselves.

### **Behavioral Interventions**

Somerset Intermediate uses a number of behavioral supports to encourage positive behaviors and address discipline issues. The primary source of behavioral support is the school's use of the Positive Behavior Incentive System (PBIS). When students engage in positive behaviors they earn "Heron Bucks" and can participate in special events organized by teachers and other school staff. Teachers perceive that PBIS has fostered positive behaviors throughout the school.

Sometimes, however, students face challenges that hinder their ability to engage in positive behaviors. Somerset Intermediate addresses these challenges in a number of ways. Many of these strategies involve the school's behavior specialist and counselor, who are major resources in the school's approach to dealing with discipline issues.

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<sup>4</sup> In order to align the program to available time, the school uses a slightly modified version of the Read 180 program. The program's design calls for 90 minutes of instruction each day, but Somerset allocates 60 minutes of instruction every other day so that they can provide students access to the program within the school day.

One approach to curbing discipline problems is the school's "check in, check out" program, which serves about 10 percent of the school's students. This system pairs students at risk of academic failure with a caring adult that they see every day. The behavior specialist keeps track of information from the check in, check out mentors so that the school can track these students' behavior, attendance, grades, and discipline referrals. The behavior specialist monitors students' progress as they become better equipped to participate in the school environment without behavior issues.

Another approach to dealing with discipline problems is by providing students who have displayed problematic behaviors in the past the opportunity to remove themselves from potentially volatile situations before they escalate. In these cases, the behavior specialist and teachers have created formal plans for particular students that include "cool down passes." These students can use their cool down passes to leave classrooms temporarily and visit the school's "time out" room if they need to take some time to regain composure after becoming upset, agitated, or overwhelmed.

The behavior specialist also implements three educational programs that target students who have struggled with behavior and discipline problems. The first, Why Try, is targeted toward students with the most extreme behavior challenges. The program focuses on skills such as goal setting, problem solving, motivation, and dealing with peer pressure. The second program, Second Step, teaches social skills and how to engage in positive peer interaction. It also focuses on helping students manage stress and anger, address bullying, and deal with issues related to drugs and alcohol. The Why Try and Second Step programs teach students positive behaviors and provide them with strategies they can use to manage conflict. The third program is a leadership course that the behavior specialist created out of a modified Second Step curriculum.

In some cases, the school will refer students to the learning support team process, whereby a team of adults that may include the behavior support specialist, the school counselor, teacher(s), special educators, LEP teachers, the student's mentor (if applicable), the student's parent(s), and others work together to identify the source of the student's problems and devise a plan to address these problems. These teams stay in place for as long as necessary to ensure that the student's needs are addressed. These teams may recommend supports that range from tangible resources (e.g. glasses for students who are falling behind academically or engaging in problematic behavior because they cannot see well) to a wide range of emotional supports. These supports may include the programs listed in the previous paragraphs or the services of the school counselor, the district's psychologist, or the district's social workers. They may also include counseling services from other district agencies that work with the school to provide students access to therapists at school so that transportation issues do not prevent students from accessing mental health services.

As highlighted in the previous paragraphs, the main behavioral resources to which Somerset Intermediate has access are the school's behavior support specialist and counselor. School district and other district personnel also provide counseling services to students at the school.

### *Professional Development*

Teachers at Somerset Intermediate engage in a variety of professional development activities. Some of these professional development activities take place within the school day, while others occur on a regular schedule after-school. Teachers also pursue external (that is, not provided through the school) professional development.

One major source of professional development stems from the organization of teachers into teams. There are five teams in the school. These consist of two teams teaching grade six students, two teams teaching grade seven students, and one team teaching both grade six and seven classes. Teacher teams include an English/language arts teacher, a mathematics teacher, a science teacher, and a social studies teacher. With the exception of the split-level team, the teams also include special educators who co-teach with other team members. Team members have common planning periods when they meet and collaborate on matters of curriculum, instruction, and student behavior. Teams meet at least once each week.

In addition to the collaborative team planning sessions, the entire school meets after-school once per week for an hour and 15 minutes. Each month, the school uses one of these weekly sessions for school-wide professional development. This academic year, teachers are reading and discussing a book on differentiated instruction. The school uses another one of these weekly sessions for teachers to meet within content areas and map curriculum, share materials, plan lessons, and analyze data. The school uses the third weekly meeting each month to allow time for self-directed professional development. Teachers report that they typically use self-directed professional development time to meet with content-area colleagues, since they perceive that subject-specific collaboration is beneficial for curriculum and instruction. The school uses the final meeting each month for whatever type of professional development (school-wide, content-focused, or self-directed) school staff need at that time.

The school's English/language arts and mathematics instructional coaches provide support to teachers in these within-school and after-school professional development sessions as well as throughout the school day. Instructional coaches provide a variety of supports to their teachers. For instance, they help teachers develop curricula, find curricular materials, and plan lessons. They also mentor teachers, co-teach, informally observe teachers, and provide feedback on instruction. Additionally, they meet with teachers individually and collectively to examine student data and determine how to use knowledge gained from analyses of student performance to improve curriculum, instruction, and student assessment. To support teachers as they transition to the new standards and assessments, instructional coaches report spending a great deal of time learning and sharing information about the College and Career-Ready standards and

the related PARCC assessment. While instructional coaches provide these supports to all of the teachers of their content area, they pay special attention to supporting novice teachers.

Teachers at Somerset Intermediate also engage in professional development opportunities that take place outside the school environment. Teachers across subject areas report that they participate in professional development opportunities available through the district, through a nearby university, and through outside organizations. For example, science teachers and the media specialist often engage in professional development through organizations like the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). Teachers say that the school routinely tells teachers about outside professional development opportunities and encourages their participation in them.

The main resources that support the school's pursuit of professional development for its teachers are the strategic use of time and access to instructional coaches. Because the school has intentionally organized teachers into teams and provided teams with common planning time, teachers have opportunities to meet with others who teach the same group of students and determine how to tailor the curriculum and instruction to those students. Because the administrators and teachers at Somerset Intermediate engage in collaboration during regularly scheduled after-school school-wide professional development sessions, teachers have the opportunity to work with subject-area colleagues. Additionally, the school's ability to have two instructional coach positions allows for a variety of teacher supports that are focused on the core areas of English/language arts and mathematics.

### *School Culture*

Some parts of the school culture affect how the school staff members interact with each other, whereas other parts of the school culture impact how staff members interact with their students, their students' families, and the community at large.

#### **Among School Staff**

School staff members report that the time surrounding the creation of the school was "tumultuous." However, they note that it was also a time for growth and that the principal at the time of the merger worked hard to build a single, strong school community. Teachers who were present at the time of the merger recall that the principal held many professional development sessions focused on building a trusting team atmosphere. The principal prompted teachers to engage in honest, candid dialogue about the challenges they faced. The principal also used the time to encourage the teachers to actively create the type of environment they wanted for themselves and for their students. The staff reports that the school administrators and teachers collectively created a culture that was marked by trust, collaboration, and support.

The years between the merger and the current school year saw a number of changes in school administration. School staff report that a strong teaching staff and a strong school culture allowed the school to continue working toward student success amid multiple changes in school

leadership. Teachers say that the school's collaborative culture pervades the building so much that new teachers who come to the school will not stay if they do not want to engage in collaboration.

The current school administration has been in place for two years. The staff reports that the administration continues to foster an environment of hard work, trust, collaboration, and support. Teachers say that they trust each other enough to ask for help when they need it and to provide help when they see that another teacher needs it. They say that the staff is tight-knit and that they consistently support each other. School staff attributes this current culture of trust, collaboration, and support to five factors: 1) the groundwork laid at the time of the merger, 2) a supportive current administrator, 3) a team structure of teacher organization, 4) multiple opportunities for formal and informal collaboration, and 5) building-wide high expectations.

### **Among School Staff, Students and Families, and Community**

Somerset Intermediate is the only intermediate school in the district, whereas the district contains multiple elementary schools and two high schools. Accordingly, the school provides a unique opportunity for students across the entire district to learn together.<sup>5</sup> This uniqueness, coupled with the small population size of both the school and the district, brings both opportunities and challenges.

As the only intermediate school in the district, students have the opportunity to form peer relationships that they otherwise might not have been able to form. The creation of relationships extends beyond student-to-student interaction. Teachers report that they work hard to create caring relationships with students during school hours in the classrooms and in the hallways. They also work to extend these caring relationships past the school day. To that end, teachers describe their efforts to go to sporting events and other community functions to demonstrate that they care about their students, their students' families, and the larger community. Additionally, perhaps in part because the population of the district is relatively small, school staff members report that there are opportunities for district schools to communicate with other district agencies regarding issues that students may face.

The school's unique situation as the sole intermediate school in the district does create a challenge. Because it is not a neighborhood school, most students and their families need to travel to the school by car or bus. The district provides bus service for students, but reliance on bus service makes it difficult for many students to stay after-school for extracurricular activities or extra help in core classes. Furthermore, transportation logistics make it challenging for some parents to come to the school building to meet with staff about their children.

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<sup>5</sup> Because the district also runs one alternative school, it is not necessarily the case that all students in grades six and seven attend Somerset Intermediate; however, the vast majority of grade six and seven students attend Somerset Intermediate.

### *Summary*

Somerset Intermediate School, the only intermediate school in the Somerset County Public Schools (SCPS), formed in 2004 from the consolidation of two middle schools. According to school documents, in 2014-15, the school served 409 grade six and seven students. Data from the Maryland Report Card indicate that, in 2014, most of the students were either African American (44.8 percent) or white (43.5 percent). Three-quarters (75.8 percent) of students at Somerset Intermediate were eligible for FRPM, and 18.6 percent of the students were in special education.

From 2007 to 2012, Somerset Intermediate School demonstrated high growth in terms of the percentage of students who scored proficient or advanced in reading, mathematics, and science on the MSA. Specifically, the percentage of students who were at the proficient or advanced level increased 32 percentage points from 2007 to 2012 (54.6 to 86.9 percent).<sup>6</sup>

A number of resources likely contributed to these gains in student performance. Among these resources are:

1. A clear focus on the core subjects. Somerset Intermediate School prioritizes the core subjects of English/language arts, mathematics, science and social studies. This prioritization is especially clear with respect to:
  - a. Staffing. Analysis of the school's staff suggests that the school targets many resources toward the core program. Specifically, the school employs a relatively high proportion of core teachers. It also employs special educators who co-teach in English/language arts and mathematics classes, special education aides who assist in science and social studies classes, intervention teachers for English/language arts and mathematics, and two full-time instructional coaches for English/language arts and mathematics.
  - b. Intentional use of time. Students spend four out of five class periods in core classes. Students at risk of academic failure use the fifth period of every other day for core subject intervention. Teachers work in teams that include educators from each core subject area and they have regular opportunities to collaborate with their content-area colleagues during regularly scheduled after-school professional development sessions.
2. Multiple supports for students at risk of academic failure. As noted above, administrators, coaches, and teachers at Somerset Intermediate work hard to create and maintain a strong core curricular program. They also provide multiple academic and behavioral supports for students at risk of academic failure. These supports include academic interventions within the school day. They also include a number of behavioral programs that are administered or coordinated by the school's behavior support specialist and counselor.

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<sup>6</sup> Differences were calculated using unrounded numbers.

3. A supportive, collaborative staff. School staff report that one contributor to student success at Somerset Intermediate is a staff culture that is marked by trust, support, and collaboration. Staff members note that previous and current school administrators as well as teachers value collaboration and that they use professional development and collaborative planning time to create and sustain this school culture.

### *Alignment with the Evidence-Based Model*

Somerset Intermediate aligns with the evidence-based (EB) model in a number of ways. Key areas of alignment include:

1. Laying a foundation for change. Somerset Intermediate came into existence due to the consolidation of two district middle schools. School leaders at the time of the merger worked hard to construct a school culture that was marked by collaboration and support. This foundation has endured. Teachers in the school maintained the collaborative environment during multiple changes in school leadership, and the current school administration has embraced collaboration and support.
2. Being strategic about core and elective classes. Administrators and teachers at Somerset Intermediate value elective courses and report that they perceive electives to be important for student success; in fact, the school employs a higher number of elective teachers (seven) than would be recommended by the EB model (four, based on a calculation of 20 percent of the number of core teachers). Still, the staff at Somerset Intermediate maintains a steadfast focus on core subjects. Multiple aspects of the school demonstrate this focus. For instance, the school employs 20 core teachers, which allows for an average core class size of 20 students, five students below the EB recommendation of 25 students in core classes in middle schools. The school organizes these core teachers into multidisciplinary groups and allows time for common planning. Furthermore, while the number of intervention teachers at Somerset Intermediate is lower than what would be recommended by the EB model based on the school's size, the school's provision of interventions for core subjects does demonstrate a focus on proficiency in core subjects.
3. Organizing teachers into collaborative groups. Teachers at Somerset Intermediate work in teams that contain an English/language arts teacher, a mathematics teacher, a science teacher, a social studies teacher, and, in some cases, a special educator. These teacher teams have common planning time and meet regularly. The school also has weekly after-school professional development sessions, wherein content-area teachers regularly meet.
4. Data-based decision making. Teachers at Somerset Intermediate regularly review student performance and use that information to inform curriculum and instruction. Use of information related to student performance exists across disciplines, but it is especially prevalent for English/language arts and mathematics, where instructional coaches work with teachers to identify patterns in student performance within and across classes.

5. Extra help for students at risk of academic failure. Somerset Intermediate provides several supports for students at risk of academic failure. Academic supports include special educators who co-teach in the general education program, special education aides working in the general education program, and English/language arts and mathematics intervention periods within the school day. Behavioral supports include student access to programs and personnel geared toward ensuring that students have emotional support in the school environment.
6. Instructional leadership that penetrates all levels of the system. Somerset Intermediate employs two instructional coaches. These coaches work to support the implementation of the English/language arts and mathematics curricula in the school. Because they do not have teaching assignments, they are able to spend their time mapping curriculum, creating assessments, analyzing student data, and supporting teachers.

Somerset Intermediate leverages its resources to focus on the core instructional program while providing a streamlined elective program for students. The school couples the instructional program with academic and behavior supports for students at risk of academic failure and a commitment to a collaborative teaching environment. In these and other ways, the school demonstrates an alignment with the EB model and an effort to use resources thoughtfully.