

Somerset Public Schools  
Somerset, MA

Superintendent's  
Entry Plan Report

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## Entry

Upon assuming the position of Superintendent on July 1, 2014, I began to develop an entry and transition process to assist me in formulating a new strategic plan and to paint a comprehensive picture of the status of the Somerset Public Schools. This data-gathering process first included reviewing many district documents, including student achievement data (MCAS) from 2009-2014, the student handbooks, the School Committee Policy manual, school safety and crisis manual, contracts (bargaining units, food service, transportation, special education, etc.), past budgets, and school improvement plans, among others.

In addition to reviewing documents, a major component of this process involved talking with and listening to many stakeholders, ranging from teachers, parents, administrators and other stakeholders in the community. Many of the conversations were guided by, but not limited to, several key questions:

- In your opinion what is working well in Somerset? What are the district's strengths?
- What do you see as the biggest challenges for Somerset Public Schools?
- What would you most like me to know about the district?
- What do you most want for Somerset students upon graduating from the Somerset Public Schools?

The existing mission of the Somerset Public Schools, which was adopted in 2009, is to ensure that our students develop the 21<sup>st</sup> Century knowledge and skills that prepare them to succeed in an increasingly global and technological society. I was mindful of this previous mission when reading district documents, talking with various stakeholders, and, most importantly, observing students and teachers in classroom settings.

## Initial Takeaways

Based upon the conversations and observations, several things became evident early on in the entry process.

Positive takeaways include:

- There is great pride in the Somerset Public Schools, which have a rich history and a strong reputation
- Great teachers are the backbone of the district
- Engaged parents, who want their children to be challenged and prepared for a competitive high school experience and beyond
- A community that has supported the school system very well over the years
- The Arts

Identified needs:

- Improved communication from central and building administration to both parents and staff
- More consistency in building leadership
- More consistency between elementary schools
- More technology resources and instruction integrated into daily instruction (need to develop 21<sup>st</sup> skills in children)

- More focused professional development for teachers
- Central Office needs to build trusting relationships with building leadership, teachers, parents, and Somerset community
- Increased collaboration/voice of teachers with principals and superintendent, and principals and directors with superintendent
- Improved financial practices and budgeting procedures

Report findings are organized into three major themes:

- *Teaching and Learning*
  - *Wide-varying expectations between teachers and schools*
  - *School autonomy has created significant inconsistencies*
  - *Professional development needs*
    - *Technology integration*
    - *Curriculum alignment to CCSS*
    - *Common assessments (form and sum)*
    - *RTI and DI*
  - *Response to intervention*
  - *Not challenging all students*
  - *Students perform well without adequate teacher resources*
  - *Strength in the arts*
  - *Weaknesses in STEM*
  - *Need more technology resources and instruction*
- *Leadership, Finance, and Operations*
  - *3 new principals/asst. principals (out of six); all new central office*
  - *Questionable support from Board of Selectmen*
  - *Three consecutive years of structural deficits*
  - *Redistricting*
  - *Little input from key stakeholders in building previous budgets*
  - *Overreliance on paper (need to create efficiencies using technology)*
  - *Antiquated email system replaced in October*
  - *Website needs updating*
  - *Student information system is not robust*
  - *Student Support Services*
    - *Special education services are mixed*
      - *Some highlights (e.g. creation of K-2 and 3-5 classrooms at North)*
      - *Preschool program is sound*
      - *Overreliance on out of district programs*
      - *Lack of Special Education leadership over the past three years*
    - *ODP costs on the rise*
- *Culture, Values, and Relations*
  - *Redistricting*
  - *High Expectations for student learning*
  - *Parents want their children prepared for competitive colleges*
  - *Parents want children challenged more*
  - *Need for better internal and external communication*
  - *Public perception of schools is at a low point following a rich history of public support*
  - *General lack of trust between schools and town, between teachers and administrators, and between building administrators and central office administration*

## Culture, Values and Relations

*Based upon a review of qualitative and quantitative data, the following findings/trends have emerged.*

- Parents who are also alumni of the Somerset Public Schools expressed great pride in the school system and often indicated that they remained in Somerset because of the schools and the community. Additionally, many parents who moved into Somerset cited that the school system was often a major factor in making their decisions to reside in Somerset.
- Despite the pride in the school system and its reputation as being one of the best districts in SE Massachusetts, many parents indicated that their perception of the school system has started to wane in recent years. There is a growing concern that the financial problems over the past three years have tarnished the reputation and has resulted in decreased services to students (larger class sizes, cuts in technology, cuts in Spectrum, etc.)
- The majority of the staff expressed generally low morale in their jobs. Part of this was attributed to the consistent budget cuts and reduction in job security. While teachers and support staff described a working environment that is safe and respectful, there is also a lack of trust with administration and a lack of voice.
- All of the Somerset schools have had great autonomy over the years. While autonomy is generally a good thing, it created large inconsistencies in policies, procedures, expectations for student learning, and curriculum. (progress reports)
- At the conclusion of the 2013-2014, the smallest and oldest Somerset's elementary schools was closed, which resulted in the consolidation of four elementary schools into three and a redistricting of the entire elementary school structure. Many of Somerset's elementary students were thrust into new schools this year. Due to the wide variations in expectations and day-to-day procedures, many parents expressed frustration at the beginning of this school year while children transitioned from one elementary school to another.
- When parents were asked in a survey about what they want the most for their children upon graduating from the Somerset Public Schools, the most frequent open response was they want their children to be prepared for entry into a competitive college. Parents also indicated they want their students to be effective problem solvers, critical and independent thinkers, great communicators (writing and speaking), to learn technology skills, and to experience the arts.
- Parents and staff also expressed the desire for increased communication from central administration, including social media, email, and more use of the One Call Now communication tool. Additionally, members of the community and the School Committee also indicated the need for the school system to increase its image with the Town of Somerset through better marketing and public relations.
- There is a general lack of trust between the schools and the town, between administrators and teachers, and between principals and central office administration
- Parents, students, staff and members of the community are extremely proud of the arts programs, with special emphasis on music. There is a commonly held belief that they play a vital role in the development of our children.
- Both parents and teachers indicated through interviews and the survey that there is not a coherent vision for the future and no plan or direction in place.

## Next Steps

1. Publicly celebrate the district's successes and publicize the strengths of the programming, school, teacher and student accomplishments, and promising practices.
2. The elementary schools need to be more aligned with each other and lessen the inconsistencies and discrepancies that exist between them. (One school, three campuses)
3. There is a strong need to develop a strategic plan and a technology plan so that all stakeholders will see the vision for the Somerset Public Schools.
4. Share survey responses with principals so that parent and teacher concerns about their lack of voice and lack of trust is addressed.

## Leadership, Finance, and Operations

**Based upon a review of both qualitative and quantitative data, the following Findings/Trends have emerged.**

- While a lack of communication was cited as something needing improvement, many parents and teachers expressed appreciation and acknowledgement of increased communication this year through emails and better use of the One Call Now system.
- Town officials (Board of Selectmen, Finance Committee, town administrators) are not unanimously supportive of the school district. Past and current budget difficulties have created tension between some people and the Somerset Public Schools.
- The relationship between Central Office leadership was not conducive to high morale, strong collaboration, or consistent communication, which led to low morale among central office staff, principals, and other key stakeholders.
- In general, a positive relationship exists between union leadership and administration. Email correspondence and weekly meetings with the president and/or representatives as well as monthly meetings with building representatives serve to maintain this positive relationship.
- While the district has created several in-district special education programs, the costs of out of district placement have increased significantly over the past several years to over \$2.2 million in FY15. This figure does not include transportation associated with the tuitions.
- FY15 experienced a high level of turnover among building and central office leadership. Furthermore, the role of Special Education Director has been filled with interim personnel for over two years and the position of Chace Street School principal has seen four principals over the past five years.
- The Somerset Public Schools ended the FY13 year with a \$299,000 deficit and the FY14 year with an approximate \$475,000 deficit. Additionally, FY15 was under budgeted by approximately \$800,000 or more.

- Building principals and directors who were employed in previous years all claim they had little input in developing the budget.
- District software infrastructure (student information system, website, human resources applications, email) are antiquated and do not provide users with immediate access to relevant information nor do they help create an efficient working environment.

### **Next Steps**

1. Continue to reach out to town boards and other key stakeholders in an effort to strengthen communication and relationships.
2. Develop and communicate the annual budget through information sessions, newsletters, and social media. Encourage dialogue to strengthen the community's trust in the Somerset Public Schools.
3. Develop a 3 to 5 year budget plan to promote budget stabilization that supports growth and improvement.
4. Explore the development of additional special needs programs to support specific student populations not already served in-district as a way to decrease out of district tuition costs.
5. Create a new website that makes it easier for teachers, students, parents, and community members to find useful information from and about Somerset Public Schools and to promote stronger communication.
6. Provide professional learning opportunities for district and building administrators to foster

### **Teaching and Learning**

**Based upon a review of both qualitative and quantitative data, the following Major Findings/Trends have emerged.**

- Through surveys, interviews, and conversations with teachers, parents, and administrators, and as a result of redistricting, many concerns were expressed involving varied expectations of students across the elementary schools and significant inconsistencies between all schools in teaching and learning expectations, instructional materials, and school practices. In my visits to all schools, I observed inconsistent approaches to curriculum, instruction, assessment, the use of instructional materials, and expectations for students. Because of these, students can have very different experiences from one classroom to another and from one teacher to another, which impacts their readiness for the next grade level or school as reported by teachers in the middle school and high school.
- I received extensive feedback from teachers regarding professional development. Many teachers expressed that professional development was disconnected from their needs and stated the desire for professional development to focus on a few key topics and be able for immediate implementation in the classroom. Some teachers also expressed the need for differentiation in professional development, so that it meets the needs of individual teachers. Specific areas that teachers cited as needing more learning in include technology integration, curriculum alignment

to the Common Core State Standards, assessment literacy, and research-based instructional strategies that support Response to Intervention.

- Teachers, parents, and administrators overwhelmingly stated the need for more technology in the classroom, consistent access to the Internet, and technology integration support and professional development.
- Teachers stated that time was spent during the previous two school years development curriculum documents that would be common across grade levels but individual schools have continued to make decisions in isolation regarding instructional materials and curriculum implementation.
- Through the surveys to parents and teachers, it is evident that the community wants Somerset Public Schools to better prepare students for the 21<sup>st</sup> century learning and skills, especially in the area of STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics). Many teachers and parents expressed concerned about the lack of a cohesive and meaningful science program at the elementary level. Somerset Public Schools does have a strong arts program and should be utilized to strengthen STEM learning opportunities.
- Somerset Public Schools has not invested in a comprehensive and balanced assessment system. A study completed in the 2014-2015 by UMass Boston indicated that each elementary school uses a variety of different assessments to identify students' strengths and weaknesses in reading. Furthermore, SPS does not have any formal mathematics benchmark assessment currently in use to help identify needs in this area. In addition to purchasing and implementing a more robust assessment system, teachers and administrators also identified the need for Tier 2 and 3 interventions (materials and staffing) as well as guidelines describing a sound RtI system.

### **Next Steps**

1. Create a curriculum review and instructional materials review cycle.
2. Provide targeted professional development that focuses on our biggest needs that leads to continuous improvement. Additionally, create a culture of professional learning so that professional learning occurs during common planning time, after school, and online in a low cost / no-cost process.
3. Reinstate the Curriculum Director position and allocate resources to professional development and instructional materials.
4. Develop and implement a comprehensive and balanced assessment system that helps educators to identify student strengths and needs in literacy and mathematics. Also, develop an assessment calendar for the benchmark assessments.
5. Develop a technology plan that focuses on building a technology infrastructure to support 21<sup>st</sup> century learning, technology integration staffing, technology integration in the curriculum, and technology related professional development.

6. Create a STEAM action plan that includes professional development, curriculum development, and the integration and alignment of science, technology, engineering, mathematics, and literacy standards



## **Appendix A**

Key stakeholders I have interviewed and met with during the entry process:

- School Committee Members (individual and collective)
- Directors of Business and Finance, Technology, and Special Education
- Building Administrators, Content Coordinators, Teachers
- STA leadership
- Municipal leadership including Town Manager, Board of Selectmen
- Parents, through parent forums
- Students
- Other Town Government including Recreation Dept Executive Director, Chief of Police, Fire Chief
- South Coast Education Collaborative Executive Director
- Staff in each building including paraprofessionals, clerical staff, teachers, custodians
- Former Somerset Public Schools Superintendents

Examples of key points that were explored during the entry plan process:

- What are the strengths of the Somerset Public Schools?
- What are people most proud of?
- What are the challenges we are facing?
- What is something that we cannot imagine changing?
- What needs changing first?

## **Appendix B**

The following documents are among those reviewed throughout the data collection process:

- Somerset Public Schools Strategic Plan (2009-2014)
- FY12, FY 13, FY14, and FY 15 Budget and supporting documents
- Collective Bargaining Agreements with STA and AFSCME groups
- School Handbooks
- School Improvement Plans
- School Committee Policy Manual
- Curriculum Documents
- Standardized Assessment Data, Attendance Data
- Crisis Management Plans