

Maurice River School District Needs Assessment

This needs assessment for the Maurice River School District is based on the New Jersey Department of Education's (Department) monitoring of the district that took place during the fall of 2008 pursuant to the New Jersey Quality Single Accountability Continuum (NJQSAC) system, N.J.S.A. 18A:7A-3 et seq., a School District Assessment Survey completed by the district in July 2008, and a site visit performed by a team of Department personnel¹ on November 13, 2008. A summary of the Department's observations, conclusions and recommendations is set forth below.

Background

The Maurice River School District, located in Cumberland County, educates 395 children in preschool through grade 8. The district has one school, the Maurice River Township Elementary School. The total K-12 enrollment of the district, pursuant to the 2008 Application for State School Aid (ASSA) is 553², and approximately 31% of the students in the district are considered to be "at-risk" (at or below 185% of the federal poverty guidelines). The district sends its high school students to the Millville School District pursuant to a send/receive relationship. Maurice River's total K-12 enrollment declined by approximately 10.7% between 2000 and 2008. The district is classified in District Factor Group B. A detailed description of the enrollment, district wealth measures and State aid calculations for the 2008-09 and 2009-10 school years are detailed below and are contained in the District State Aid Profiles attached.

QSAC Monitoring

In the fall of 2008, the Department monitored the Maurice River School District pursuant to NJQSAC. Under NJQSAC, districts are evaluated, using an assessment tool known as the "District Performance Review" (DPR), in the five key areas of school district performance: Instruction and Program, Fiscal Management, Operations Management, Personnel and Governance. Districts that satisfy 80% of the indicators in any area are considered to be high performing in that area. Maurice River scored over 80% in all five areas: Instruction and Program (88%), Fiscal Management (84%), Operations Management (98%), Personnel (88%) and Governance (89%). As a result, the district has been designated a high performing district pursuant to N.J.A.C. 6A:30-4.1(d). The district has already received its NJQSAC decision.

With respect to Instruction and Program, the NJQSAC monitoring revealed that, based on the 2007-08 assessment results, Maurice River met the definition of district Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for its total population in language arts literacy and mathematics, and that at least 70% of the district's total student population passed the State science assessments. In addition, the district had no schools in "Schools in Need of

¹ The DOE site visit team consisted of Willa Spicer, Deputy Commissioner, Donna Arons, Special Assistant, Joan Saylor, Director and Michael Elwell, County Superintendent.

² The resident enrollment is the count used for the calculation of state aid, and includes students in grades 9-12 who are educated in Millville through a tuition arrangement.

Improvement” (SINI) status pursuant to the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (20 U.S.C. Sec. 6301 et seq.). The NJQSAC monitoring also revealed that Maurice River has an up-to-date curriculum aligned with the most recent version of the New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards (NJCCCS) and that the district requires and verifies that the curriculum in each area is fully implemented at all grade levels and includes clear grade level benchmarks and interim assessments (QSAC I&P DPR indicators B1, B2 and B3). The district also demonstrated that its curriculum is horizontally and vertically articulated among all grades, content areas and schools through the use of strategies such as curriculum mapping, and that it convenes curriculum articulation meetings across regional and in-district schools, grades and content areas at least twice a year (QSAC I&P DPR indicators B5 and B6).

Moreover, Maurice River satisfied the majority of indicators in Section C of the I&P DPR which measures whether the district employs instructional strategies and processes that support the achievement of the NJCCCS. Specifically, during the monitoring, Maurice River demonstrated that it implements a supervisory process that ensures that all areas of the curriculum are taught in every district classroom and that teachers receive meaningful feedback, that it requires and verifies that lesson plans are aligned with the curriculum and reviewed monthly by supervisors, that supervisory practices focus on classroom instruction and that teachers and supervisors analyze student work to determine if instruction is aligned with the curriculum (QSAC I&P DPR indicator C1).

District Assessment Survey

In July 2008, the Maurice River School District completed a comprehensive assessment survey designed by the Department to assist the district in identifying areas of unmet need in the district. The district described the primary challenges it faces as follows: “Providing quality academic instruction, relevant professional development, and differentiated grade level instructional support to all students to sustain on-going academic achievement; to provide all students with a balanced, comprehensive curriculum, support services to enhance students [sic] social/emotional development, and more extensive extra-curricular activities” (District Assessment Survey, p. 8). The district indicated that it addresses these challenges by “leveraging existing financial resources to ongoing priorities as evidenced by student performance data gathered through multiple measures” [Ibid]. Maurice River further noted that it is concerned that rising tuition rates charged by Millville High School, which Maurice River students attend, could imperil its ability to provide all of these services.

In the survey, Maurice River indicated that it has a curriculum that is aligned with the NJCCCS and that the district’s textbooks, instructional materials and technology are aligned to the curriculum and the NJCCCS. According to the district, 98% of the district’s teachers are Highly Qualified as defined by the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*.

The district offers a visual and performing arts program, but is unable to provide dance/drama due to lack of staffing. The district offers a world language curriculum in every grade, taught by a qualified teacher, although it indicated that it would like to hire an additional world languages teacher. The district's school has a library/media center, but does not have a library media specialist—the library is staffed by an aide. Maurice River offers gifted and talented services in all grades through differentiated instruction by grade level classroom teachers, but the district indicated that it would like to hire a full-time gifted and talented teacher. The district has an alternative education program. It also offers before- and after-school “latch-key” programs, grade level after-school academic support programs, a variety of after-school clubs and intramural activities, a summer school for reading/writing/math academic support, and a summer school 8th grade intensive algebra program.

According to the district's response to the survey, it has a special education classification rate of 14.3%, which is roughly equivalent to the state average classification rate of 14.69% used in the School Funding Reform Act's (SFRA) calculation of the census-based special education funding. Approximately 12% of classified students are placed in out-of-district facilities. According to Maurice River, it does not have a backlog in conducting required activities for students referred to the child study team or students with IEPs, all IEPs for students with disabilities are implemented as written and that the district is not required to provide compensatory services to students due to staff shortages.

With respect to facilities, the district stated that it currently has adequate space to deliver the NJCCCS, and will continue to have adequate space even if enrollment increases. The district's school has adequate cafeteria, multipurpose room, and gymnasium and auditorium space. The district does not use trailers to provide instruction or services to students. The district indicated a need for additional security technologies or security staff. The Department notes that the SFRA provides categorical aid for security.

According to the survey, the district has embedded technology into the learning experience in all curricular areas. In addition, the district's building has sufficient equipment, connectivity and technical support necessary to provide e-learning opportunities in all learning environments. Maurice River stated that it needs additional funding to hire a full-time technology coordinator.

The district currently has a half-day preschool program for 4-year-olds. It is classified as a universal district under the SFRA. The district stated that it will face challenges finding space, staff and transportation to implement full-day preschool for 3- and 4-year-olds.

Finally, with respect to staffing issues, the district indicated that its staffing needs include a full-time librarian/media specialist, full-time reading specialist/reading recovery program teacher and a full-time guidance counselor. The district believes that funding constraints limit its ability to attract new staff. It should be noted, however, that these

positions were identified as necessary educational resources in the process of developing the SFRA and, therefore, are incorporated into the SFRA's determination of per-pupil costs.

Site Visit

On November 13, 2008, members of a team of Department personnel traveled to the Maurice River School District and met with the district's superintendent and other district personnel. During the course of this conversation, the team from the district discussed Maurice River's goals and its strategies to achieve those goals, as well as the challenges still facing the district.

The site visit revealed a small district with a team of resourceful educators that have worked diligently to develop and maintain a strong educational program for the benefit of the student body. In language arts, the teachers were trained in guided reading techniques and differentiated instruction so that students can work in small groups according to their abilities. In addition, Maurice River has a very talented writing coach who also provides professional development to the Lawrence School District on a fee basis. The success of the district in teaching language arts is reflected in the State assessment results—83% of the students passed the 2008 ASK4 assessment and 87% passed the 2008 ASK8 assessment. In mathematics, the district recently revised the math curriculum and provided professional development to teachers through a summer institute. The district uses Envision Math in the elementary grades and Connected Math in the middle school grades. Again, these efforts appear to have paid off. In 2008, 86% of the students passed the ASK4 mathematics assessment and 72% passed the ASK8 mathematics assessment.³ The school made Adequate Yearly Progress as measured by the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* in 2008.

The district maintains fairly small class sizes. In the elementary grades, there are approximately 18 to 22 students per class. In grades 5-8, class sizes range from approximately 13 to 17. The district has part-time aides in the kindergarten classes and a part-time basic skills teacher to work with struggling students in grades K-2. There is also a self-contained program for special education in the middle grades with approximately four students. The Department notes that the staffing ratios identified as part of the development of the SFRA are 18:1 in elementary school and 20:1 in middle and high school.

Maurice River has one teacher each for world languages, art and music, and as a result, district personnel believe that the students do not receive sufficient instruction in these areas. The district does not have a drama teacher, but other teachers provide drama instruction. Maurice River offers various after-school and extra-curricular activities. It also offers a 6-week Algebra I course for rising ninth graders during the summer. According to the district, approximately 12 students took advantage of this opportunity during the summer of 2008.

³ The district's proficiency rates on the State assessments reflect a certain degree of fluctuation from year to year, which may be due, in part, to the small number of students tested.

Maurice River is a participant in the Millville Collaborative, which involves the Millville School District and its sending districts. The Collaborative coordinates curriculum development, professional development and transitions to high school. According to the Millville superintendent, the high school dropout rate for Maurice River high school students has decreased.

The district contracts with the Salem County Special Services District for child study team and other special education related services. District personnel stated that the district has a classification rate of approximately 15%, with 5% of the special education students placed out-of-district.⁴

With respect to technology, the school has three to four computers per class in addition to a computer lab. The library also has a number of computers. The district integrates technology into the curriculum through the use of reading software, using blogs as part of the writing coursework and requiring students to employ the Internet for research.

Facilities

During the site visit, the district indicated that there was an addition to the school in 2000 and that Maurice River did not currently have any pressing facilities needs.

School Funding Reform Act

The Maurice River School District received a 2% increase in State aid pursuant to the SFRA in FY08-09 amounting to \$86,400, and will receive no increase in FY09-10. Under the formula, the district's "adequacy budget" is calculated by multiplying the district's K-12 enrollment by the base amount of \$9,649.⁵ The district's enrollment of middle school (grades 6-8) and high school (grades 9-12) students are then multiplied by the additional weights of 1.04 and 1.17, respectively. The district's adequacy budget also includes an additional weight of about .47 (FY08-09)⁶ and about .50 (FY09-10) for each at-risk child, which amounted to a total of \$547,405 in FY08-09 and \$773,734 in FY09-10.⁷ The district's State equalization aid is calculated by determining the difference between its adequacy budget and the district's local fair share. For FY08-09, the district's local fair share was \$2,790,190, which is based on the district-wide property wealth of \$289,689,671 and total income of \$63,677,687, which translates to an approximate per pupil property wealth of \$530,567 and per pupil income of \$116,626. For FY09-10, the district's local fair share was \$3,061,658, which is based on the district-wide property wealth of \$312,957,706 and total income of \$72,037,346, or per pupil

⁴ These classification rates differ from those reported on the survey.

⁵ This amount increased to \$9,971 for FY2010.

⁶ Weights are rounded to the nearest tenth.

⁷ Once the components of the adequacy budget are summed, each district's adequacy budget is multiplied by a Geographic Cost index number to reflect regional cost differences.

property wealth of \$565,927 and per pupil income of \$130,266. For both years, the district's local fair share exceeded its prior year tax levy.⁸

The funding formula under SFRA also provides for categorical security aid as well as aid for transportation and special education. Pursuant to N.J.S.A. 18A:7F-46, every three years the Commissioner will re-evaluate and recommend to the Governor and Legislature any appropriate changes to the funding elements of the SFRA (such as the State average classification rate for general special education students and the additional weights for at-risk and limited English proficient students). For the intervening years, the cost factors in the SFRA are updated according to the Consumer Price Index.

The SFRA also dramatically increases access to preschool education, requiring districts to offer preschool programs to eligible students within five years. As the Maurice River School District is a DFG B, the district will be required to offer full-day preschool to its 3- and 4-year-old population within that time frame.

In addition to these State funds, Maurice River will be receiving federal funds to support students with special needs (at-risk and special education) through Title I and IDEA, as well as additional funds through those programs pursuant to the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA).

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Department's review of the Maurice River School District revealed a system with a dedicated and talented staff that is committed to providing quality educational services to the students of the district. The district has strategically employed its limited resources to maximize the opportunities made available to its students.

Maurice River has conscientiously revised its curriculum to ensure that it is aligned with the NJCCCS. In addition, through the use of careful programming, professional development and small class sizes, the district has maintained relatively high levels of student achievement in language arts and mathematics. The district's proficiency scores on the State assessments reflect this accomplishment. The district also offers a wide range of after-school, extra-curricular and summer programs that enhance the overall delivery of education in Maurice River.

In analyzing the issues facing Maurice River, it is important to recognize that the district faces many increased challenges due to its small size. A district, such as Maurice River, educating fewer than 400 K-8 students simply cannot realize the economies of scale that its larger counterparts can achieve. Smaller districts like Maurice River tend to have more administrators per pupil than larger districts. In addition, smaller districts simply cannot offer diversity in programming options since they lack sufficient students to maintain reasonable class sizes for some types of offerings. Thus, while the district would like to hire a full-time gifted and talented teacher, this does not appear feasible nor

⁸ The district's 07-08 tax levy was \$2,414,644 compared with its 08-09 local fair share of \$2,790,190 and its 08-09 tax levy was \$2,466,484 compared with its 09-10 local fair share of \$3,061,658.

cost efficient at this time, given the small number of students that would likely participate in the program. Moreover, small districts like Maurice River often must rely on part-time staff or staff serving multiple roles. As part of his responsibilities under the CORE legislation, P.L. 2007, c.63, the Executive County Superintendent is charged with recommending to the Commissioner a school district consolidation plan to eliminate all districts, other than county-based districts and preschool or kindergarten through grade 12 districts in the county, through the establishment or enlargement of regional school districts. As part of this effort, the Department will be commissioning regionalization studies. Due to the constraints facing Maurice River because of its extremely small size, this district is being treated as a high priority and will be placed in the first group of districts for regionalization studies, which will begin in September 2009 and conclude by December 31, 2009.

During the site visit, district administrators discussed their plans and progress in including special education students in the general education classrooms and using differentiated instruction. The Department's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) offers professional development opportunities in differentiated instruction for the special education population through its Learning Resource Center (LRC) in the Southern Region. The Commissioner directs OSEP to coordinate such training with Maurice River. In addition, the Department also offers training to districts on developing and improving Intervention and Referral Services. The Commissioner directs the Department's Office of Educational Support Services to coordinate a training on this topic, if Maurice River so desires. Finally, the Department has made arrangements with the Mid-Atlantic Regional Educational Lab (REL) to work with Maurice River and other rural districts to meet their needs for staff development in the various content areas as well as with special needs children who require particular attention and strategies in order to succeed. The leadership of the REL will contact the district shortly, if it has not already done so, to make arrangements to provide this assistance.

Maurice River stated that it was struggling to meet increased tuition costs from Millville and that it needed resources to hire additional staff. The Department notes that the district is taxing below its local fair share, and although it raised its levy for FY09-10, it did not raise it by 4%, as permitted by law. Moreover, the school tax rate is below the State average and it does not appear to be municipally overburdened. In the future, the district should consider increasing its tax levy which would provide additional resources to hire staff or meet other needs of the district.

In sum, the Department finds that the SFRA and other complementary legislation such as CORE provide the necessary resources for Maurice River to continue to improve the educational opportunities available to its students. Like many districts in the State, Maurice River can identify areas where improvements can be made in the delivery of educational services. The Department will work with the district, as described above, in that endeavor.